

The Borders of the European Union in a Conflictual World: Interdisciplinary European Studies.

By Antonina Bakardjieva Engelbrekt, Per Ekman, Anna Michalski, and Lars Oxelheim (Eds.), Springer, 2024

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Abstract. This edited volume, featuring contributions by Antonina Bakardjieva Engelbrekt, Per Ekman, Anna Michalski, and Lars Oxelheim, offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the contemporary challenges facing the European Union's external and internal borders. The book addresses a "Conflictual World," examining how geopolitical tensions, particularly those related to Russia, energy security (e.g., REPowerEU), and the weaponization of economic instruments like sanctions, reshape the concept and reality of the EU's frontier. The analysis is structured around key thematic areas: the integrity of the internal market and free movement, as governed by the Schengen Agreement; the legal and political dynamics of border securitisation; and the fundamental adherence to the Rule of Law under stress. It highlights the growing tension between open borders, a foundational EU principle, and the imperative for enhanced security and defense mechanisms in response to heightened global instability. The work is essential for scholars and policymakers seeking to understand the complex, multi-layered governance of borders in an era of renewed great power competition.

Keywords. European Union Borders; Geopolitics; Conflictual World; Free Movement; Securitisation; Interdisciplinary European Studies; Rule of Law.

JEL. F13; F50; H77; K33; P52.

Book Review

The *Borders of the European Union in a Conflictual World*, edited by Antonina Bakardjieva Engelbrekt, Per Ekman, Anna Michalski, and Lars Oxelheim, offers a compelling and necessary analysis of the European Union's external and internal frontiers as they are tested by a dramatically shifting geopolitical climate. The volume, aligned with the *Interdisciplinary European Studies* focus, moves beyond traditional border studies—which often focus purely on migration or administrative law—to explore the multi-dimensional stresses imposed by renewed great power competition, economic warfare, and internal political fragmentation. The central thesis is that the ideal of a unified, open, rules-based European territory is currently in a state of crisis, requiring a fundamental re-evaluation of border governance and the core principles of the EU itself.

The Geopolitical Reshaping of the External Frontier

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The book dedicates significant attention to the concept of a "Conflictual World" and how it manifests physically and structurally at the EU's periphery. The conflict in Ukraine and the resulting confrontation with **Russia** serves as a primary case study for this analysis.

- **Weaponization of Borders and Policy Tools:** Chapters examine how non-military tools are used to exert pressure, treating the border less as a line of separation and more as a contested space. The volume likely includes deep dives into the strategic use of migration, energy supply, and information warfare as instruments of hybrid conflict directed against the EU's eastern flank.
- **Economic Sanctions as Border Policy:** A crucial section is devoted to the policy of Sanctions. The book analyzes the complex legal, economic, and administrative challenges of imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia. This policy transforms the border into a perimeter of economic exclusion, raising questions about legal effectiveness, compliance monitoring, and the potential for circumvention. The discussion also touches upon related energy security responses, such as the EU's REPowerEU initiative, which aims to restructure energy reliance and, in effect, redefine the geopolitical energy border.
- **Security and Defence Integration:** The need for collective defense planning and border hardening in response to external threats drives a discussion on the securitisation of the external border. This involves analyzing the expansion of agencies like Frontex and the increasing integration of security policies, often leading to a complex negotiation between national sovereignty and shared EU security mandates.

The Fragility of the Internal Border: The Schengen Crisis

A critical area of focus is the integrity of the **Schengen area**. The book argues that external conflicts inevitably generate internal pressures, leading to the erosion of the principles of free movement.

- **The Return of Internal Borders:** The volume scrutinizes the political and legal implications of the temporary, yet increasingly prolonged, reinstatement of border checks within the Schengen area. It asks whether these internal checks—triggered by security concerns, migration crises, or health emergencies—represent a fundamental shift towards the re-nationalisation of border control, undermining one of the EU's most tangible achievements.
- **Legal and Technical Instruments:** Specific attention is paid to the operational tools, such as the Schengen Information System (SIS), which manage internal and external movements. The book likely examines how the technical implementation of these systems reflects and reinforces the political tension between security surveillance and the rights to privacy and free movement.

Institutional and Normative Stress: The Rule of Law

The most profound challenge explored is the normative one, centered on the Rule of Law. A "Conflictual World" not only challenges the EU's physical security but also its foundational liberal democratic values.

- **Rule of Law at the Frontier:** The book analyzes how heightened security concerns and the imperative of border defense may lead to exceptions, derogations, or outright violations of the Rule of Law, particularly

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concerning asylum procedures, human rights, and non-refoulement principles. The pressure to "secure" the border can lead to compromises on fundamental rights, creating a dichotomy between the EU as a normative power and the EU as a security actor.

- The Internal-External Nexus: The volume explores the relationship between external geopolitical conflict and internal struggles over democratic backsliding and judicial independence in member states. The stress of external conflict provides political cover for governments to consolidate power, often by attacking the independence of institutions that uphold the Rule of Law. The book thus links the integrity of the EU's borders to the integrity of its core legal and democratic norms.

Conclusion

The Borders of the European Union in a Conflictual World is a seminal work for contemporary European Studies. Its editors have successfully compiled an interdisciplinary volume that captures the multi-faceted nature of the crisis at the EU's frontiers. By weaving together strands of law, economics, political science, and security studies, the book provides a robust framework for understanding the twin crises of geopolitical tension and internal fragmentation. It concludes that the survival of the EU's open borders—both internal and external—depends not just on military strength or economic resilience, but on the unwavering defense of its constitutional principles and the Rules-based international system it champions. This makes the book an indispensable resource for academics, policymakers, and security professionals concerned with the future of Europe.



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