
Relic borders and their geopolitical positioning through tourism development: Contested Iron Curtain and Sudetenland tourism products in the German-Czech borderlands

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Abstract

European borderland cooperation has for years been characterized by high polarization between, on the one hand, a European-wide policy of de-bordering and region-building across internal borders and, on the other hand, an increased re-bordering and militarization of its external borders to establish what has been dubbed ‘Fortress Europe’. However, recent years have seen an increased blurring of these previously separated internal and external EU border policies. The 2015 migration crisis symbolically highlights the increasing contestations between both. It has, amongst other, given form to a national-institutional tendency to increasingly harden internal European borders, thereby challenging the EU rhetoric of establishing a ‘Europe of the regions’ and promoting internal European social cohesion. In this paper, we discuss the implications of these multi-scalar geopolitical bordering contestations for cross-border tourism projects that, in the first place, symbolical underpin internal European economic and political cross-border cooperation policy. Tourism functions as one of the main sectors in European cross-border cooperation schemes, especially on local scales, as it is often deemed relatively straightforward to develop across international borders and politically uncontested compared to other socio-economic development spheres. Focusing on the tourism commodification of relic Iron Curtain and Sudetenland landscapes in the German-Czech borderlands, we study the contestations between larger EU cross-border cooperation rhetoric and local memories. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, socio-economic development plans in the German-Czech borderlands have dominantly stressed the value of cross-border cooperation for the future development of the area. The two most high-profile relic borderscape tourism projects in the area – the Iron Curtain Trail and the European Green Belt – discursively support these positive reflections on the value of cross-border integration. They reflect on the divided history of Europe to portray a future in which binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ should not reoccur. Practically, these projects use tourism as a soft tool to facilitate cross-border exchange between German and Czech communities as well as nature conservation in the borderlands. Despite these potential advantages, our research indicates that the projects encounter both tourism-related and socio-cultural contestations. On the one hand, local tourism managers question the long-term success of the projects as attractive and viable tourism products. On the other hand, the cross-border rhetoric supporting EU internal border policy of the projects results in societal agitation because it creates a feeling among locals that it by-passes socially sensitive and locally diverse senses of place regarding the Iron Curtain history. Finally, questions remain how these projects will

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fare in a context of increasing challenges between internal and external EU border policy and national discussion on the openness of internal European borders. This way, we argue that EU-inspired borderland tourism projects become geopolitical arenas with important selectivity in whose memory is commodified for which purposes.

Keywords: Borderland tourism, memory politics, tourism geopolitics, bordering, Iron Curtain Trail