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A “Little Berlin Wall” for all: discursive construction across scales

EDWARD BOYLE

Abstract

Since 2013, Russian Border Security Forces have been constructing border fences at various points along the Administrative Boundary Line that separates the de facto state of South Ossetia from the remainder of Georgian territory. This process of ‘borderization’ materializes what was formerly an administrative fiction on the ground, seeking to territorially demarcate the divide between the two communities. The fence in question has come to be referred to as the “Little Berlin Wall” inherently comparing some comparatively insubstantial stretches of fencing and barbed wire with the imposing concrete fortifications that served to divide East and West Berlin at the height of the Cold War.

This article argues for the utility of the notion of a discursive construction in analysing this border. The notion will be used to clarify how this superficially unjustifiable comparison indicates that the Administrative Boundary Line is both shaped by and restructuring the regional geography of Europe. The invocation of the Berlin Wall emphasizes that this material fencing divides Georgia. The effects of its deployment are felt at various scales, from how this boundary is seen as an illegitimate division of sovereign Georgian territory, to its role in constructing Europe’s outer edge. The geographical and temporal division of Tbilisi-controlled Georgia from what lies on the other side of the “illegal” boundary works to incorporate Georgia firmly within Europe.

This discursive construction at Europe’s outer edge also indicates both the importance of border processes occurring at the margins of a regional geographic entity and how the local, national and wider regional scales are able to be tied together within Europe’s post-Cold War borders.

Georgia; South Ossetia; Borders; Europe; Scale; Discursive Construction

Zusammenfassung

Eine „kleine Berliner Mauer“ für alle: Maßstabübergreifende diskursive Konstruktion

Seit 2013 haben russische Grenzsicherheitskräfte Grenzzäune an verschiedenen Punkten entlang der Verwaltungsgrenze errichtet, die den de-facto-Staat Südossetien vom Restgebiet von Georgien trennt. Dieser Prozess der Grenzziehung hatte zum Ziel, etwas Realität werden zu lassen, was zuvor räumlich und verwaltungsmäßig Fiktion war, indem man die Trennung zwischen zwei Gemeinden territorial abgrenzen wollte. Der infrage stehende Grenzzaun wird inzwischen als „kleine Berliner Mauer“ bezeichnet, indem man einige unwesentliche Zaunabschnitte und Stacheldraht mit den imposanten Betonfestungen vergleicht, die während des Höhepunkts des Kalten Krieges dazu dienten, Ost- und Westberlin zu trennen.

Dieser Artikel erörtert den Nutzwert der Vorstellung einer diskursiven Konstruktion, um uns zu ermöglichen, die Wirkung dieses vordergründig ungerechtfertigten Vergleichs zu untersuchen, wie es dazu kam, dass ABL durch die regionale Geographie von Europa sowohl geformt als auch umstrukturiert werden konnte. Die Verwendung des Begriffs einer „kleinen Berliner Mauer“ ist das Ergebnis sowohl der materiellen Abzäunung eines Teils des souveränen Staatsgebiets von Georgien, als auch der Rolle, die der Fall der Berliner Mauer im Verständnis von Europa in der Zeit nach dem kalten Krieg gespielt hat. Ähnlich werden dessen Auswirkungen in unterschiedlichen Maßstäben verspürt. Das beginnt damit, wie diese Grenze als rechtswidrige Abtrennung des souveränen Staatsgebiets von Georgien verstanden wird, über deren laufenden Ausbau als Außengrenze von Europa, was bezeichnend für die geographische und zeitliche Trennung des von Tiflis kontrollierten Georgiens von dem ist, was auf der anderen Seite dieser „illegalen“ Grenze liegt, bis hin zur festen Eingliederung von Georgien in Europa.

Die bei dieser Verwendung der diskursiven Konstruktion sichtbaren Wirkungen auf die Außengrenze Europas weisen sowohl auf die Bedeutung der Grenzprozesse hin, die an den Rändern einer regionalen geographischen Einheit stattfinden, als auch auf die gleichzeitige Anwendung binärer Logik von Bewegung und Beständigkeit innerhalb der Grenzen Europas nach dem kalten Krieg.

Georgien; Südossetien; Grenzen; Europa; Maßstab; Diskursive Konstruktion

The „Little Berlin Wall“

In August 2015, it was reported that the Georgian director Toma Chagelishvili was editing a film entitled “Little Berlin Wall”, shot the previous year in the Georgian village of Khurvaleti. Khurvaleti is located along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) that separates territory controlled by Tbilisi from that under the authority of the largely unrecognized state of South Ossetia and their principal backers, the Russian Federation. The report announced that the film would seek to document the daily struggles of the villagers as they go about their lives in the shadows of the barbed wire fences recently thrown up by Russian border guards (AGENDA.GE 2015). In addition to being a record of these local struggles, though, the film’s title indicates its own awareness of their wider political resonance; presented as manifestations of a phenomenon thought left behind in the previous century, but one of increasing contemporary relevance. The Berlin Wall came to symbolize the divide between the West and the Soviet Union, and its fall in 1989 is understood as the moment in which the conflict between these two competing ideological systems came to an end (ASH 2014). In the years since, and particularly since 2001, it has come to attain a perhaps even more pervasive significance, in which its fall represents the immanence of a truly globalized world, one which would be characterized by an absence of the sort of materialized barriers between peoples and states that the Berlin Wall, in particular, came to stand for.

This paper will argue that the manner in which a relatively obscure conflict in a region that remains remote for the majority of Europeans has come to be associated with a geopolitical event of such central significance as the Berlin Wall and its fall offers an insight into the new regional geography of Europe. Superficially, there appears to be very little relation between the vast militarized complex of concrete walls, towers and the constant threat of state-sanctioned violence that characterized this most extreme of division between

the worlds of capitalism and communism played out along the boundary between East and West Berlin, and what is, even at its most clearly demarcated, a thin, snaking, and uneven lines of fencing or barbed wire across which people communicate and exchange goods, and around which people are occasionally apprehended but where, for the moment anyway, they remain mercifully unlikely to experience fatal violence. This emphasizes that the relation between the two is constituted through the deployment of the discursive construction of the “Berlin Wall” to explain its “Little” counterpart. While the latter is objectively of a far lesser scale, it has come to serve a similar rhetorical function, but with one crucial difference. While the Berlin Wall was a division within not just Germany, but Europe as a whole, its “Little” cousin is a rhetorical device that seeks to position the part of Georgia under Tbilisi’s control as within Europe. The other side of the fence is presented as beyond the pale, standing apart from the modern civilization that the fall of the Berlin Wall was thought to presage.

This analysis of the deployment of the notion of the “Little Berlin Wall” will show us how this discursively-produced bordering process resonates across spatial scales within a new regional geography. It emphasizes how the significance of such a boundary is not solely territorial, but results from the manner in which its meaning is ascribed and deployed through its appearance within wider discourses. The hypothesis is that the deployment of the discursive construction of the Berlin Wall in order to refer to the ABL has influenced the way in which the boundary has been responded to. Invocation of the Berlin Wall has allowed for the various scales at which this boundary may be said to exist (local, national, regional, and global) to be brought together.

In order to show the multiscale effect of this discursive construction, the study offers a material explanation for the origins and effects of this boundary constructed along the ABL between Georgia and South Ossetia. The interpretation offered here is based on the author’s

fieldwork and interviews with those responsible for monitoring the boundary on a daily basis, as well as reports produced by local news organizations and international bodies. A narrative analysis of the boundary’s description seeks to establish the role that the ABL’s representation as a “Little Berlin Wall” has played in making the meaning of the boundary. Through this, the study will analyse the material and ideational effects of the deployment of this particular discursive construction.

This paper will proceed as follows. First, it shall indicate the significance of borders within Europe, understanding borders as processes that occur at a number of scales, and argue that it is the “over-determination” of borders is what allows them to exist at these various scales. Second, it will define what a discursive construction is and how it works to over-determine meaning at multiple scales. In the third section, an account of the borderization occurring along the ABL is offered. The fourth section will examine the meaning ascribed to the Berlin Wall in the years since its fall. Section five will show the effects that the deployment of the discursive construction of the Berlin Wall has had for Georgia, while the sixth section will consider the same at a more European, regional level. The paper will analyse the material and ideational context within which the notion of the Berlin Wall is deployed, and what influence this has had on perceptions of the boundary at various scales. Doing so emphasizes that while discourses produce both material and symbolic effects, they are also materially and symbolically produced. The focus of this study is on the co-existence of these two distinct yet related processes.

Scaling the borders of Europe

Attention paid to the study of borders within a regional setting is of course nothing new. For states, national boundaries form the territorial limits of the nation, where they exist as, simultaneously, instruments of state policy, the expression and means of government power, and markers of national identity (ANDERSON

1996). As nations are defined by their frontiers, regional geographies are similarly described by their limits, whether viewed as existing within or beyond the boundaries of the state, and are available as political resources to be mobilized in a similar, functionally-differentiated way as those borders termed national (PAASI 1996). The development and expansion of the European Union led to a flurry of work that sought to move beyond international boundaries by emphasizing the importance of studying borders at other scales, such as those occurring at the local, regional and supranational scales (LIKANEN 2010). Nevertheless, in such formulations, borders tend to be defined by the geographical scale at which they are seen as functioning, with the notion of geographical scale itself forming a levelled or “nested hierarchy” (HOWITT 2003; SWYNGEDOUW 2004). While disaggregating political activity and ascribing it to a particular scale may be analytically convenient and even essential for theoretical development, it undoubtedly skates over a politics of scale in which “relations of power and authority by actors and institutions operat[e] and situat[e] themselves at different spatial scales”, and where different scales, such as the local, the national, the regional, or the global, lack a truly autonomous existence, with processes seemingly occurring at one scale influencing others (LEITNER 2004, p. 238). Consequently, this paper shall understand a border as existing on multiple scales, although these scales are not ontologically-prior to the wider systems within which the border exists, being co-constituted through the networks within which the borders in question function.

Frequently, the notion of a geographic region has been utilized to provide an expression of geographical area that is not contingent with the territory of the nation state, in order to allow for a discussion of processes occurring over different geographical scale. In such studies, the borders of the region are defined by the object under discussion. Nevertheless, with the expansion of interest in border studies, and increasing attention

to the notion of borders as existing “everywhere” (BALIBAR 2002), what constitutes a meaningful border has come to be somewhat arbitrarily determined by the interests of the researcher. By contrast, this study shall focus its attention upon the object that initially gave rise to boundary studies or limology, the conscious effort to materialize a “bounded space” to serve as the territory of the state. The boundary in question is that which exists between the Republic of Georgia and the de facto state of South Ossetia. However, speaking from the perspective of international law, this border does not exist. According to the European Union and the vast majority of nation-states in world politics, this boundary is illegal, an unconstitutional division of the territorial integrity of Georgia by an unrecognized political entity, the Republic of South Ossetia, with the backing of the Russian Federation. The demarcation and materialization of this boundary line on the ground has been consistently opposed by the state of Georgia, which refuses to recognize it as an international border (by stationing border guards or customs officials there, for example) and refers to it as an Administrative Boundary Line, or ABL.

The argument in this paper is that while this border may not exist in terms of legal epistemology, nevertheless we are able to usefully discuss the role that representations of this border perform at a variety of scales. Following LEFEBVRE, it is contended that the “representation of space matters” and that these representations “have a substantial role and specific influence on the production of space” (1991, p. 42). The appeal of the state to the illegality of the ABL seeks to impose a particular vision upon the boundary itself, and is clearly one which designed to create the world rather than merely represent it (AGNEW 2003, p. 7). Nevertheless, even while the Georgian state claims the illegality of this boundary, it is unable to avoid recognizing the fact that there exists a border across what it claims as its sovereign territory. The result is that what becomes represented is no longer a

“mere boundary”, as the varied meanings contained within this representation and the varied discourses within which they circulate cause the boundary to be “over-determined” (SALTER 2012, p. 737). According to RUMFORD (2012, p. 891), over-determination is “a form of consensus generation” which seeks to emphasize the extra-local significance of a particular border. It is this over-determination of boundaries that allows them to tie together a variety of geographical scales, the “domestic, international and global” (WALKER 2010).

The above emphasizes the importance of analysing how the borders come to be over-determined, and come to embody a variety of meanings that not only jump scales, but also serve to tie the varied geographies within which this particular border is able to be represented together. It is argued here that this border is “over-determined” through the deployment of what this paper shall term a discursive construction. This discursive construction is a pre-existing representation of borders that works to connect the intensely local bordering processes occurring in the foothills of the Caucasus with a particular representation of borders, one that brings with it a great deal of conceptual baggage for inhabitants throughout the Europe.

The next section shall briefly sketch out an explanation of what is meant by a “discursive construction”. The remainder of this paper shall then be concerned with analysing how the representation of this border has been over-determined by unpacking the discursive construction of the Berlin Wall and analysing how it has come to be applied to the ABL that exists between Georgia and South Ossetia. This will enable us to examine how such discursive constructions operate, their relation to wider regional issues across various scales and what this tells us about the nature of state border-making claims in the twenty-first century.

Deploying discursive constructions

The notion of discourse refers to the ways in which we confer meaning on our

physical and social surroundings. A discourse is a form of power, but one that circulates throughout the social order rather than being exercised in a top-down fashion, in contrast to how sovereignty is exercised by a state or its constituent institutions. A discourse forms a cohesive body of concepts, categories and ideas about an object which attempt to frame the object in question in a certain manner. This framing is utilized in order to provide the limits within which an object is open to being acted upon. A discourse influences how an object is able to be acted upon by circumscribing the limits within which action towards it can be made to make sense. Described in this fashion, discourse appears as merely an ideational mode of explanation, one that focusses on the production of meaning rather than material outcomes. From the perspective of the object in question, however, this distinction between the ideational and the material collapses, as what is said about something is directly related to what is done about it. That is, a transformation of the ideational environment in which sense is made of an object will alter what it means, just as a transformation in the material circumstances within which the object exists will (refer particularly to LEBOW 2009; EPSTEIN 2008).

A discursive construction refers to an attempt to set the discursive limits within which an object exists through referring to other object(s) in order to characterize its nature. For example, in the conflict over the Russian takeover of Crimea, the description of Russia’s actions as “annexation” discursively constructs Crimea as an object whose possession by Russia has a particular meaning, in this case one that necessitates sanctions by the United States, Europe and the G7. The meaning accorded Crimea through this discursive construction is totally different from that accorded by contrasting descriptions that focussed on Sevastopol (its importance to the Russian nation), Khrushchev’s illegitimate gift of the territory to the UkrSSR (it is rightly Russian), and the “vote for union with Russia” undertaken prior to Russia’s formal absorption of the territory

(its inhabitants desire to be Russia). Consequently, the limits of a meaningful response towards this material reality, Russia’s absorption of the formerly Ukrainian autonomous region of Crimea, is shaped by the discursive construction utilized to make sense of it. Depending on the construction adopted, the relative meaning of the material fact of Russian control is altered, as are the limits within which responses to this fact are made to make sense.

However, the sense-making driven by such discursive constructions is itself dependent upon the scale at which such constructions are mobilized. If the above example is analysed at a regional, European scale, for example, discursively constructing Russian rule over Crimea as annexation positions such a material reality as being in violation of European norms and values that have shaped the continent’s politics since the Second World War. Alternatively, however, noting it as being the revision of an unnatural situation in which one ethnicity was ruled by the state of another, or as having come about as a result of the expressed wish of the Crimean population, are ones which are made to appeal to a different set of ideals with which Europe constitutes itself. In either case, what must be emphasized is how such efforts of sense-making with reference to Europe are themselves constituted at a variety of scales (Europe’s role within global politics, questions of ethnicity and the state, the wishes of local residents), meaning that these constructions are affected by and produce influence over discourse occurring at multiple scales.

The above has sought to offer a justification for examining notions of borders and scale within a regional geographic framework through the notion of a discursive construction, while remaining at a relatively high level of abstraction. The following sections shall examine how the Berlin Wall has been materially and ideationally constructed between Georgia and South Ossetia, before moving on to examine the effects of this construct upon geographies at various scales.

Building Walls

An understanding of the boundary which separates territory controlled by Tbilisi from the area administered by Tskhinvali as a “Little Berlin Wall” is the result of a process referred to as “borderization”. Borderization is defined as the “the process of the installation of razor wire and barbed wire fences, so called ‘border’ signs and other artificial obstacles along the occupation lines” that separate the territory controlled by Tbilisi from that “occupied” by Russia (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GEORGIA 2016, p. 1, 4). These occupied territories are two areas of Georgia internationally recognized as being part of the Republic of Georgia, but that following the war in August 2008, were recognized by the Russian Federation as constituting the sovereign states of the Republic of Abkhazia and Republic of South Ossetia (Fig. 1). Georgia refers to these areas as the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali District and considers them as occupied by Russia; this article will henceforth follow convention in English and refer to them as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It is with the Occupation Line/ABL between South Ossetia and “Georgia proper” that this article is concerned.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, South Ossetia was widely recognized as forming one of four “de-facto states” within post-Soviet space that emerged with the breakup of the Soviet Union (MIRSKIĬ 1997). Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia attempted to secede from Georgia prior to the latter’s independence, and together with Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, these four ‘unrecognized entities’ experienced interethnic conflict and ethnic cleansing (GEORGE 2009; TOFT 2003) as a result of the ethnicization of politics that occurred amidst the growing nationalism of the late-Soviet period (JONES 2006). After the disintegration of the USSR, all four functioned as semi-stable political administrations largely outside of the control of the states within which they were located, with each being dominated by a de-facto political authority supported by the Russian Federation (although in the case



Fig. 1: The republic of Georgia and its occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

of Nagorno-Karabakh more indirectly, through Armenia). The coming to power of Mikhail Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) in Tbilisi in 2003, and its promises to reassert Georgia's territorial integrity (KABACHNIK 2012), culminated in the August War of 2008 and subsequent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states by the Russian Federation.

The borderization process is driven by the efforts of the largely unrecognized state of South Ossetia and their Russian backers to assert the existence of a boundary between the territory of Georgia and that of South Ossetia. Borderization materializes what was formerly a line on the map as what we might term a "fortified boundary" snaking across the fields of the Southern Caucasus. According to HASSNER and WITTENBERG, fortified boundaries are "distinguished from conventional interstate boundaries by virtue of their physical appearance,

which is designed to enhance border control" and from "militarized boundaries because of their asymmetrical origin and intent" (2015). The concept of fortified boundaries provides a good description for the construction of artificial barriers to suggest the physical separation of these two territories and the asymmetrical imposition of control through the patrols of Russian and irregular South Ossetian forces. This means of asserting authority over the physical territory of the putative Republic of South Ossetia also works to impose it upon the local Georgian population, cementing the existence of the former in their minds and delegitimizing Tbilisi's claims to authority. The fence thus serves as a clear, unambiguous marker of the state's sovereign rule, incorporating a display of military power in order to assert its authority to the disputed territory (JOHNSON and JONES 2014). In this respect, the borderization process serves to proclaim

the disputed sovereignty of South Ossetia (BOYLE 2016).

South Ossetia and, more importantly, the Russian Federation deem the current Republic of South Ossetia as having borders identical with those of the South Ossetian Administrative Oblast (SOAO) of 1922. The view widely held in Georgia and elsewhere, that the establishment of the SOAO was the result of a Soviet policy of "divide-and-rule" towards its various nationalities (MARTIN 2001; KAPPELER 2001) fails to account for its origins as a means of accommodating the separatist demands of Ossetian Bolsheviks within the Soviet state (SAPAROV 2010). This view therefore underemphasizes the ad hoc nature of these administrative fictions and overlooks how they were only open territorial mobilization following the Soviet Union's fall. In fact, borderization between Georgia and South Ossetia is part of a problem common to the post-Soviet period, of bringing political and ethnic

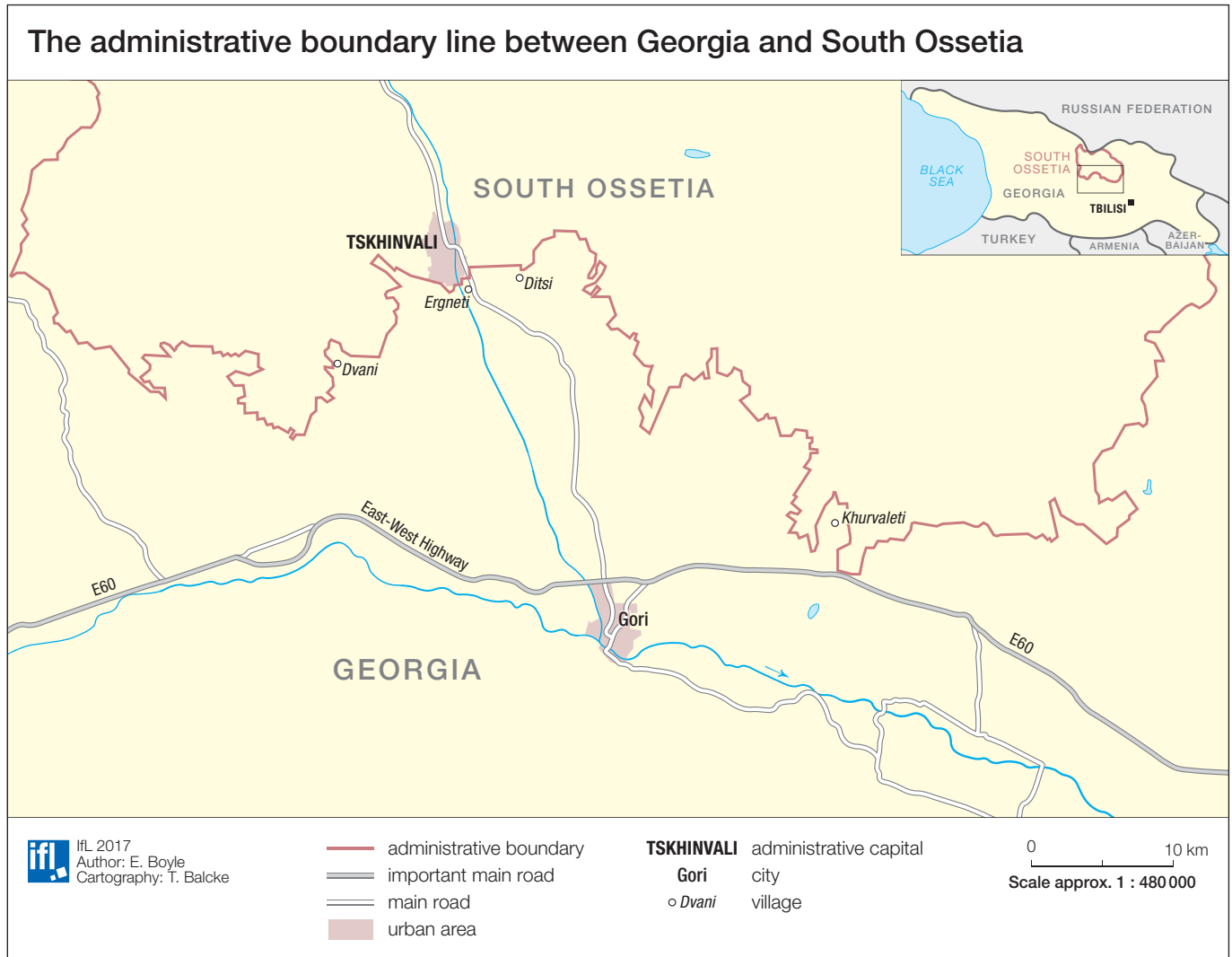


Fig. 2: The administrative boundary line between Georgia and South Ossetia

boundaries into alignment. As REEVES has shown, it is not only the four “de facto states” noted here that have struggled with the consequences of marking out and administrating material boundaries over what had previously been mere lines on the map (2014). In this case, though, the actual work of patrolling and maintaining the border is largely in the hands of the Russian Federation’s Federal Security Service (FSB) rather than the government of South Ossetia, in accordance with an agreement between the two initially signed in 2009. BROERS astutely notes how, “Ironically, Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia provided re-sounding confirmation of the Saakashvili administration’s efforts to reframe, and geopoliticize, Georgia’s conflicts to the Georgia–Russia level, sublimating and

rendering irrelevant the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian levels of conflict” (2014, pp. 153–154)

It was villages inhabited by Georgian residents located close to this ABL, such as Dvani and Ditsi as well as Khurvaleti, which from the spring of 2013 onwards saw fences and barbed wire being erected by Russian border guards (Fig. 2). This occurred following the parliamentary elections held in October 2012 that had handed a decisive defeat to the UNM and Mikhail Saakashvili. The winners of the election, the Georgian Dream coalition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, who had been presented by the UNM as being under the control of Russia, announced that they would be more willing to accommodate Russian interests in order to improve relations. Nevertheless, despite, or perhaps

because of, this more conciliatory approach from Tbilisi, the following year saw a sustained period of artificial barrier construction along South Ossetia’s ABL. This created situations in which villagers were no longer able “to visit their cemetery, use agricultural lands, irrigation and drinking water, as well as emergency medical services” (DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM WATCH 2013). The new Georgian government began to brief the international community on this fencing and use the term “borderisation” from the summer of that year (CIVIL GEORGIA 2013).

The borderization process has proceeded in fits and starts since, with most of the fence construction occurring in spring or summer, although according to the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) such construction was

most marked in 2013, and by late 2015 appeared to have largely abated. This reflects the fact that currently “the total length of razor wire and barbed wire fences and other artificial obstacles along the occupation line in Tskhinvali Region is nearly 52 km”. Although the South Ossetian occupation line totals more than 350 km, most of this runs over exceedingly harsh or uninhabited terrain (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GEORGIA 2016, p. 4). Consequently, by this stage, the artificial barriers running “through local villager’s orchards, yards, grazing fields, agricultural plots and cemeteries” (AGENDA.GE 2016) have largely separated the Georgian and South Ossetian populations in those areas along the ABL where they were most likely to come into contact. Villagers finding themselves fenced in on the South Ossetian side are forced to cross “illegally” to access schools, jobs, health care, and relatives in Georgia, and their detention along the ABL by Russian border guards or local South Ossetian forces have continued. Tskhinvali and Russian Border Guards insist that such detentions are for “violations of the border”. Detainees have been generally released after being fined, but are entirely at the mercy of the authorities in Tskhinvali (CIVIL GEORGIA 2017).

Georgia maintains that the territory claimed by South Ossetia is occupied by Russia. It views borderization as a Russian policy of creeping form of territorial annexation, one that both serves to divide both communities and people from their livelihood. The process also violates the ceasefire agreement that ended the 2008 conflict, which called for the return of Russian troops to their pre-conflict positions. The international community largely supports Georgia in these criticisms. In July 2016, for instance, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly deplored “the process of the installation of razor wire fences and embankments by the Russian occupation forces along the occupation line, dividing the local population and depriving them of fundamental rights and freedoms” (for this and other examples, see MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GEORGIA 2016: 5).

Seen from this perspective, the effects of the process of borderization are intensely local, relating as they do to the ability of individuals to access territory and resources, and prohibitions on freedom of movement (Photograph 1). Georgia is correct that these prohibitions do not merely effect the local Georgian population, but also make life difficult for the South Ossetian villagers on the other side of the ABL (DELEGATION OF GEORGIA 2016). It is for this reason that Georgia has consistently argued that borderization is “directed against de-escalation of the conflict and directed towards preventing people from finding common language” (CIVIL GEORGIA 2014). Nevertheless, the fencing introduced after 2008 mirrored earlier policy prescriptions previously pursued with vigour by the Georgian state, such as the demolition of the Ergneti market by the Georgian government in 2004. As SAHLINS has noted, “The boundary and the nation were not imposed on these people; they pushed for its enforcement” through the presence of state institutions that provided the framework to handle their local conflicts and ideology (1989). The result of almost three decades of political and ethnic conflict within the region has

been the disengagement of Georgians and South Ossetians economically, socially, and culturally.

The fencing involved in the borderization process, then, is also a symbol of this disengagement, rather than just the means to bring it about. While there is nothing primordial or timeless about South Ossetia, its claims for existence as a state have necessitated fixing the territory of South Ossetia through the fencing out its geographical space. The material effects of the fence are felt at the local level, but it is the continued (re)production of the border, through the discourse that surrounds this borderization process, which grants these artificial barriers such performative power. In invoking a global symbol of division by describing this snaking course of barbed wire and lengths of chain-link fencing as a “Little Berlin Wall”, Chagelishvili is not merely seeking to position the barrier in Khurvaleti and elsewhere as being of wider interest. He is also taking advantage of the connections already drawn between the various scales within which these barriers are symbolically mobilized. In so doing, he is transforming the tableaux upon which this “Little” wall exists to



Photograph 1: Fence on the Administrative Boundary Line near Khurvaleti, Georgia 2015 (Edward Boyle)

something much broader. Such a process is made possible by the way in which events in Khurvaleti are made to discursively connect with those in Berlin a quarter of a century previously, as well as by how the Berlin Wall has been interpreted in the intervening period.

Walling Europe

The fall of the wall, collapse of the Warsaw pact and subsequent disintegration of a number of the multi-ethnic states that existed within or were associated with the Eastern bloc nevertheless brought with it the promise of seeing not merely the culmination of a process of constructing a global order of modern sovereign states. Instead the European Union held out the promise that we would see the development of a new mode of political order. The seemingly inexorable expansion of both the Union and the number of countries within the Schengen Area suggested that the European Union, and consequently Europe itself, were embarked upon a process of simultaneously closer and more extensive integration. In presenting itself as a new political form, the EU had sought to position itself as lacking the necessity of sharply-defining itself against another territory (PROZOROV 2008). In fact, the other against whom Europe would come to define itself against was its own past, the bordered and territorially-demarcated nation-state (WAEVER 1998). This transformation into a new form of political community was rendered possible by the ending of Cold War and the disintegration of those barriers, like the Berlin Wall, that restricted the free movement of peoples. Consequently, the fall of the wall came to stand for the emergence of new political possibilities, one in which Europe would once again serve as a normative model for the rest of the world, though this time for its regionally-fuzzy borders, rather than the hard territorial ones of the nation-state. This was the context in which a globalization sweeping before it the sovereignty of the state came to be celebrated.

While the EU project is frequently associated with globalization and prevalence of cross border flows indicative of the

decline in nation state sovereignty, the external borders of the Union are in some ways no less hard than their internal predecessors, and indeed have become fairly “sharp” markers of difference (SCOTT and VAN HOUTUM 2009). There were already extensive criticism of the apparent development of a “Fortress Europe” and the way in which the “fuzzy” internal borders of the Union contrasted with its extensively fortified and securitized outer boundaries (PINOS 2013). These have been amplified by the effects of the refugee crisis over the last two years, with the reestablishment of border controls between a number of Schengen states and the throwing up of barbed wire along the Union’s internal borders, have come to make the pronouncements of a “borderless” Europe appear as premature at best. The Berlin Wall, and particularly the poignancy afforded by the 25th anniversary of its fall in November 2014, served as an occasion to decry this recent spate of wall construction occurring both within and beyond Europe. As Thorbjørn Jagland, Council of Europe Secretary-General, noted on 23 August 2015, “It’s 25 years since the Berlin Wall came down, it’s not a good time to start building new walls in Europe again, we should absolutely avoid it”. Nevertheless, the new materialized forms of boundary enforcement seen in the EU do not find themselves rhetorically linked with the Berlin Wall in the same way as this borderization process in the South Caucasus. It is in the exceptional nature of the deployment of this discursive construction in Georgia that we are able to see the way in which the invocation of boundaries serves to both represent and materialize the rearrangement of multi-layered regional geographies.

Rebuilding Berlin in the Caucasus

A quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the borderization process, the fencing of the South Ossetian boundary, was presented as “a new Berlin Wall in the modern world” by the US Ambassador to Georgia, Richard Norland. In terms of the relative sophistication of these two fences, the comparison is unjustified, if not downright dishonest, in ignoring

the presence of a far more sophisticated, expensive and brutal stretch of secured border along the US’s southern frontier. It is made effective because Norland is not looking to literally compare the fortified boundaries themselves, but rather to re-invoke the illegitimacy that the Berlin Wall represented in preventing the movement of people within Germany. In doing so, of course, he is referencing the ultimate victory of the free movement of people and capital that the fall of the Berlin Wall represented, the symbol of this age of globalization that was supposed to supplant the need for fences like those built on the South Ossetian boundary.

The history of the conflict within South Ossetia suggests a classic narrative for the emergence of sovereignty, where control gained over people, achieved with the expulsion of the Georgian population, is followed by efforts to fix control of the state’s territory. The assumptions of the “territorial trap” highlighted by AGNEW, with states as fixed units of space with a clear distinction between domestic and foreign that serve to “contain” society within its territorial borders (1994) are the same ones that motivate this borderization. Construction of the fence is firmly in line with public opinion in South Ossetia, which continues to display overwhelming support for the continued Russian military presence (TOAL and O’LOUGHLIN 2013). This boundary fence, as with any infrastructural investment in the territory, is funded by the Russian state and manned by FSB troops, showing the dependence of a much-reduced population upon Russian largesse. The severing of any links across its boundary with (the rest of) Georgia confirms the integrity of South Ossetia and grants it sovereignty over not only this territory but history as well, aligning the boundaries of the putative Republic of South Ossetia with those of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, claiming it as sovereign in both space and time. Those aligning this boundary with the “Berlin Wall” are making claims regarding the legitimacy of this particular fence, as well as the state in whose name it is being constructed. Indeed, the relation of this

borderization process with sovereignty is more opaque than in many of the examples looked at by HASSNER and WITTENBERG, due to the fact that, according to most of the world, the fence is not being constructed on the border between two sovereign states. Certainly for the Georgian state, as well as the EU and US, the fence is quite simply an illegal act that can only impinge upon Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The deployment of the discursive construction of the Berlin Wall seeks to create consensus regarding the illegality of this material boundary being thrown up, which would otherwise reflect the sovereign will and territorial control of the state and people of South Ossetia.

Through the notion of the Berlin Wall, the question of Georgia's territory becomes imbricated with the regional geography of Europe on several levels. The ABL is itself monitored by the EUMM, which is mandated to seek the stabilization of the security situation and normalization of life on the boundary, as well as building confidence between the two sides and informing wider EU policy. At the same time, the ABL is also becoming the outer limits of a larger European zone of free movement, with Georgia seeking to attain visa-free travel to countries within the Schengen zone. This "visa-free travel" comes as part of the EU's Eastern Partnership Agreement, and was based upon Georgian compliance with the Action Plan on Visa Liberalization signed by Georgia and the EU. The "Little Berlin Wall" of the ABL has been frequently connected to the achievement of this goal. For instance, John Kerry noted in February 2014 that he was "announcing additional assistance by the United States to help support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic vision, specifically to help Georgia achieve visa-free travel with the EU and to mitigate the hardships by borderization along the occupied territories". In December 2015 it was announced that the necessary provisions, such as "more secure documentation, including biometric passports; 'integrated border management'; and prevention of organized crime", had been satisfied. During 2016 the question of Schengen access for Georgians was

caught up within larger issues involving proposed visa liberalization for Ukraine and Turkey, but in February 2017 it appears that visa liberalization for Georgian citizens is on the verge of being granted (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT 2017).

Georgia's inclusion within this visa-free zone has been dependent upon co-operation on a range of immigration and border-control issues, which effectively extends the EU's law enforcement buffer zone far beyond the member states. This externalization of the EU's domestic control functions extends an already controversial "punitive model of migration management", and as SLADE notes, "the EU is ensuring that countries aspiring to membership but far beyond its borders are becoming the new frontiers of 'Fortress Europe'" (2013). These frontiers include those of the ABL, with residents beyond it not in possession of Georgian passports and thus ineligible for the scheme. Indeed, in a manner that mimics the EU's own offer of increased movement and trade with the union for those countries willing to cooperate with European regulations, Georgia has sought to dangle the carrot of a shared future of greater mobility with its breakaway territories. As Georgia's President has consistently argued, for the population of the Occupied Territories, living in European Georgia will be more interesting than living on the other side of barbed wire fences. South Ossetian participation "in building a modern democratic European Georgia" would mean that "Citizens of Tskhinvali will be able to travel, without any visa, to Vienna, Berlin and Rome" (TABULA 2013). Access to Berlin for those on the other side of the ABL is of course dependent upon the removal of this "little Berlin Wall" that currently divides Georgia from its "Ossetian brothers" (GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA 2015).

That this adjustment in border control functions between the EU and Georgia should result in the rhetorical reaffirmation of the boundary between Georgia and South Ossetia confirms what is often argued of borders under globalization. Recent border studies have highlighted the tendency of the latter to result in very

uneven boundary effects, which facilitate movement in some cases but restrict it in others (NEWMAN 2006; O'DOWD 2010). The achievement of visa-free travel for the bulk of Georgia's citizens places a dramatic restriction on those resident on the far side of the ABL, who are deprived of the opportunity of enjoying access to the countries of Europe. In doing so, of course, it emphasizes how this notion of free movement is still dependent and beholden to the territorial fixity of the state, in which the inscription of the border and indeed the state requires constant deployment of resources: the writing of the border, the state, and the world again and again (WALKER 2010). Through Georgia's success in negotiating visa-liberalization, the border itself continues to be constantly rewritten.

The European Theatre

In his work on Critical Geopolitics, TOAL noted how a "backlash" by certain "territorially based forces of local survival" can "territorialize globalization in such a way as to represent it as conflicts between nations, trading blocs, and civilizations. Seemingly anachronistic identities and dormant territorial disputes between states take on renewed symbolic meanings amid the dislocations of globalization" (1996, p. 199). In the case of Georgia, such meanings are not just "renewed" but entirely novel, as the "Little Berlin Wall" between Georgia and South Ossetia has increasingly come to be rewritten as a division between Europe and what's beyond it. Discussions of what constitutes the essence of Europe are complicated by Europe's status as an undefined actor, "lacking autonomy over a homogenous, clearly-bordered space" (DAVID 2008, p. 70). Although the "inside/outside dichotomy at the EU's edges has been further blurred since 2002" with the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ANDERSON 2007, p. 20), the attempt to build a "European sieve" beyond the Union's boundaries has reconstituted Georgia proper as the EU's border, rewriting the ABL as the Union's outer edge. Visa-free travel to the EU has materialized Georgian Tourism's former slogan that

“Europe Started Here” (Ó BEACHÁIN et al. 2014), with the ABL coming to serve as the boundary for this zone of free movement.

While it may be true that the “world does not need another Berlin Wall” (Richard Norland, US Ambassador to Georgia, on January 22, 2015), Georgia’s performance of its European role required a “Little” one be discursively constructed. The equating of this boundary with that of the Berlin Wall ties the anachronistic character of this particular form of fencing to Europe’s own past, associating it with a temporal othering that serves to position Georgia as squarely within modern Europe (DIEZ 2004). This is evidenced by Georgia’s incorporation within the zone of visa-free European travel, a move that positions the ABL as the divide between the past and future, one associated with the free movement of peoples within a European regional space. Through its incorporation within this discourse, the borderization between Georgia and South Ossetia has become a character within a wider European drama. It comes to serve as a “political theater piece” (AGNEW 2005) in a world where “international politics is produced as theatre”, with “geography the stage, politics the drama and geopolitics the detached observation” (TOAL 1996, 178).

The theatrical nature of the fence and the characters involved in its construction is demonstrated by reaction to it. Rather than as a result of separation of political visions between Georgian and South Ossetian leaderships, within Georgia the fence is currently presented as being their cause, as with current Georgian President Margvelashvili noting that borderization is “definitely directly against the people – against those people who want to see and meet each other beyond barbed wire fences”. This narrative appeals to the localness of the conflict, in a way that seeks to conceal the politics behind what is being fenced off. It is for this reason that:

“It kind of reminds me of the Berlin Wall. People here are artificially separated from their fields, from their cemeteries. And it seems to me that even as the diplomatic negotiations

take place in Geneva, it should be possible on humanitarian grounds for people to be able to move back and forth and to conduct their normal lives.” (Richard Norland, US Ambassador to Georgia, on October 3, 2013)

The effect of this invocation of a Berlin Wall is that the varied meanings of the ABL come together to over-determine what is no longer a mere boundary.

This rhetorical over-determination of the Little Berlin Wall works to reshape the regional geography of Europe, decisively incorporating Georgia within Europe and providing it with “a notable rhetorical resource” that challenges the EU’s “initial attempt to use the ENP as a tool to demarcate the EU’s final borders” (BROWNING et al. 2010, p. 113). The notion of “Georgia, Europe Started Here” seeks to “return” Georgia to the European state fold from which they were but temporarily separated by the Cold War (HANSEN 2006, pp. 39–40). The mobilization of this “Little Berlin Wall” therefore offers a clear example of the “constitutive power of outsiders” to set not only their terms of interaction with the centre, but to have an impact on the EU’s policies, its borders, and the identity and perception of its security environment (BROWNING et al. 2010, p. 110). With the extension of the visa-free zone of movement up to the ABL, the EU finds itself responsible for monitoring the security situation at the external boundaries of its own region of influence. This has simultaneously resulted from and driven the discursive construction of this fence as a “Little Berlin Wall”, which is deployed to both emphasize the illegitimacy of the division of Georgia, and its European destiny.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of the Berlin Wall as a discursive construction stems from the manner in which its fall is used to narrate the post-Cold War period. The breakdown of the Warsaw Pact mediated via the Berlin Wall is seen as the ending of the illegitimate division of both the continent and Germany itself. At the same time, its fall is taken to signify the immanence of a new

political moment, a period of unfettered movement between European states and the diminishing of border functions between them. Since 2003, Tbilisi has consistently attempted to position Georgia as rightfully European, indeed, with its tourist slogans, as the originator of what we understand as Europe. On one level, therefore, the Berlin Wall constructs the ABL as an illegitimate division of sovereign Georgian territory, while also positioning it as the boundary between both the nation’s past and future and its European destiny. It is able to do this, despite the obvious differences in scale in the material manifestation of the border, because of how the discursive construction of the Berlin Wall serves as a referent with which we decipher the world (Foucault quoted in SHAPIRO 2009, p. 18). Georgia’s participation in a modern Europe characterized by cross-border movement is, however, dependent upon the reluctant maintenance of a border between itself and a Russian-backed South Ossetia that Tbilisi claims is illegal, but which serves to confirm its European location. Georgia’s European status is dependent upon this border, even as it opposes its presence. Its importance is shown in Chagelishvili’s documentary, circulating in film festivals throughout Europe, and in the process claiming this border, Georgia’s ABL, as Europe’s outer edge. This orients Georgia against both the other on the far side of this boundary, and Europe’s own past.

In this sense, the invocation of the ABL as being a “Little Berlin Wall” has proved effective for Georgia in repositioning itself within the European fold. The fence appears to serve a traditional function in demarcating the sovereign states’ territorial limits and impeding free movement, seemingly impervious to the structural changes that came with globalization that were deemed to have greatly altered the modern border. The non-recognition of the Republic of South Ossetia by Georgia and open backing of this stance by the US and EU member states mean that Georgia’s constant appeals to its own sovereign authority and territorial integrity result in its being part of a wider European region.

This is shown in the deployment of the “Little Berlin Wall” as a discursive construction, which serves to tie together the local, small-scale restrictions in one corner of the world with a global narrative of movement and freedom versus fixity and control. The presentation of this border scarred across Georgia’s sovereign territory works to incorporate Georgia within Europe, while also emphasizing the illegitimate nature of the border being demarcated there. The local, national and wider regional scales are tied together through this one construction, which sets limits on the possible interpretations made of this Russian-backed process of borderization. At the same time, it restricts the way in which the effects of this process are open to amelioration. The discursive construction of the Berlin Wall works to provide the horizon of possibilities within which borderization is open to being understood.

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Резюме

ЭДВАРД БОЙЛ

«Маленькая Берлинская стена» для всех: cross-scale – дискурсивная конструкция

С 2013 года российские пограничники возвели заграждения в различных пунктах вдоль административной границы, отделяющей де-факто существующее государство Южная Осетия от остальной территории Грузии. Этот процесс демаркации границы имел целью, проведя границу между двумя территориями, придать некоторую реальность тому, что ранее пространственно и административно было фиктивным. Пограничное заграждение, о котором идёт речь, теперь называют «маленькой Берлинской стеной», сравнивая некоторые незначительные секции указанного снабжённого колючей проволокой сооружения с с внушительными бетонными укреплениями, которые в разгар холодной войны разделяли Восточный и Западный Берлин. В статье рассматривается целесообразность идеи дискурсивной конструкции, чтобы позволить исследовать влияние этого поверхностного необоснованного сравнения на реорганизацию и переформатирование понятия административной границы Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) в рамках страноведения Европы. Использование термина «маленькая Берлинская стена» является результатом как физического ограждения части суверенной территории Грузии, так и той роли, которую играло падение Берлинской стены в понимании/трактовке Европы в период после окончания холодной войны. Аналогичным образом последствия этих двух сооружений ощущаются в различных масштабах. Начнём с понимания этой границы в качестве незаконного отторжения суверенной территории Грузии – через её современное формирование как внешней границы Европы, что свидетельствует о географическом и хронологическом разделении контролируемой Тбилиси Грузии с тем, что находится на другой стороне этой «нелегальной» границы – до прочной интеграции Грузии в Европу.

Очевидные последствия на внешней границе Европы при таком использовании дискурсивной конструкции указывают как на важность пограничных процессов, происходящих на периферии региональной географической данности, так и на одновременное использование логики движения и стабильности в пределах Европы после холодной войны.

Грузия; Южная Осетия; границы; Европа; масштаб; дискурсивная конструкция

Résumé

EDWARD BOYLE

Un «petit mur de Berlin» pour tous : construction discursive à travers diverses échelles

Depuis 2013, des Forces de sécurité des frontières russes ont construit des clôtures frontalières à divers endroits le long de la ligne de démarcation administrative (ABL) qui sépare l'Etat de fait de l'Ossétie du Sud du reste du territoire géorgien. Ce processus de «frontérisation» a cherché à matérialiser ce qui était autrefois une fiction administrative sur le terrain, visant à délimiter territorialement le fossé entre les deux communautés. La clôture en question est maintenant appelée le «petit mur de Berlin», rapprochant intrinsèquement quelques portions de clôtures et de barbelés négligeables, en comparaison, aux imposantes fortifications de béton qui ont servi à diviser Berlin-Est et Berlin-Ouest au plus fort de la guerre froide.

Cet article argumente que la notion d'une construction discursive est utile pour nous permettre d'analyser l'effet de cette comparaison apparemment injustifiable sur la manière dont l'ABL en est venue à la fois à être façonnée par la géographie régionale de l'Europe et à la restructurer. Le déploiement de l'idée d'un «petit mur de Berlin» est le résultat à la fois de la séparation matérielle d'une partie du territoire souverain de la Géorgie par une clôture et du rôle de la chute du mur de Berlin dans la perception des frontières dans l'Europe de l'après-guerre froide. De même, ses effets se font sentir à divers niveaux, allant de la perception de cette frontière comme étant une division illégitime du territoire souverain de la Géorgie, à la poursuite de sa construction en tant que limite extérieure de l'Europe, révélatrice de la division géographique et temporelle de la Géorgie contrôlée par Tbilissi de ce qui se trouve de l'autre côté de cette frontière «illégal» et incorporant la Géorgie fermement au sein de l'Europe.

Les effets visibles dans ce déploiement de la construction discursive à la limite extérieure de l'Europe montrent, d'une part, l'importance des processus frontaliers qui se produisent à la lisière d'une entité géographique régionale et, d'autre part, l'emploi simultané des logiques binaires de mouvement et de fixité au sein des frontières de l'après guerre froide de l'Europe.

Géorgie; Ossétie du Sud; frontières; Europe; échelle; construction discursive