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**Introduction to the Special Section “Cross-Border Cooperation as Conflict Transformation:  
Promises and Limitations in EU Peacebuilding”**

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Can we continue to view European Integration as a project associated with conflict transformation and peacebuilding through the promotion of soft borders and cross-border cooperation? Or are we faced with yet another sign that European Union (EU) has reached its limits? (Balibar 2015; Bhambra 2015)

As we developed this Special Section, we have witnessed the unfolding of inter-locking tensions around variously identified “Others” and security threats, a corresponding rising tide of ethnic nationalism and a reversal in the processes of debordering at the heart of the EU post-war project. From the state of emergency and enhanced security emerging in response to terrorist attacks (Butler n.d.; Burke 2015) to EU governments’ calls for a revision of Schengen (Nielsen 2015), central elements of cross border movement and cooperation have been increasingly questioned. (Hayward 2016.) Since the heightened security alert of 2015, migrants and refugees fleeing instability, hardship and conflict have continued to attempt (and often tragically fail) to reach the shores of Italy and Greece, as well as access the EU on foot through the Balkan route. Frequently, those who make the journey are met with security forces, detention centres, tear gas and border fences. As a consequence of controversial deals with Turkey and Libya, migrants and refugees have faced deportations. They have become stranded at sea or in detention facilities where violations of human rights have been rampant. Within EU Member States, populist and right-wing entrepreneurs have continued to fuel public anxiety around migration and fear of ‘the Other’ bringing borders to the centre of political debates, media and everyday life (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017).

Despite having faded from the media and political limelight, tensions relating to conflictual borders have been reignited or emerged anew across the EU external and internal borderlands, as well as in the EU’s extended neighbourhood. The reverberations of the 2015 war in Gaza and violence in the West Bank serve as powerful reminders of the complex and ongoing conflict in the region. Despite the Minsk Agreement (2014),

conflict also remains frozen in the border zone between Ukraine and Russia. Moreover, in the Post-Yugoslav space two decades of peacebuilding efforts have often served to reinstate divisive ethno-nationalist politics. Questions of statehood and borders remain alive and contested as highlighted by recurring attempts to challenge the entirety of Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina in the name of the Bosnian-Serb entity Republika Srpska's self-determination, as well as by the renewed border contentions between Serbia and Kosovo. Despite numerous rounds of talks on the reunification of Cyprus, divided along the Green Line, intractable differences among the parties on territorial issues have failed to produce an agreement (Pelerin 2016). Even in a context such as Northern Ireland, where peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation had reached an advanced stage after decades of conflict, questions about the future of cross-border relations are at stake as *Brexit* brings about prospects of a return to a hard border in the island of Ireland (McCall 2018).

Contemporary pressures for increased securitisation and *rebordering* progressively undermine peacebuilding and *debordering* as key principles and articulating grammar in the project of European integration. In response to these multiple crises, the EU Global Strategy has seen a move towards more pragmatic and strategic approach to EU Foreign policy increasingly driven by stability and security concerns (Tocci 2016).

In the face of such developments, including the rise of right-wing populism and resurgent nationalism(s), we are compelled to ask critical and urgent questions about the commonplace of a borderless EU, its image as a political space produced through the logic of intergovernmental and cross-border cooperation, democracy and human rights, as well as its credentials as a peacebuilding global actor (Klatt 2018). In this Special section we grapple with these questions by focusing specifically on the diffusion and limitations of EU sponsored cross-border cooperation as an instrument for conflict transformation in the current moment of global interdependence, renewed or unresolved conflicts, and increased securitization. This introduction first outlines the development of cross-border cooperation as a trademark of Europeanization and traces its ambivalences as an instrument of border politics at the EU external frontiers. It then contextualizes the collection within new trajectories in Border Studies that, gesturing to a more complex and situated conceptualisation of border landscapes, foreground a multiplicity of actors, issues and sites of border politics. As contributions in this collection illustrate, paying attention to multiplicity, locality and complexity is crucial if we are to understand practices of borderwork in the aftermath of conflict, as well as in peacetime.

### **Cross-Border Cooperation and its Limits: Trademark of Europeanization and Double-Edged Instrument of EU Border Politics.**

Since its very inception, the project of European integration has been regarded as a prime symbol/example of *debordering*, unification and cooperation. Both symbolically and materially, it has worked to reconfigure *hard* borders into *soft* borders underpinned by intergovernmental cooperation among states, the development of multilevel governance and the support for various programs of cross-border cooperation (McCall 2013; Anderson and O'Dowd 1999; Scott 2012b; Hayward et al. 2011). Initially set

against the backdrop of World War II, the suspension of borders as barriers and their divisive impact on international and inter-state relations has also essentially cast European integration as a project associated with conflict resolution and peacebuilding (McCall 2014). Within EU external policy and discourse, this long-standing tradition of conflict transformation is continuously mobilised to attest the EU's credential as a political project and peacebuilding actor.<sup>1</sup>

Established across different regions, cities and borderlands and involving actors as diverse as civil society, municipalities, local businesses and cultural institutions, cross-border cooperation has become a trademark of Europeanization. More than that, it has been a tool of strategic partnership deployed at and beyond the EU's ever-shifting external borders to extend its geopolitical influence and strengthen its image as a global actor (Bialasiewicz 2011). Born out of post-Cold War transformations, cross-border cooperation has increasingly assumed a paradigmatic status as an instrument for rapprochement and development. In this process, previously divided border regions can be brought together through various policies that aim to create a more cohesive European space.(Scott 2015) By (even momentarily) lifting the territorial cage of the state that is pivotal to border conflict and by (re)constructing borders as resources for economic and cultural exchanges, intercommunal relationships and political dialogue, cross-border cooperation has a conflict transformational potential (McCall 2014).

However, the success of this strategy in some European contexts, for instance as in the case of the Irish border (Hayward et al. 2011), is also met with less encouraging examples of EU-sponsored cross-border cooperation, such as many of those launched in post-Yugoslav borderlands (Scott and Van Houtum 2009). In other words, while the promotion of cross-border cooperation has been intensive in EU rhetoric, in practice crossing borders is a much more complex and multi-layered socio-spatial process than envisioned in institutionalised EU practices and policies of cross-border cooperation. For instance, it has been found that less successful cases of cross-border projects have often merely served to enhance local budgets rather than stimulating cooperation (Scott 2015). The top-down and technocratic nature of cross-border cooperation often also presents a challenge for local participation and ownership (Popescu 2008). This is particularly true in the aftermath of protracted conflict where the eventuality of cross-border encounters might (re)produce insecurities and (re)ignite grievances. At the EU external frontiers these ambivalences are amplified. As James Scott and Henk van Houtum observe: “rhetorical statements to the contrary, [cross-border cooperation] has become mundane, technocratic, underfunded and bereft of the historical symbolism of earlier cooperation at what, since 2004 and 2007, have become internal borderlands of the EU.”(Scott and van Houtum 2009, 273) As contributors in this collection illustrate, this analysis still rings true today. In the midst of pressures for securitization and multiple unresolved crises outlined above, the notion of cross-border cooperation as conflict transformation remains a seductive concept for those interested in peacebuilding. Yet, a key contribution of this collection is that the complexities of *really existing* conflicts and their historical

legacy, actors with often opposite political agendas and identities, as well as the lack of transformative visions and adequate resources, complicate the realisation of cross-border cooperation's potential.

Cathal McCall (2014) has noted that in its current form, EU sponsored cross-border cooperation is driven principally by economic interests and thus often sidelines other sites, actors and resources that can mobilise initiatives for peacebuilding from below.(Lederach 2005) Such a trend runs contrary to Lederach's notion of peacebuilding from below as a starting point in the critique of top-down and technocratic models of conflict transformation(Lederach 2005; McCall 2014). This understanding expands the range of actors and sites of politics that could contribute to transforming the legacy of conflict beyond elites, central governments and institutions to include grassroots activists, interpersonal relations and cultural practices. This approach can be fruitful given the fact that, despite borders often being central to (inter)national conflict as sites of cultural and political antagonisms, and of struggles over inclusion and exclusion, the experiences of borderland inhabitants frequently lie beyond the concerns of central governments.(McCall 2014) Lederach's idea that addressing the legacy of conflict is a long-term and often tortuous process requiring change in the personal, structural, relational and cultural aspects of conflict, has been further examined and developed in critical peace and conflict scholarship (e.g. Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Väyrynen 2019). The so-called "everyday turn" is particularly poignant in the context of bordering processes and conflictual relations. It encompasses opportunities for local agency and transformation enacted through ordinary encounters and social practices which are often overlooked in mainstream peacebuilding approaches whereby local agency is often inscribed within a technocratic logic of NGOs, projects and funding cycles.(Mac Ginty 2014) As Roger MacGinty writes:

"The unpacking of everyday peace reveals that interaction across sectarian, ethnic and nationalistic boundaries can be common despite a meta-context of societal division. Thus we can confront the often hegemonic narrative of homogenous, near-hermetically sealed groups that have no or only aggressive interaction with the outgroup. The everyday peace notion shows that a complex array of intergroup interactions can occur in many contexts and are sensitive to calibration according to gender, class, locality, and interpretations of decency and civility."(Mac Ginty 2014, 552)

While there can be no presumption that these interactions will have a conflict transformation outcome, studying everyday peace challenges deterministic understandings of the social groups, identities and socio-spatial imaginaries at stake in conflictual borderlands and shifts our attention from the formal political sphere to the vernacular as a site where these might be reproduced but also challenged. In a similar vein to Chris Rumford's 'borderwork'(Rumford 2013), the focus on the everyday spotlights the role of citizens as agents in the making and the unmaking of the social order and in the multidimensional

negotiations of borders. In this sense, the notion of the ‘borderscape’ offers a sound conceptual framework to capture the multilevel complexity at stake in the bordering process as occurring at the level of geopolitics and governance, as well as in everyday negotiations and cultural encounters.

### **Borderscapes as sites of Conflict Transformation**

From an initial concern with the geographical, physical and tangible manifestations of borders, the interdisciplinary field of Border Studies has developed a processual understanding of borders as multilayered sites of inclusion and exclusion that are at the core of socio-political processes and everyday practices.(Amilhat Szary et al., n.d.) This perspective allows us to see borders as serving vital economic functions; as instruments for the organisation of democratic practice; and as markers of identity and security. Yet, it also reveals them as the source of tensions over human rights abuses, stereotyping, conflict and violence(Kolossov and Scott 2013). As early as 1999, James Anderson and Liam O’Dowd outlined a new agenda for Border Studies that foregrounded the inherent complexity of borders as contradictory sites of politics:

‘[C]loser critical scrutiny of borders challenges their reification and reveals them as far from simple. Instead, they appear inherently contradictory, problematical, and multifaceted. They are at once gateway, and barriers to the “outside world”, protective and imprisoning, areas of opportunity and/or insecurity, zones of contact and/or conflict, of cooperation and/or competition, of ambivalent identities and/or aggressive assertion of difference. These apparent dichotomies may alternate with time and place, but – more interestingly – they can co-exist simultaneously in the same people, some of whom have to regularly deal not with one state but with two’.(Anderson and O’Dowd 1999, 595–96)

Newly developed conceptual work since has shifted the attention from borders as an entity to bordering as a complex socio-spatial process. As the theorising of borders intensified in response to the complexity of contemporary societies, new conceptual tools have emerged to reflect the centrality of bordering in processes such transnationalism, migration, conflict and securitisation.(Amilhat Szary et al., n.d.; Johnson et al. 2011) These new understandings illuminate the multi-level and multi-directional constitution of borders as “by no means ...static line[s], but a mobile and relational space”(Brambilla 2015, 22). Drawing on the concept of the ‘borderscape’, which denotes “cultural and political complexities, contested discourses and meanings, struggle[s] over inclusion and exclusion, [and] involvement of multiple actors”(Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007), scholars have enabled a much more complex understanding of border politics as constructed, lived and experienced at the intersection between local, national and global dynamics(Rumford 2010; Amilhat Szary et al., n.d.; Wilson 2015). Essentially the ‘borderscape’ captures the complex relations and contentions between borders as sets of (legal, political and socio-cultural) rules, practices and spatial realities on the one hand, and identities, representations and imaginaries, on the other (Brambilla et al. 2015; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). As Chiara Brambilla writes, it enables an investigation of borders through a kaleidoscopic view encompassing “the ‘variations’ of borders in space

and time, transversally to different social, cultural, economic, legal, and historical settings criss-crossed by negotiations between a variety of different actors, and not only the State.”(Brambilla 2015, 25). The notion of ‘Borderscapes’ thus identifies zones of interactions and cultural production in which the contours of socio-spatial identities are continuously constructed and deconstructed (Wilson and Donnan 1999, 64). In this sense, borderscapes may be interpreted as potentially important zones for intercultural contact, communication and cooperation that might lead to conflict transformation (McCall 2014). Underscoring the agency of so called “ordinary” citizens in making and re-making of borders in a ‘bottom-up’ fashion”(Rumford 2010, 953), borderscapes are also important sites for exploring situated dynamics of “everyday peace”(Lederach 2005), as well as the practices and policies that might constrain them.

Informed by these conceptual developments, the contributions in this Special section explore the multilevel complexity of border conflicts, their reverberations beyond the line of the border and the intersections with questions such as ideology, power, culture, memory and emotions. In doing so the collection pays attention to the multi-situated, *pluritopical* and multilevel negotiations and contestations of borders. Contributors explore the practices through which borders are inhabited, crossed and traversed (Brambilla 2015), as well as the different border regimes, historical legacies and geopolitical dynamics that regulate and govern these practices. (Rumford 2006).

### **The Promises and Limits of Cross-Border Cooperation as Conflict Transformation.**

Emerging from the EUBORDERSCAPES research Project, funded under the EU Framework Programme 7<sup>2</sup>, the collection is part of a larger and sustained effort that contributes to conceptual change in our understanding of borders, their shifting and dialogical nature and their centrality in processes of cultural encounters, the everyday, transnationalism, conflict, and securitization (Amilhat Szary et al., n.d.). The articles presented here offer a critical analysis of EU sponsored cross-border cooperation as an instrument of conflict transformation that examines the configurations of bordering processes in specific localized geopolitical and social contexts (Brambilla et al. 2015). A key strength of the collection lies precisely in revealing the complexity of bordering processes at stake in different case studies. These shift across the EU space and its external frontier to include negotiations of borders in the shadow of the EU and the accession process, borders in the Neighbourhood, as well as borders between member states and disputed territories. The issues considered by our contributors are as diverse as cross-border cooperation in light of the historical memory of genocide, *cartopolitics*, the role of cultural interventions and cultural institutions (e.g. literature, cinema, festivals), and the implications of Brexit for the future of cross-border cooperation policies. The papers’ focus varies from contexts of relative peace shaped primarily by the legacy of WWII (Poland/Ukraine), cases shaped by post-Soviet geopolitical transformations (Turkey/Armenia), to broadly defined ‘post-conflict’ scenarios (Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Northern Ireland). The contributions illustrate the ways in which concepts and top-down policies of cross border cooperation intersect, both

historically and in the current moment, with specific institutional and political scenarios. Moreover, the papers illuminate how these concepts and policies resonate (or fail to do so) for a range of different actors, such as “ordinary” citizens, grassroots activists, film makers, in particular spaces (e.g. cities, regions, borderlands) and as a result of *global* dynamics (e.g. post-WWII, post-Cold War, post-9/11). Some contributions explore how bordering practices and identities are enacted and performed through specific artefacts such as maps, films and literature, as well as cultural interventions, (film and music festivals). Read together, the collection mobilises a borderscapes perspective as a critical tool. That is, it examines existing practices of cross-border cooperation through detailed contextual evidence, whilst proposing alternative sites of border politics and perspectives which might otherwise be overlooked.

This collection provides a critical interdisciplinary exploration of the promises and limitations of cross-border cooperation as an instrument of conflict transformation by bringing together concepts and practical evidence from within the EU and in the context of its neighbourhood. Read together, papers offer an examination of practices and discourses of EU sponsored cross-border cooperation and its challenges from multiple perspectives. Geographically, contributions address a diversity of bordering processes shifting across the EU internal boundaries, its external borders, as well as disputed borders and borders involving third countries. Thematically, the collection foregrounds the negotiation of bordering processes enacted at the level of governance, devolution and international intervention on the one hand, and intersecting with grassroots and civil society efforts, cultural cooperation and artistic production on the other hand. In each paper, the analysis is inflected with the specific history of conflict and with wider geopolitical scenarios that shape and affect contemporary reverberations of border politics in the case studies under examination. The collection itself thus offers a kaleidoscopic view of border politics and conflict that zooms in and out of the EU external frontiers and its geopolitics of peacebuilding, security and cooperation.

The section opens with a particularly topical contribution (Komarova and Hayward) which explores the potential effects of the UK’s exit from the EU on the nature of the land border between Northern Ireland (as part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland. Drawing on the notion of the EU external border regime as a fragmented politics, the paper outlines differentiated scenarios for the changing hierarchies of rights and treatment on the two sides of the Irish border that might affect the movement of people across it. In doing so the authors highlight an interesting site of tension between different bordering scenarios resulting from Brexit and conclude that the emerging new ‘border regime’ will be shaped by the multiple interests and political divisions within Britain, Northern Ireland and the EU, and by the ways in which these might gain representation in the negotiating process. More broadly, what the *problématique* of Brexit and the Irish border demonstrates is how regulation of all kinds of movement across the border is intricately interwoven with key aspects of multi-level governance and regional devolution. Integral to the latter, and a central tenet of the 1998 Peace Agreement is the concept and practice of cross-border cooperation. The post-Brexit



possibility of a return to modes and practices of border governance that involve stricter controls of movement threatens to reopen the old contestation over the legitimacy and existence of the border itself.

This is followed by a paper on the *micropolitics* of border-cities partnership (Sagan, Nowicha and Studzińska). Here, the authors examine the role of city-twinning and cultural initiatives in processes of ‘bottom-up diplomacy’ along the Polish and Ukraine border in the shadow of the long-standing violent legacy of WWII. Drawing on interviews with a range of local actors, the paper highlights possibilities and constraints in the process of EU-supported grass-root forms of cross-border cultural cooperation. Illustrating how the memories of WWII violence and conflict still shape cross-border interactions and city-twinning partnership between Poland and Ukraine, the authors stress the promise and strength of such cooperation where it builds on shared orientation to European/global contemporary culture that unites young people in particular. This shared broader global context helps to zoom out of and transcend local historical conflicts. At the same time, the paper cautions of the limitations imposed by the institutional and legal setup operating at the EU’s external borders which limits basic freedom of movement, actively hampering the aims of the EU’s own programmes for cross-border cooperation.

Other papers set the investigation within global geopolitical dynamics. Bueno-Lacy and van Houtum draw on the prism of *cartopolitics*, understood as a political technology of cartographically defining and imbuing political territories with meaning, to question the very ethno-national foundation of Cyprus’ Green Line which underpins efforts to resolve the conflict. Cartographically organized imaginations, the authors contend, have historically ‘woven a dense web of local and worldwide interests’, including those of the EU in more recent times, which ‘have constructed and protracted the divide among Cypriots’, failing to ameliorate or counter it. It is further argued that in accepting Cyprus as an EU member, to the exception of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, the EU has effectively abdicated its position as a neutral arbiter, laying bare its own complicity in perpetrating divisions.

Another couple of authors - Doğangün and Karadağ - offer an assessment of EU-led cross-border cooperation which promotes the development of mutual relations and dialogue between both sides of the Turkish-Armenian border. The article provides a compelling overview of the multi-level challenges and opportunities for conflict transformation in both the local historical and present-day contexts to this border, and against the wider geopolitical dynamics of the European eastern neighbourhood. The authors argue, the reconciliatory potential of EU-sponsored cross-border cooperation is limited in cases such as the Turkish-Armenian ‘sealed border’ since neither can they exert leverage by promising EU membership to the associated countries, nor do they provide a comprehensive regional framework for cooperation and stability. Ultimately, the ‘soft power’ of EU geopolitics of co-operation in the regional context of post-Soviet transformation, where nationalism and ethno-territorial conflicts over borders are thriving, leaves room for instability, insecurity and suspicion.

Another set of papers explore different reverberations of border politics in the post-Yugoslav space. Trkulja provides an original perspective on bordering and border-crossings through an analysis of literary texts and literary debates among Croatian and Post-Yugoslav intellectuals from the 1990s to the present time. The author demonstrates how the literary sphere acts as an alternative space for a critical articulation of national identity and borders, both reflecting and bearing upon regional socio-political realities. By mapping the ways in which literature and literary criticism reproduce ethno-nationalist tropes, as well as offer more complex, nuanced understanding of regional border(ing) themes, the paper confirms ‘the historically intriguing relationship between national, regional and European influences’. Croatia’s accession to the EU in 2013 serves as the most recent landmark among these.

Finally, Deiana focuses on post-conflict dynamics that bring into sharp focus the EU’s largely rhetorical commitment to conflict transformation and its complicity in producing Post-Dayton Bosnia as a space of impasse. The paper argues that existing approaches to cross-border cooperation overlook important bottom-up dynamics emerging in the Post-Dayton borderscape that can open opportunities for border-crossings. In doing so, it highlights the creative -yet fragile- potential of cultural cooperation, cinema-mediated encounters and grassroots initiatives revolving around the Sarajevo Film Festival as practices that both reproduce and attempt to outlive the divisive legacy of conflict. Once again the paper demonstrates, along the EU external boundaries, cross-border co-operation is a ‘double-edged instrument of EU border politics’, which ‘in the ensuing context of enlargement fatigue and security concerns, is devoid of the transformative value it might had originally assumed in the heyday of European integration’.

The collection of papers presented here provides a timely and critical discussion that is framed through the prism of bordering and builds upon the critical potential of the ‘borderscape’ concept. From this starting point, it offers new insights into the relationship between theories and practices of conflict transformation, including the perspectives of ‘peacebuilding from below’, ‘everyday peace’, territoriality, memory and emotion. In this way, not only do the papers explore and critique the potential, evolution and limits of EU cross-border cooperation, but offer both empirical and conceptual contributions to the critical debates surrounding the significance of the EU, its shifting configurations as a political space and global actor, and its inherent contradictions between border consolidation and cross-border cooperation. Ultimately, the collection explores new openings and opportunities for future paths that might be taken if the EU is to stay true to its original peacebuilding vision and uphold its transformative aspirations.

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<sup>1</sup> One example of how this logic is mobilised in the context of the Former Yugoslavia is Federica Mogherini's poignant speech on the Visa liberalization process for Kosovo available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160505\\_05\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160505_05_en.htm) accessed 10 May 2015

<sup>2</sup> See project details at : [www.euborderscapes.eu](http://www.euborderscapes.eu)