

# “Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad...?”: Populism and the Threatened Border in Austria

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*Abstract: This paper analyses the performative power of the discourse on the transgression of borders and boundaries. Drawing on research in Austrian right-wing populist political and media discourse, I show how different imaginations of threat are connected to different conceptualisations of boundary-drawing. Stigmatized representations of Muslims and Eastern European males as the threatening “Other” differ regarding the kind of border transgressions and violence used against the body politic. I argue that by invoking the “threatened border”, the populist discourse creates a powerful image of an endangered ethno-national community, projecting a utopian future where the border will be restored. Therefore, this article elaborates on the relationship between nationalism and borders by emphasizing the performative nature of the populist discourse on borders and boundaries.*

*Keywords: borders, migration, Austria, media discourse, Islamophobia, Eastern Europe, right-wing populism*

## Introduction

In December 2012,<sup>1</sup> Angela P.’s jealous husband Harald P. stabbed her to death in the Austrian town of Klagenfurt. On account of her wanting to leave him, he attacked her while she was picking up their son, aged 4, from kindergarten. Angela P. died at the scene. The Austrian daily tabloid *Heute* (“Today”) described Harald P., a Muslim, as follows:

The trucker (43) belongs to the type of men who are behind the times.<sup>2</sup> He comes from a country where the bottom is in a higher position than the head while praying, where they consider their female partner to be their property.

<sup>1</sup> An early version of this article has been presented at the EastBordNet conference “Relocating Borders”, 11–13 January 2013 in Berlin. I am indebted to Sarah Green, Guido Tiemann, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and advices which have led to significant improvement on the quality of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Literally: “lives behind the half-moon”.

If she acts autonomously, their pride is wounded and they go mad.<sup>3</sup> (*Heute*, 7. 12. 2012: 6–7)

The editor-in-chief was forced to publicly apologise. In 2009, the Austrian tabloid *Kronen Zeitung* published a letter to the editor stating that Austria, once an “island of the blessed”, has degenerated into a passageway and a madhouse:

Due to our geographical location, we have become a hub for Romanian burglar gangs, Polish car smugglers, Russian mafia, Slovakian child traffickers, Albanian arms dealers, Nigerian drug dealers, German professional traffickers, Asian cigarette smugglers, and now also Turkish immigrant hordes. The latter are laughing at us anyway, since they do not need a bloody conquest anymore. On the contrary, our political representatives are eagerly helping them [...]; along the way, they are breeding us to our extinction. Why should they adapt or integrate, when this country will soon belong to them anyway? (*Kronen Zeitung*, 13. 9. 2009: 29)

Austria, it appears, is under siege. There is suggestion that Eastern Europeans, Africans, and Asians misuse the country for their criminal enterprises, while culturally, Austria is threatened by alien and hostile immigration. These two excerpts exemplify two versions of a common motif in nationalist politics: the over-emphasis of an external threat that creates and binds together a community of valuable “good-citizens” (Anderson 2013); at the same time the externalization of “wrongs” enhances this in-group’s moral superiority while drawing a strict boundary between the two groups. Andre Gingrich (2006: 199) argues that neo-nationalists share a “basic, tripartite hierarchical ideological pattern: a coherent, culturally essentialised form of ‘us’ is positioned in the centre and is contrasted against two groups of ‘them’”. These two groups are the European Union “from above”; and “from below”, immigrants, both local and potential ones. These threats integrate large parts of society into a coherent “us”.

The importance of borders and boundary-drawing for the nationalistic project and national identity has long been recognized in scholarly research (see, e.g., Cole and Wolf 1999; Sahlins 1989; Wilson and Donnan 1998). Borders are constitutive for national identity, and populist nationalism has been very successful in identifying “enemies” lurking behind or threatening to transgress those set borders. Thereby, borders are excessively marking the difference between “us” and “them” (see Wodak 2015, ch. 3). In this article, I use the concept of populism less for its inherent opposition between “the people” and “corrupt elites”, but because more than nationalism, populism emphasizes “a moralized form of antipluralism”

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<sup>3</sup> This and the following quotes from Austrian newspapers are the author’s translation.

(Müller 2016: 20) which claims to speak for an imagined homogenous ethnically and morally pure “people”. As Müller (ibid.: 49) argues, “populists create the homogeneous people in whose name they had been speaking all along”. Political actors who seek to mobilize populations may conduct such nationalistic identity work. In addition, other non-state actors can engage in populist border work, such as the example from Shapira (2013) of the minutemen volunteers who patrol the US-Mexican border. Finally, compliant media outlets support right-wing populists and grant them high visibility such as in the case of Austria discussed below (see also Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2017).

Overall, I wish to expand on the axiomatic relationship between populist discourse and borders, as well as subjecting it to closer scrutiny. Drawing on Austrian tabloid media and right-wing populist politicians, I analyse the performative power of the discourse on the transgression of borders and boundaries. In my introductory examples above, a clear boundary between “us” and “them” is established, which is violently transgressed by aggressive “Others”. Yet, “they” are not all the same and neither are the threats they pose. There is a difference between the dangers brought by the jealous Muslim and the Eastern European criminal, and it is this difference I wish to scrutinize. The Muslim husband and the Eastern European criminals each represent an array of threats that relate to different ways of bordering and boundary-drawing, and in effect, point to different ways of selfing and othering. I follow Sarah Green’s concept of “borderness”, through which she seeks to elaborate on

the different senses of border that have been expressed in different places and at different times, and how that relates to the way borders are both generated by, and/or help to generate, the classification system that distinguishes (or fails to distinguish) people, places and things in one way rather than another. (Green 2012: 580)

These different senses of border and border transgressions are pivotal, not because of their empirical basis, but due to their imaginary dimension. They are powerful yet contested narratives which not only classify but link such classifications to imaginations. Therefore, to imagine a national border and/or an ethno-cultural boundary at the same time creates a border violation, a perpetrator, and a victim. Each discursive “outside invasion” that transgresses the border into an imagined “safe” territory helps reinforce the myth of the nation state and the “pure” body politic. Whether the national border or a cultural boundary are “actually”, empirically, endangered, is not important. Facts are trumped by feeling and discourse. Hence, rather than the border being under threat, I suggest the discourse has worked to create this impression. I claim the populist discourse on the border between “us” and “them” has agency in making the borders appear to be

“under threat”. This article thus contributes to the existing literature on the relation between nationalism and borders by emphasizing the performative nature of the populist discourse on borders and boundaries.

The article proceeds as follows: Initially, I introduce the concept of the body politic and its importance for the imagination of a distinctive healthy community which draws a clear boundary between “the inside” and “the outside”. Subsequently, based on the example of Austria, I show how different “the Other” is constructed as a threat to this healthy body. I elaborate on the representations of Muslims and Eastern European males in the political and media discourse. In conclusion, I analyse how the different perceptions of threats are connected to conceptualizations of bordering and boundary-drawing, presenting the concept of the discourse on the border as performative, even if the border itself is only imaginary. By invoking the threatened border, the populist discourse creates a powerful image of an endangered present and a utopian future where borders will be restored.

Additionally, this article sets out to analyse images of male intrusion in Austria. Threats to the body politic from females and the relationship of biopower and the female body have been dealt with by several authors (see, for example, Chavez 2008; Inda 2002). The Muslim and Eastern European females are very different types compared to their male counterparts, relying on the imagined perception of the orientalist female body as a victim (Andrijasevic 2007) which needs saving by the civilized West.

### **Borders and the Body Politic**

The concepts of borders and boundaries are used differently across disciplines. My usage draws on a distinction common in anthropological literature, where “boundaries” are social, mental, and cultural borders (Cohen 1998). The notion of “borders” refers to judicial borders, such as those between nation states. Borders and boundaries obviously can coincide, and the project of the nation state seeks to bring both into accord. Following Georg Simmel’s (1997: 143) famous dictum, the “boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially”.

One of the most important symbolic functions of national borders is that they promise security to the inhabitants of the territory they encompass. The state’s authority on which this security promise is based creates a monopoly over the legitimate use of force at the border and justifies the behaviour in the name of protecting the state. Border controls are a powerful instrument of the nation state which aims to reduce ambiguity and hybridity; the inherent feature and main purpose of borders is to categorise and classify. Salter (2008: 371) argues the moment of decision at a border is a biopolitical filter, therefore, “entry is a moment of crisis – a moment of absolute surrender to the sovereign power of the state”. Consequently, for

the nation state crossing borders becomes an instrument of power, whereas for the traveller, it is an existential question. Thus, borders, border controls, and the idea of the nation state are inextricably intertwined. In this section, I will take a closer look at the importance of both mental boundaries and institutionalised borders for an “imagined (security) community” in the construction of self and other.

### ***The Body Politic***

Following Anderson (1991), nations are perceived as “imagined communities”. This refers to communities where not everyone knows everyone else personally, but where people imagine the larger entity and believe they belong. How a community is imagined relates to the way it is experienced, and how it is perceived to operate and position itself. In this article, I suggest the notion of the “body politic” in order to grasp a specific ethno-nationalist and populist imaginary. Generally, imagining a national population as a collective body invites a representation of the nation state as a political body, or the body politic.

Initially, the concept of the body politic, the political body encompassing all members of a state community, derives from social contract theory and contractualism. These theories are intrinsically tied to philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The metaphor of the body politic dates to the medieval doctrine of the king’s two bodies, the natural body and the political body (Kantorowicz 1997). While the king’s natural body can die a natural death, the political body lives on and devolves into the next natural king’s body. This mental abstraction enabled a transfer of legitimacy from the king to the parliament, and from the people to the nation. Consequently, this permits the killing of the natural body of the king by the body politic, with examples such as the English Civil War of 1649, and the French Revolution, and best expressed in the phrase, “The king is dead – long live the king!” (see Manow 2008: 46). The image of the polity as a political body was most impressively elaborated by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. Here, a state comes into being through the social contract that ends the war of all against all. By transferring the monopoly over the use of force from the people to the state, the state ensures an absolute rule through a strong and united government. The frontispiece of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* by Abraham Bosse displays the embodiment of all members of a society, marking the transition from an estate system to a society imagined as an organic bodily unit.

To imagine a state as a “body” allows for an understanding of the nation state as an organic community. As an efficient, well-oiled ensemble of units of indefinite numbers, all of which have their specific meaning and fixed places, working together towards a common good, a higher aim. Such a conception of the nation as a body is potentially anti-democratic if fused with ethno-nationalism. “The people” are not the democratic sovereign, but “a fictional entity outside existing democratic

procedures, a homogeneous and morally unified body whose alleged will can be played off against actual election results in democracies” (Müller 2016: 27).

Even in its ethno-nationalist variant, this body is not closed off but semipermeable, an “osmosis” (Barth 1969: 21), which not only makes exchange possible, but enables desirables to be granted entry while everything undesired is eliminated – unless the intruder can overcome the lines of defence either by spite, malice, or simply due to superiority. Within this imaginary, both the institutionalised border and mental boundaries function like a skin (Douglas 1984: 124), and migrants and refugees are perceived as penetrating the purity of the nation. The body’s own border controls (such as the skin) are decisive in blocking external dangers, as they provide for a smooth functioning within their borders. In times of peace, the external *per se* is immigration; for ethno-nationalists, this means a peaceful, yet equally harmful violation of the body’s integrity.

To imagine the state as a body not only implies a conception of political and social order, it also allows one to imagine its breakdown. If the nation state is imagined as a body, then this leads to a certain understanding of national borders, making them the decisive element to obstructing intruders. Consequently, I use the notion of the body politic because it allows to highlight a specific aspect of populist nationalism, one that refers to the political body not as a democratic community, but as carrier of a mythical ethnic will of an eternal homogenous and morally pure community. It therefore emphasizes the potential exclusionary character of nationalism more than Anderson’s “imagined community” does.

### ***Keeping the Body Healthy***

If the sedentary body politic is the healthy norm, then mobility is its counterpart. Mobility becomes pathological, a “contamination” of the body politic. Friese (2017: 35) compares such a perception of mobility to a hostile invasion of parasites who seek to weaken the healthy and intact body politic, and who, according to right-wing populists, must be chased away, deported or killed at the border for the sake of the well-being of the body politic (see De Genova and Peutz 2010). The “healthy” body can be taken literally. For instance, supposedly “objective” and non-political health policies serve highly political purposes (see the contributions in Bashford 2006). From a historical perspective, Bashford (2002) explicates the correlation of health issues, immigration, and citizenship in Australia. She shows how health control and quarantine have been implemented to guard against the intrusion of diseases onto the continent. Furthermore, she discusses how the merging of discourses of contagion and migration reproduces the idea of a contamination of an imagined Australian white nation, and the identity of this healthy and pure white nation itself. Similarly, Smart and Smart (2012: 366) argue that “in the past, quarantine attempted to protect sovereignty and served to strengthen borders”. Vukov

(2003) shows that the imagination of “desirable” and “undesirable” migrants is a typical feature of settler nations such as Canada and the US (see also Markel and Stern 1999). Similarly, health and disease control in Germany was an indirect way to manage immigration at least since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mattes 2005; Riecken 2006).

Throughout history, specific diseases have had a stigmatizing effect, such as cholera or tuberculosis, which in Germany also went by the name of “guest worker’s disease”, or “Russian disease”. Although people predominantly from lower, working classes were more likely to be infected with tuberculosis, fear of contagion in the host country is not interpreted in class terms, but it is culturalised. The germs are perceived as an external threat; making the carriers of the threat externalised as well. Such externalization is not confined to international borders but takes place at various locations within the country where the border function is executed. Other studies explicitly link racism and anti-immigrant discourses with the imagination of the national community. In their analysis of mainstream Canadian newspapers, Mykhalovskiy et al. (2016: 9) argue that their coverage “stigmatizes Black heterosexual men living with HIV as dangerous, foreign sexual and public health threats to the safety of individual (White) women and, more broadly, the imagined Canadian nation”.

In effect, mobilities are a danger for an imagined “healthy” community because “both the body and the body politic are at risk” (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 136). This is epitomised, for example, in the words of Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of the Polish party “Law and Justice”, who claimed in the run-up to the 2015 parliamentary elections that refugees had to be rejected since they endangered the Polish nation by bringing “various types of parasites, protozoas, which aren’t dangerous in the organisms of these people, but which could be dangerous here” (quoted in Brubaker 2017: 1209). Accordingly, the conception of the body politic serves as a basis for the defence against “external” unwanted elements whose intrusion might do harm to the organism. Bigo emphasises the embeddedness of the metaphor of the body politic into the sovereignty myth:

in the need to monitor borders to reassure the integrity of what is “inside”, in the practice of territorial protection, in the technologies of surveillance – [it] creates an image of immigration associated with an outsider coming inside, as a danger to the homogeneity of the state, the society, and the polity. (Bigo 2002: 67)

Yet migrants or Others are not all considered similar. Just like the living body can be subject to harm in various ways, there are different imaginations and representations of intrusions and intruders. Also, borders and boundaries are not only located at the limits of the state, but as Khosravi (2010: 99) argues, with reference

to Balibar, they “have become invisible borders, situated everywhere and nowhere. Hence, undesirable people are not expelled by the border, they are forced to *be* border”. In the following segment, I argue that the alterity is constructed via stigmatizing representations, and these relate to the way the borders of the body politic are imagined to be transgressed, and how the “Other” is imagined inflicting violence on the body politic.

### **Austria and its “Others”**

In the following analysis, I draw upon (1) the coverage of the leading Austrian tabloids *Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich* and *Heute*, and (2) on examples from Austrian right-wing extremist and populist discourse. These sources are not identical but still complement one another. The 2016/17 Austrian “Media Analyse” (2017) found that the *Kronen Zeitung* (30,1 %), *Heute* (12,9 %) and *Österreich* (7,2 %) together reach more than 50 percent of the population, i. e. more than 4,5 million people; such a large range of influence is extraordinary compared to newspapers in all other European countries (see also Seethaler and Melischek 2006: 353). This analysis covers editorials, feature articles, and letters to the editor.<sup>4</sup> The tabloids’ coverage exerts considerable influence on public opinion, significantly shaping Austrian public discourse (see also El Refaie 2001; 2003), along with the formation and creation of beliefs, knowledge, and “truth” about self and other (Foucault 1980). The Austrian tabloid media have repeatedly been criticised for campaign journalism, continuing to be heavily accused of violations of personal rights, fear-mongering, and inciting fears and prejudices regarding minorities, asylum-seekers, and migrants.<sup>5</sup>

Structurally, the tabloids are not linked to any party, pursuing their own agenda, news coverage and political discourse. However, there is a common consensus, and overlap, ultimately reinforcing each other and creating their own specific discourse universe. Populist tabloids provide an explanatory referential framework that is easy to digest and renders a complex world meaningful. In so doing, the tabloids’ blunt, clear-cut black-and-white worldview functions as a framing device that feeds into extremist attitudes, making them socially acceptable. Right-wing

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<sup>4</sup> The *Kronen Zeitung* emphasises letters to the editor as an important element linking readers and journalists, encouraging readers to actively co-write the newspaper. The *Kronen Zeitung* has been repeatedly accused of fabricating letters to the editor (see AK’s weblog 2009). In 2003, the editor of the *Kronen Zeitung* abandoned a lawsuit against the Vienna city magazine *Der Falter* when the magazine’s lawyer announced to summon the editor’s secretary as a witness against the *Kronen Zeitung* (Fidler 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Specific websites exist that check for fabricated or wrong news reporting, such as [kobuk.at](http://kobuk.at) or [mimikama.at](http://mimikama.at).



populist and extremist attitudes, in turn, are not a marginal phenomenon in Austria, but occupy a strong position within the political and public discourse. The Freedom Party (FPÖ) was part of a previous government until 2019. How right-wing extremist imaginations are received by voters and the wider public, and which effects they have, lies beyond the scope of this paper. As I have argued elsewhere (Schwell 2015), imaginations inform emotional practices in complex ways.

Empirical data was collected between December 2007, the date of the Schengen enlargement, and December 2012. In my interpretation and analysis, I focused on strategies of selfing and othering in the Austrian right-wing populist discourse. I conducted a content analysis to discover representational patterns and cultural meanings that emerge with relation to boundary-drawing between “us” and “them”. Such representations are examples of prejudices based on stereotyping, which “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall 1997: 258). As such, “stereotyping is a key element in the exercise of symbolic violence” (ibid.: 259), with tangible effects for those who are targeted by prejudiced practices. This analysis is part of a larger research project, which included interviews and participant observations in Austrian and Polish security agencies (Schwell 2012; 2014; 2016), and focused on how (in)securities and fears are practiced, performed and institutionalized in an enlarged Europe.

### ***The Cultural Contagion***

Anti-immigration discourses frequently paint a picture of immigrants as being incompatible with host nations. Immigrants from predominantly Islamic countries in particular are considered “unsuitable participants in the body politic”, their exclusion being codified “as a noble pursuit necessary to ensure the well-being and survival of the social body” (Inda 2007: 139f.). Constructing the migrant as a risk and harmful contaminant hinges upon the concept of the state “as a body or a container for the polity” (Bigo 2002: 65). Austria is no exception; mistrust and hostility towards Muslims are not specific to Austria but are informed by historically transmitted Western narratives about “Orientals”, Western media coverage of the Arab world, and the firmly established link between Islam and terrorism (see Powell 2011; Shooman and Spielhaus 2010). Austrian discourse on Muslims resembles those of other Western countries. It reflects and reacts to narratives and imaginaries that transcend the local and national level but are nevertheless firmly anchored within the narrative of the body politic. Furthermore, it creates a localised version of a transnational discourse that adapts to, and is embedded in, local and national knowledge.

Austria’s geopolitical position and its historical proximity with those countries it ruled in the Habsburg Empire yield certain postcolonial implications (see Feichtinger et al. 2003; Lemon 2011). Austria’s self-image as a Germanic bulwark

against everything oriental is highly influential. It concerns first and foremost Austria’s relationship with Muslims, which includes Turks, Arabs, or the country’s “own” Bosnian “Orientals”. The former are an important antagonist for identity construction, due to the Turkish sieges in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The relationship to the Bosnian Muslims takes on a different nature. Bosnia was incorporated into the Habsburg Empire in 1878, which had a rather progressive attitude towards Muslims, particularly with regard to the judiciary. Islam has been an officially recognised religious community since 1912 (Abid 2006; Hödl 2010).

Austria’s relation towards Muslims is paradoxical. The Habsburg Empire integrated Islam into its political body; while maintaining a strict opposition towards the outside enemy, the Ottoman Empire, the boundary towards their “own” Muslims, was only blurred not dissolved. The cultural boundary remained in place, even if the political border had been transgressed. On the one hand, the Austrian centre cultivated a sense of paternalism over the region and its people, and on the other, an extensive aura of suspicion and mistrust prevailed. A “Frontier Myth of Orientalism” (Gingrich 2004) is deeply rooted in Austrian popular and everyday culture and it exerts a significant influence on political campaigns, decisions, and public opinion. Austria’s “Frontier Myth of Orientalism” differs from “classical” Orientalism as described by Said (1979), because “the ‘Oriental’ was portrayed not as a distant, backward, and deviant underling but rather as a close, dangerous, potential intruder of almost equal, albeit very different, skills” (Gingrich 2004: 169). In contrast to Orientalism, Frontier Orientalism was not limited to elite culture, but found its expression first and foremost in popular and “folk” culture (ibid.). References to the two Turkish sieges in 1529 and 1683 can be found abundantly in public places, such as monuments or street names. Popular songs that children learn in school, children’s books and other parts of popular culture constantly, and subconsciously, remind of the incommensurability (and also enmity) of Muslims with “our” culture (see the contributions in Bunzl and Hafez 2009).

Such historically transmitted cultural patterns are easily activated under the impression of Islamist attacks and increasing Islamophobia in the West, merging with widespread prejudiced and racialized representations. A recurring narrative is that Muslim migrants undermine Austrian traditions and identity. Both tabloids and right-wing extremist politicians join forces to save and protect what they claim to be an Austrian identity. Every year since 2006 around Saint Nicolas Day, the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, a rumour keeps reappearing, spread by FPÖ politicians and the tabloids, that celebrations are banned from Viennese kindergartens because Muslim children might be offended:

Row about Saint Nicolas. When Saint Nicolas was not allowed into the Döbling kindergarten Obkirchgasse on Thursday, a conflict developed. “Our

culture is trampled underfoot because of 10 Muslim children,” parents said indignantly. (*Kronen Zeitung*, 7. 12. 2012: 30)

Every year the Vienna City Council attempts to correct this myth, arguing that celebrations are in fact taking place, albeit in a different format, as the small children are afraid of the “big man with the long beard” (Puschautz and Steinlechner 2013). Nevertheless, the rumour persists. The Lower Austrian FPÖ worries that “our little ones” are targeted by “compulsory islamisation” as a result of “multicultural lunacy”. In a press release entitled “Saint Nicolas must not die!”, more than ten years after the initial uproar the FPÖ complains:

Traditional and Christian festivals are in massive danger! Year by year they are buried, secretly and quietly, and banned from kindergartens and primary schools. [...] Many kindergartens cancel their Saint Nicolas celebrations, instead foreign children are allowed to tell stories from their countries of origin. For the Lower Austrian FPÖ, this exemplifies the attack on traditional Austrian celebrations, which are important symbols of the nation and necessary for identity creation. These developments are scandalous and unbearable. (FPÖ 2017)

In these quotes, a homogenous and ethnically pure national “we-community” is constructed. This “we” shares a timeless Christian tradition and culture which is synonymous with ethno-national community membership. Participation in the body politic is not derived from democratic values and procedures but based on a naturalised cultural imaginary of belonging and perpetuated through identity work. Muslims mentioned in the previous quotes are at the same time inside and outside, already present within the body politic, yet their contribution and loyalty is questionable. They are framed in terms of a “cultural contagion”, a cultural toxin, destroying the body politic from the inside.<sup>6</sup> Rather than contributing to the wellbeing of the healthy body, the discourse suggests they seek to destroy it from within, like a contaminant or an alien organism that works its way to harm its victim.

There is an important gender dimension in the construction of the Muslim contaminant and Austrian victimhood. Due to their culture, Muslim men are depicted as being archaic Barbarians who treat women like objects as exemplified by the introductory quote. Not only are Austrian women endangered, but the country as

<sup>6</sup> Jews in Nazi Germany were framed as “cancer” trying to kill the “healthy” German body politic, or as “rats” bringing deadly diseases. Many striking parallels exist between the conception of anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism (Bunzl 2005).

a whole is construed as feminine and weak. Within the right-wing populist discourse, an Islamic intrusion into, and penetration of, the Austrian body politic triggers the deterioration of the entire organism. If Muslims get the upper hand, the argument goes, “we” will even have to change our outlook, and all women will have to wear burqas or at least a headscarf (Gresch et al. 2008). Moreover, one day “we” will not be here because of the high birth-rates of Muslim women (see Chavez 2008 for a similar discourse on Latino women in the US). Hence, “we” are facing both a cultural and a biological extinction.

During the 2008 FPÖ New Year’s meeting in Styria, party member Susanne Winter caused a scandal when she suspected a “creeping islamisation” of Austria and an “immigration tsunami”. She subsequently called Mohammed a child abuser and demanded animal brothels for Muslim men. Her son was convicted of incitement of hate crimes, proposing to let sheep graze in the city park of Graz as an “emergency measure” against rape, so Muslim men would refrain from molesting Austrian women. He was alleging that Muslims have a propensity to bestiality (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2010).

Together, these many horrifying and racist narratives create the image of the dangerous oriental “Other”. After the first and second Turkish sieges, anti-Muslim proponents contend, Austria presently finds itself right in the middle of the Third Turkish Siege. Moreover, this time “they” have already won, the siege turning into an occupation. Again, this narrative is not exclusively Austrian, but framed by a larger narrative existing within the West where a majority feels threatened by a small percentage of the population that is identified as different based on cultural, and in this case religious grounds. Drawing upon his own experiences in Sweden, Khosravi writes in the same vein:

The “primitive masculinity” ascribed to Muslim men is a way to represent them, not only as a danger to Muslim women, but also as a force that violates Swedish norms and values. Muslim men are stereotyped as more likely to violate Western norms and values than are Muslim women. Their “primitive masculinity” is seen as inferior to the “civilized” masculinities of Western men. (Khosravi 2010: 77)

“Culture” in such popular discourses is perceived as something static, eternal and unchangeable – something a person “has” (or does not have). This notion of culture builds upon cultural essentialist concepts and cultural fundamentalism. The increasing “culture speak”, Grillo (2003: 166) argues, is accompanied by a rising “cultural anxiety” which he defines as “concern about cultural identity and loss”. The fear of identity contamination is present in discussions over minaret construction in Western countries, or on headscarves and veiling (Bracke and Fadil

2012; Göle 2011; Gresch et al. 2008). Borders, both mental boundaries and institutionalised borders, are pivotal for such a culturalistic argumentation.

Cultural anxiety, therefore, is the fear of a cultural contagion and intoxication by the “Other”. If “we” do not remain vigilant, “they” will contaminate us, and “we” will lose our identity. Within this discourse the border between the Muslim “Other” and the imagined “Self” is a cultural boundary, which is unbridgeable; yet even still, “they” do not stay on their side of the cultural border but infringe upon “our” side. “They” have a strong identity and will overwhelm “us”; the discourse revolves around the issues of contagion, penetration and infiltration, and thus the imagined “purity” of the body politic. However, emphasizing the cultural boundary does not make the institutional border obsolete, since in this quasi-Herderian space – or Westphalian ideal type state – nation, religion, and territory necessarily must coincide.

### ***The Eastern Threat***

Cultural anxiety is the fear of a “cultural contagion” of the “Other” who infiltrates and penetrates “our common home” and “our culture”. However, intruders from Eastern Europe are conceptualised in a different way. While Muslim migrants are perceived as cultural contaminants, Eastern and South-eastern Europeans are identified, less subtly, as violent criminals which are a tangible threat to both the political and natural body. In this narrative, the East does not pose a threat to our cultural “home”, but to our material “home” and our physical wellbeing. However, the boundary between “us” and “them” is a cultural one as well, albeit in a different way.

Again, this is not a specifically Austrian invention, but the representation of Eastern Europe in the West is connected to the way the boundary between West and East is drawn historically. In effect, both representations follow a culturalistic pattern: While Muslims, following Orientalist interpretations, in fact do have a culture, albeit an inferior, strange one, Easterners are perceived as barbarians lacking culture. In a nutshell, the Western representation of the Eastern intruder is male, brutal, and barbarian. In comparison to “us”, the Eastern criminal “has” no culture. His representation is in line with a long history of stigmatizing and prejudices towards Eastern Europe, Russia and the Balkans (Todorova 2009; Wolff 1994). The cultural “East” is a representation in contrast with civilization, enlightenment, and modernity; whereas the ideal image the “West” constructs about itself is displayed as the yardstick for progress, development, and modernization.

Similar to the Austrian conceptualization of Muslims, the representation of Eastern and South-Eastern Europeans has a history going back to the Habsburg Empire. Until its break-up in 1918, large parts of Central Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Europe belonged to the Habsburg Empire. Austria had fostered its

“Habsburg myth of a pluralistic society and pluralistic state, within which every people found the homeland (Heimat) it was entitled to” (Le Rider 2008: 161). In reality, a strict hierarchy and asymmetry governed relations between the German-speaking centre and the peripheries. After the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, mistrust towards the former crownlands and a feeling of superiority remained.

Changing political and institutional borders have played a pivotal role in the formation of the images of self and other. The Iron Curtain had hidden the former crownlands; they were out of sight behind the border, and thus out of mind. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain positioned Austria as a bridge between East and West, where large parts of its population had mentally turned their back on the East for the last decades. Austria saw a sudden influx of migrants and seasonal workers, as well as refugees fleeing the war in the former Yugoslavia, all of whom had been previously contained behind closed borders. In the nationalist imaginary, the opening of borders is accompanied by the influx of external dangers resulting in a self-image characterized by vulnerability and victimhood. The abolishment of border controls during the enlarging of the Schengen area in December 2007 significantly increased this feeling of vulnerability.

Stationary border controls were substituted by mobile surveillance and patrols, while the external borders of the Schengen zone were strengthened. Hence, the border is changing rather than waning. As border functions are more and more disengaged from their territorial reference point, both surveillance techniques and increased possibilities of control lead to processes of deterritorialisation and de-localisation of borders. However, the public imagination focuses less on border functions than on tangible sentry bars and visible border guards. Border controls do not just matter with regard to their security-political aspect, but to their symbolic power as well: “Border control efforts are not only actions (a means to a stated instrumental end), but also gestures that communicate meaning.” (Andreas 2001: 11) This is even more the case, it seems, when no physical border controls are taking place.

Judging from their historical development, borders and boundaries have played, and continue to play a central role in Austria’s relation to its former crownlands. Geopolitical transformations have not only changed international borders, but they exerted an impact on the imaginaries linked to these borders and to what they are supposed to protect. With the opening of borders after the Cold War, along with the abolishment of border controls in 2007, the “island of the blessed” suddenly seemed to have turned into a country under siege. How Austrian political borders and border controls are being imagined and invoked within a populist nationalist narrative is inextricably intertwined with a representation of the ethno-national body politic and those who attack it. The violence which these attackers inflict corresponds to the stereotype of the “cultural East”. It is direct and a threat to life

itself. The types of crimes committed are viewed as uncouth, blundering, and often brutal. The tabloids invented the specific technical term “Ostkriminelle” meaning “Eastern criminals”, which has quickly entered everyday language due to the quasi-natural link between the two concepts:

Eastern criminals arrested on field. Romanian gang wanted to mow down police officer. (*Kronen Zeitung*, 22. 5. 2011: 22)

To “mow down”, i. e. almost run over a police officer with a car while trying to escape, fits the image of the brutal, yet dumb criminal. Less violent offences are also framed as “Eastern crime”, opening up an entire universe of figments of imagination. “Eastern criminals” are accused of “overfishing domestic waters [...]”. Increasingly, local fishery wardens are threatened by Eastern criminals hunting for trout” (*Kronen Zeitung*, 31. 8. 2009). Eastern “Bear’s garlic gangs” are haunting Austria, and “ruthless pickers from the East” (*Kronen Zeitung*, 25. 2. 2014).

The following quote from the *Kronen Zeitung* illustrates the way the tabloids frame such minor breaches of the law as severe and external crime (“crime tourist”), simultaneously decrying the “perpetrator’s” intelligence by ridiculing his language skills:

Loot in the pants. “I stealing and living from that”, the Eastern criminal Jano E. justified shoplifting in Wien-Donaustadt. The crime tourist (24) was caught red-handed by a vigilant shop detective. (*Kronen Zeitung*, 1. 7. 2012: 14)

Against this male intrusion, which is often portrayed as brutal and barbaric, Austria is conceptualised as the female victim, weak, vulnerable, helpless, and at the criminals’ mercy. Contrary to the “cultural contagion” discourse, the “Eastern threat” is an entirely external threat which calls for a different kind of solution, one that invokes an imaginary of the national border as a fortress. More than two years after the abolition of border controls a letter to the editor in *Kronen Zeitung* emphasises Austria’s role as a frontier and bulwark:

Austria is the last frontier bulwark against the former East. It’s exactly from this former Eastern bloc that all the criminals come from... So, again, give us border controls, for the safety of all of us. We inhabitants of Austria have the right to sleep peacefully, without fear of burglars, thieves and near-police murderers. (*Kronen Zeitung*, 27. 1. 2010: 23)

This last quote emphasises the symbolic importance of border controls for the national security community. This is one of the dominant narratives the tabloids employ with regard to Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The author constructs an imagined community of good Austrians who could be safe and secure, if “we”

only had border controls. Within the populist national narrative, a reinstatement of border controls is a universal remedy for any external threats to the body politic. In fact, EU member states have the right to temporarily reinstate border controls in exceptional situations; but such a temporary reinstatement for the fight against cross-border crime is not deemed conducive by police and security-political experts. Theft and human smuggling may be detected at random; more serious crime, however, such as terrorism or organised crime, can hardly be fought using old-fashioned border controls.

It is here where the discrepancy between the national-populist narrative and experts’ opinion on the efficiency of the reinstatement of border controls is particularly obvious. Border control apologists suggest that a return to closed borders would at once automatically eliminate not only drugs, burglaries, rapes, and car thefts, but also other problems that are discursively connected to migration, such as unemployment and a decreasing welfare state. All of them are presented as “external” to the morally pure community of valuable “good-citizens”.

The externalization of threats and the boundary-drawing between “us” and “them” is not only a semantic figurative metaphor, but the discourse constructs an imaginary army of barbarian adversaries at the border, prepared to break into “our” home, the body politic:

Expert: Eastern mafia threatens Austria. International top agents warn against gangs in our neighbouring countries. Thousands of criminals are only waiting for their “marching orders”. (*Heute*, 15. 1. 2010: 1)

In this headline, *Heute* paints the picture of Austria as helplessly exposed to an army of Eastern European burglars, who are preparing to invade with military precision. However, the same issue of *Heute* gives a temporary all-clear: “Eastern gangs are on holiday: fewer burglaries in Vienna!” *Heute* found out that criminals “are on home leave to celebrate Orthodox Christmas” (*Heute*, 15. 1. 2010: 13). This example is one of the very few in my sample where Easterners are linked to culture, here through an emphasis on religion. Unlike in the case of Muslims, religion/culture does not pose a threat; Christianity, as a binding force, instead restrains the perpetrators. “We” and the “Other” may be divided by cultural differences, but it is “culture” that can protect “us”, at least temporarily.

### ***Fighting Back***

In April 2008, three Romanians dressed as police officers, pretended to check traffic while trying to rob car-drivers in Lower Austria. Unfortunately for them, they accidentally came across official police officers in plain clothes. Although the Romanians were unarmed, one of them was shot by a police officer, “in self-defence”, and died soon after. Lower Austrian governor Pröll saw nothing wrong with the



use of guns in his territory. He told the *Kronen Zeitung* (24. 8. 2008): “I see this as a signal that goes beyond Austria, stating that whoever is up to no good in Lower Austria, must be prepared for the worst.” The charge against the police officer was later dismissed.

In spring of 2010, the Ministry of Interior invented the “Taskforce East (SOKO Ost)”. The “East”, as used in this taskforce’s name, is not simply a geographical direction, but carries a symbolic meaning as it targets the “Eastern threat”. The then Minister of Interior, Maria Fekter “wants to smash all the mafia-heads”, and aimed at “leaving the criminals no air to breathe” (*Österreich*, 21. 3. 2010: 5). However, despite spectacular helicopter operations, traffic chaos due to road blocking, and extensive car controls, the taskforce was unable to produce any noteworthy results. In the meantime, the Taskforce East has been dissolved, and police practitioners *sub rosa* perceived it to be an inefficient waste of resources; which besides an increase in the population’s subjective feelings of security, had no practical value at all.<sup>7</sup> Also in 2010, the Freedom Party published an online computer game called “Moschee Baba” (“Mosque bye-bye”). The goal of the game was to shoot and kill muezzins popping up on minarets. The game was removed following protests (Vienna Online 2010).

These three examples illustrate how right-wing populists and extremists in Austria “fight back”, with the assurance that Austrian tabloids are on their side. In their representation of self and other, the violation and penetration of the body politic requires purification. To “fight back” against a self-identified threat serves as symbolic empowerment. Self-acclaimed victimhood is symbolically overcome by narrative and sometimes practical counteraction against a perceived threat. The ethno-national community of “good-citizens” is reproduced and strengthened through a joint guarding of political borders and cultural boundaries. The nation state is most visible and tangible at its borders; its power is most perceptible at the national border, where entry may be granted or denied, and where unlawful transgression is punished. Within the performative discourse on the borders and boundaries protecting the body politic, a perceived transgression calls for a demonstration of power by the national community. If the border and the boundary are imagined to be under “our” control, “we” can give the impression of restoring order.

<sup>7</sup> Informal conversations with police officials in Vienna in 2009 and 2010. A parliamentary inquiry by the Green party claimed that the Taskforce East was a “show, to fake police activity and success” (Parlament 2010).

### **Conclusion: Restoring the B/Order**

This article set out to discuss the performative power of discourses of border transgression. Border discourse is an integral part of nationalist identity politics. Using Austria as an example, I have shown how distinctive discursive strategies emerge against different out-groups. These are, on the one hand, “culturally incompatible” Muslims attempting to conquer and contaminate Austrian identity, and on the other, the cross-border criminals or Eastern European intruders who violently attack the body politic and its members’ physical integrity. Each of these representations relies on historically transmitted imaginaries regarding the enemy “Other”. Yet, these representations do not only mirror an ideal-type Austrian self-image, but their relation to the body politic is much more complex and deeply entangled. Populist nationalism mobilizes the imaginary of “the people” bound together in one homogenous ethnic nation state. How alterity towards this imagined community is constructed relates to the way the borders of the body politic are imagined to be transgressed and how the “Other” is imagined attacking the body politic and inflict violence. Moreover, to imagine the nation state as a “body”, and the “good-citizens” as integral parts of this body, makes any attacks on the body appear personal and emotional, whether they are experienced, imagined and/or discursively created.

Yet, media discourse and public-oriented actions of politicians say little about a state’s capabilities to efficiently control borders and territory; nor do they provide an adequate picture to what extent cross-border crime exists and in what way it affects the wellbeing of the population. After all, movements across borders are impeded only to a limited extent by border controls – be they visible to the public, such as stationary checks, or invisible, such as visa requirements. The so-called “Four Freedoms” provide for permeability and an increasing irrelevance of national borders in certain realms of social life. Migration (both regular and irregular), tourism, and other forms of transnational mobility all undermine classic conceptions of state governance. It is exactly this classic conception of state governance that the anti-migration discourse relies on. When politicians and tabloids demand strict controls, pursuing a hard line while talking about compensation measures, they create the illusion that an effective and complete control of borders and movements across borders is possible. They reinforce the myth of the sovereign nation state and the purification of an imagined security community from unwanted “external” intruders where the “discourse reproduces the political myth that a homogenous national community or western civilization existed in the past and can be re-established today through the exclusion of those migrants who are identified as cultural aliens” (Huysmans 2000: 758).

Border controls and bordering practices are pivotal elements within this discourse. But it is not the border itself that *a priori* creates difference – borders are not natural and self-evident facts. Borders are discursively constructed, experi-

enced, invoked, charged with meaning, sensed, and felt in different places at different times. As such, the border marks “differences that make a difference, at least for a moment” (Green 2009: 17). Border discourse is performative in constituting an imagined community and simultaneously classifying its relations with various external “Others”. The border narrative, as my analysis has shown, has agency in making the body politic appear under siege, while at the same time it assists in creating and reproducing it.

The narrative of the threatened border (re)creates an imagined ideal past (or future) and uses it for processes of exclusion and inclusion in the present. The lost border control is the phantom pain of the body politic, existing not in a geographic place that can be clearly located, but in a discursive space where histories and practices are intertwined, as well as instrumentalised.

Representing the “East” continuously within a framework of crime and barbarism reinforces and reproduces an imagination of the past border (control) and border function as protective fortress of “good-citizens”. Framing the Muslim citizens and immigrants as parts of a “Third Siege”, as cultural aggressors and contaminants, reproduces a cultural yearning for a pure and “healthy” home, a homogenous ethno-national community that never existed. Both ways of bordering link a present practice, a way of viewing and interpreting the social world, with a specific past. This connection between practice and historical dimension endows boundary-drawing with symbolic power.

The populist nationalist narrative does not only seek to diagnose, but in addition, to heal. Within this discursive universe, the *status quo ante* regarding the Muslim communities cannot easily be restored. “They” have already infiltrated “us” and now “we” can only try to do our best to defend “our culture” and “our identity”. Staying with the analogy of the “healthy body”, “our” only remedy is to strengthen our immune system so it will be able to resist the contaminants and to fight the “infection”. The “Eastern threat” is different: The *status quo ante* can easily be restored. This is due to “Eastern criminals” being an external problem that will stay outside once “we” close the door. This is the difference between a siege and an occupation. The political border plays a pivotal role in both representations, since the imagination of the body politic is strongly linked to a Westphalian logic of the nation state where ideally nation, ethnos (culture), and territory all converge. Sarah Green (2012: 575) contends that “borders mark the location of stories so far”. Borders not only recall a history that is not distant, but which is right here, present in this space. To invoke borders and boundaries also yields projections for a specific future: A utopia where b/order can be restored.

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