



Bottom-up Geopolitics and Everyday Brexits at the Gibraltar-Spain Border

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ABSTRACT

Brexit has opened doors for renewed attention to contested, multi-scalar geopolitical forces grounded in everyday life in borderlands. In this paper, we aim to unravel 'everyday Brexits' in the Gibraltar–La Línea (Spain) borderlands. By studying the 2019 commemoration of the historic 1969 border closure, we concentrate on how local borderwork by residents is mobilised for bottom-up geopolitics in the context of Brexit negotiations. We use a conceptual approach that focuses on multiple layerings of the border and the selectivity of stakeholders to select among these layers to pursue their interests. Based on on-site observations, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations with residents and key actors of La Línea and Gibraltar, we argue that Brexit has increased the tension of already loaded core-periphery relations in Spain. Brexit does not represent a sudden disruption. Rather, we show how Brexit allowed the bottom-up geopolitical mobilisation of latent, strongly historically embedded and continuous cross-borders sentiments of residents. This mobilisation could potentially challenge local cross-border power relations. In the final analysis, we conclude that the bottom-up geopolitics of 'ordinary' residents through everyday bordering processes is central to geopolitics research, including with regard to Brexit and in particular for non-British geographies affected by Brexit.

Introduction

The year 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the closure of the border between Gibraltar (UK) and La Línea de la Concepción (Spain. La Línea in short) under general Francisco Franco. Ironically, this was the same year that Gibraltar was set to leave the European Union, before British prime minister Boris Johnson negotiated an extension until January 2020. During the Franco era, the Gibraltar-Spain border was closed between 1969 and 1982, separating families and hitting hard the economy of La Línea and the broader Campo de Gibraltar county. To commemorate the 1969 anniversary the city of La Línea started a crowdsourcing project to collect historic imageries, anecdotes, and testimonies from families that lived through the border closure. The project

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culminated in an exhibition providing the rarely-told human face of this historic event. These commemorations were particularly timely, yet also sensitive considering the then ongoing discussions on how to solve the border situation after Brexit.

Alongside the increased focus on the contested Gibraltar-Spain border, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum has brought the already ongoing academic attention for state sovereignty, geopolitics, and borders to the forefront of public discourse throughout Europe. In fact, Brexit, and particularly its consequences for the Gibraltar and Ireland borders, is illustrative for the increasingly complex functioning of borders as geopolitical tools for safeguarding territorial sovereignty, furthering neoliberal economic ventures and using socio-cultural identity politics for states to manoeuvre in our globalising world (Beurskens 2017; R. Jones et al. 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

Among others, the (post-)Brexit borders discussion has rejuvenated the previously existing claim that more attention should be given to non-state-centric approaches in border studies by looking into everyday realities and geopolitics involved in (cross-)border social and economic life (Anderson and Wilson 2018; Dittmer et al. 2020; Rumford 2012). In this period of turbulent geopolitical relations, more studies should be done on the way everyday border-crossings negotiate, challenge, but also contribute to border geopolitics, from the bottom up (see e.g. Williams and Boyce 2013).

To respond to this call, this paper uses a multi-layered interpretation of borders and bordering processes to deconstruct the underlying meanings and sentiments embedded in the process leading to and the events surrounding the commemorative exhibitions in La Línea and Gibraltar. By doing so, our paper contributes to the border studies, geopolitics, and political geography literature in two ways. First, through the border layering perspective, we provide a conceptual but empirically grounded approach to unravel bottom-up geopolitical processes that build on historically embedded border-crossing experiences. This approach includes reflecting on the way transboundary memories and experiences of people are geopolitically mobilised on a local level, but also symbolically positioned as being different from top-down, national-level political-discursive constructions of the same cross-border histories. Second, we answer Anderson and Wilson's (2018) call for considering 'everyday Brexits' and the way different groups and geographies relate to and live with Brexit and post-Brexit futures, also, and in our case uniquely, outside of the UK.

In what follows, we present the conceptual lens of interpreting borders and bordering processes as multi-layered. In the third section of this paper we elaborate on the methodology. Next, we provide context on the 1969 border closure (section 4). We use the multi-layered border perspective to contrast the local socio-cultural and economic narratives of the border and its closure in these commemorative events (section 5) with the geopolitical framing of the

border and border closure at national level (section 6). Section 7 shows how the past years' Brexit negotiations have exacerbated these historical and scalar tensions and could potentially even challenge current power relations in the area. Finally, we conclude that the bottom-up geopolitics of 'ordinary' residents through everyday bordering processes is central to geopolitics research, including with regard to Brexit and in particular for non-British geographies affected by Brexit.

The Multi-layered Nature of Everyday Geopolitics

The Brexit discussions, Donald Trump's focus on further militarising the US-Mexico border, the Rohingya dispute between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the general increase in number, length and conflict surrounding border walls throughout the world (R. Jones 2016a; Vallet 2014) stand in marked contrast to calls in the early 1990s that the world was becoming increasingly borderless (e.g. Ohmae 1991). The 'borderless world' thinking did not just describe the societal trend of opening up international borders but contained a normative ethical mission fuelled by neoliberal economics to champion further opening of economic markets (Paasi 2019). Since then, the border studies literature has almost unanimously rejected the borderless world notion. The increase in cross-border movements of people and goods has coincided with an increasingly complex and selective opening and closing of borders, harshening the contrast between those with and those without the right to move, within a global neoliberal system (Bianchi and Stephenson 2019; R. Jones and Johnson 2016; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The Brexit discussion is a prime example of this process.

Since the 1990s, research on borders has moved well beyond understanding borders solely as territorial dividing lines between nation states and national economies. While many cross-border empirical studies still approach borders as predominantly nationally organised administrative delineations, borders have increasingly been interpreted as ongoing, repetitive processes that are dynamic since territories are in a constant state of transformation (Berg and Van Houtum 2003; Paasi 2005). Borders are both territorial and relational constructs and practices with different material and symbolic forms (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009). Rather than being 'given', borders are actively constructed and negotiated in what has been labelled a process of bordering (Newman 2003). This process makes borders historically contingent, multi-scalar and multi-sited while being established with use of narratives by political stakeholders and institutions and by citizens in everyday practices, i.e. in 'borderwork' (Rumford 2012). The focus on the construction of borders by diverse stakeholders in a process of 'borderwork' shows that bordering is not governed by consensus but is underpinned by different interests, practices, symbols, and discourses (Newman and Paasi 1998; Rumford 2012).

From this perspective, borders are seen as lenses to understand broader geopolitical relations and questions of territoriality in the increasingly global world, as well as entities that are structuring for social consciousness and identity processes of individuals and communities (Laine 2016; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Because of their simultaneous material and spatial characteristics and immaterial, existential role in ‘ordering’ society (Van Houtum 2010), borders have been described as multi-layered constructs. For example, building on Schack (2000), Zimmerbauer, Suutari, and Saartenoja (2012) describe political-administrative, social, cultural, and identity layers while Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013) add physical-material, legal, and economic layers to the equation.

The discussion on the multi-layered nature of borders largely limits itself to these political-administrative, social, cultural, and identity spheres. Yet, one could argue that borders are multi-layered also in other respects. Orsini et al. (2019) show that borderland histories and changing bilateral relations over time mingle at the external EU border to create complex situations of path dependency that structure current social and political life in these borderlands. Other studies (e.g. Jakola 2016; Scott 2013; Stoffelen and Vanneste 2019) show how political stakeholders selectively tap into these histories to discursively justify future development trajectories, which may or may not match with local experiences and memories part of the borderwork of people.

Borders are, thus, not just historically contingent but deeply historically layered. The metaphor of historical layering is well-established in cultural landscape research (e.g. Renes 2015) and has been tentatively applied to border landscapes (e.g. Isachenko 2009; Vogel and Field 2020). For example, Isachenko (2009) shows how landscapes in the Russian-Finnish borderlands consist of both material layers and socially constructed mental layers that build up and change over time depending on the socio-economic and political context at certain moments. Vogel and Field (2020) use the layering metaphor in a case study of Indian-Pakistani relations in Ladakh to argue for reflecting on the cultural, everyday nature of border-making, alongside the obvious material and state-led bordering layers. Combining both approaches allows reflecting that, despite being path-dependent, borders do not develop historically in a linear way by one set of actors. Different stakeholders with contrasting geopolitical power refer to different historical periods or with other normative claims regarding historical borderland situations to underpin their current geopolitical interests. As such, borderland histories are flexible and reflective; not only historically produced but also historically (re-)constructed in the present day. For instance, in this paper, we show how the conflation of at least two different historic layers in the same time period (the 1969 border closure in the form of the 50 years commemoration and Brexit) gives new meaning not just to Brexit, but also to the memories of the historic border closure.

Finally, using the same layering metaphor to analyse scalar bordering processes makes explicit that different historically grounded geopolitical narratives regarding social, economic and/or cultural issues can be simultaneously constructed by stakeholders operating on different scales. Borders and bordering processes are not just the result of multi-scalar interaction between different stakeholders. Stakeholders with different scalar operations mend plans and discourses according to their own needs and interests (Johnson 2009), leading to the co-presence of different and possibly conflicting geopolitical forces and underpinning narratives regarding the same border. For example, in Gibraltar (and similarly for other outposts of the EU), the changing bilateral relations between Spain and the UK over time have created a situation where ‘there is a constant tension in borderlands between the imagined community of the nation which is cast in sharp relief at the border, and the lived community of transborder interaction where lived relationships, even if they exist as memories, offer a counternarrative to the discourses of othering’ (Orsini et al. 2019, 13).

In short, different ‘multi-layered border complexes’ (strategic combinations of scales of operation and discourses, historical reflections, and an emphasis in narratives on specific social, cultural or economic borderland situations) could be constructed by different stakeholders to pursue their geopolitical interests. While this interpretation is, conceptually, only a small extension from the current reasoning in border studies that recognises borders as historically produced and multi-scalar, it provides an additional angle to study how contested (de- and re-)bordering processes and geopolitical discussions fluctuate between hegemonic, nation-state centred geopolitics and social life at the border. As such, this approach provides a conceptual lens to research ‘geopolitics as something everyday’ (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1664). By understanding borders as multi-layered, we recognise the false dichotomy between geopolitical/global and everyday/local to stress how geopolitics is embodied in the ordinary (Koopman 2011). By using the term ‘bottom-up geopolitics’ we not only mean how geopolitics affect the everyday and become embodied (Dittmer and Gray 2010) nor how it is mediated locally (Tuathail 2010). Rather, we use this term to describe the ways local experiences are mobilised selectively in the different geopolitical topographies, histories, and scales, and can become a tool to influence and challenge (trans)local geopolitics and power relations.

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader research project that deals with cross-border solidarities and resilience in the Gibraltar-Spain border region. During the summers of 2018 and 2019, we conducted 16 exploratory, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with inhabitants of La Línea, Gibraltar, and the wider Campo de Gibraltar county. We asked interviewees about their perceptions and

relationships with the border, what it meant to them to be part of a border community, and how various border fluctuations impacted their lives now and in the past. In this exploratory research phase, the interviews primarily provided information and context about the area and residents' lived experiences with the border. They also helped us trace its history and development over the past half century. To this end, most of our respondents were chosen 'by name or position for a particular reason, rather than randomly or anonymously' (Hochschild 2009). In other words, we contacted several people in the region directly through purposive sampling. We approached other respondents on-site, during one of the commemorative events of the border closure in June 2019. These conversations subsequently led to further contacts and interviews. We contacted respondents who had lived in the area for several generations. Several experienced the 1969 border closure first-hand or entertained views and opinions that were well-embedded in the border community. This is something which we could observe from their interactions with members of the community at public events and from several other informal conversations with residents during a non-consecutive period of observation of three months in the winters and summers of 2018 and 2019. As such, the paper does not aim to describe all local power relations, (cross-)border experiences and activities of all groups within the La Línea-Gibraltar borderlands. Instead, we use the Brexit context and the 2019 commemorative event as a lens to look at how latent sentiments by residents became more explicit and were increasingly mobilised in and gave form to local politics, providing a geopolitical force from below. Several respondents explicitly asked to be mentioned by name or title in future research output. Rather than their names, in this paper, we opted to add only the titles of those of whom we know their views are well-known in the community.

We complemented our interviews and observations by non-systematic desk-research of local and national media coverage from the Brexit referendum in June 2016 to Brexit-day in January 2020. From January 2018 we collected (social) media reports on Brexit as well as on the commemorative events of the historic border closure, which were announced in May that year. We sourced these reports from the Gibraltar Chronicle and the Spanish local *Diario Área* and *Europa Sur* as well as the national *El País* newspaper. We tracked the online *The Guardian* newspaper to get a tentative British perspective on the matter, despite this not being the core focus of our paper. We also followed local journalists and politicians from Gibraltar and La Línea on social media. We saved all articles and collated all posts that were related to Brexit, the commemorative events or border relations in general. Whenever the Brexit negotiations reached a new milestone, phase, or tensions, we purposefully searched for articles using 'Brexit' as keyword in the five mentioned newspapers. Additionally, we retroactively searched for media articles in these newspapers from June 2016 onwards. In the end, we saved 322 newspaper articles and social media posts. Instead of performing a systematic content

analysis, we used these articles to construct a timeline of the Brexit negotiations and the role of Gibraltar in it, as well as how Brexit was lived on the other side of the border. The insights following from this descriptive analysis are used in the results sections to complement the main findings derived from the on-site observations and interviews.

Setting the Scene: the 1969 Border Closure

Local life in the Gibraltar-La Línea area has been integrated for centuries. The Gibraltar-Spain border was created in 1713 when Spain ceded (or was forced to cede, according to Spain) Gibraltar to the UK under the Treaty of Utrecht. Yet, it was not until 1908 that the British installed a border fence, hoping to decrease smuggling and contraband activities (Leiva and Ávila 2003; Oda Ángel 2019). Even after that, the border continued to be porous and there were ample economic, social, and cultural relationships between both sides (Orsini, Canessa, and Martínez Del Campo 2018; Orsini et al. 2019).

In the context of early 20th century Spain, a country torn by a Civil War and dictatorship, Gibraltar brought British industrialism to the Spanish border region along with work opportunities and goods that were scarce or unavailable in Spain, including tobacco, certain food items, and penicillin. In turn, the city of La Línea and its coastline was a welcome breathing space for the residents of the small, crowded peninsula, providing Gibraltarians with entertainment along with much needed labour force – something which remains so today. Gibraltarians spoke predominantly Spanish and Yanito, a unique mixture of Spanish and English, and intermarriages between both sides were frequent, blurring the separate nationalities into one border community (Oda Ángel 2000; Orsini et al. 2019).

Fast-forward to 1967 when repeated failed negotiations between Francoist Spain and the UK over Gibraltar's status and increasing restrictions on cross-border mobility by General Franco culminated in a referendum. Britain asked Gibraltarians to choose between continuing under British sovereignty but with local, self-governing institutions, and falling under Spanish sovereignty but with a special territorial status and continued British citizenship for the inhabitants (Gold 2010; Lambert 2005). The result was almost unanimously in favour of pertaining a link with Britain. In 1969, the British government started constitutional talks with Gibraltar, after which Gibraltarians were provided with significant self-government (Gold 2010).

Spanish general Franco was furious by this resistance and unilaterally decided to close the border with Gibraltar. Overnight, all movement and communication between both sides was interrupted, in effect transforming Gibraltar into an island. By doing so, Franco intended to 'choke' the small town and lure it back under Spanish rule. However, while Gibraltar was able to replace its predominantly Spanish labour force with migrants from Morocco

and elsewhere, the population of La Línea faced high unemployment. The city lost thousands of people as many families migrated to Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia or abroad (Alonso 1979; Ayuntamiento de La Línea 2017; Leiva and Ávila 2003; Torremocha and Humanes 1989). Additionally, many families became separated by the border closure, being unable to see or talk to each other for over a decade.

This border closure had profound impacts not only on the (widely-researched) construction of a Gibraltarian identity (Gold 2010; Orsini et al. 2019) but is also reflected in the ways the communities at both sides of the frontier perceive, experience, and construct the border on a daily basis up to today.

Historically Embedded Border Layers in Local Narratives at the ‘Never Again’ Closure Events

Fifty years after the closure of the border, in 2019, several commemorative events and lectures were held throughout the Campo de Gibraltar. The main event took place in La Línea, which was hit hardest by the closure. It capped a year-long crowd-sourcing project, entitled *50 y que no se repita*, freely translated here as ‘never again’ (EuropaSur 2019). Via a website and Facebook page, the City Council of La Línea called for testimonies of the years of the border closure. Throughout the following six months, it received contributions from both sides of the border, showing the consequences of the closure for people’s everyday life. Anecdotes, photos, documents, and videos were collected and presented in a commemorative exposition named ‘50 years: many stories to tell’, aiming to ‘keep the memory alive and raise awareness so that [...] such events will never happen again’ (50 Años 2018). The exhibition, accompanied by public lectures, travelled throughout the region and local schools until June 2019, when it ended on the public square in front of the local history museum near the border (Figure 1).

On the other side of the border, the National Archive of Gibraltar organised a large exhibition compiled from more than 200 panels of reprinted historic newspaper articles (both local and national, British and Spanish) that recounted the run-up and trauma of the border closure (Figure 2).

Finally, on Monday June 10th 2019 La Línea’s mayor Juan Franco and Gibraltar’s Chief Minister (CM) Fabian Picardo met each other on the border, followed by a public speech and press conference near the *Statue for the Spanish Worker in Gibraltar* (Figure 3).

The photo exhibition in La Línea emphasised the unity of the two border communities, ruptured by a unilateral, top-down decision taken by the Spanish national government. The following passage, written by a visitor in the guest book at the entrance of the exhibition in the local history museum of La Línea, describes how she remembers the social trauma of the closure (see also Oda Ángel 2019):



Figure 1.. ‘50 y que no se repita’ commemorative exhibition in front of the local history museum in La Línea (photo by authors).



Figure 2. The closed gate in front of one of the most iconic photos related to the border closure (a parent holds up its baby to show it to family members at the other side of the border) marked the entrance of the commemorative exhibition in the John Mackintosh Hall in Gibraltar (photo by authors).



Figure 3. Press conference next to the Statue for the Spanish Worker in Gibraltar, with the border crossing and the rock of Gibraltar in the background (photo by authors).

Today, [I] remember a not so happy past. Our family, once so close, got separated. I remember the screams on Sundays to ‘communicate’ with the family [on the other side of the fence]. The day of my wedding [date], I, dressed as bride [stood] before a closed fence, so that my uncles, cousins and my beloved grandmother could see me.

The commentaries and symbolism surrounding the different commemorative events symbolised the ‘sister cities’ (*ciudades hermanas*) sentiment that also emerged throughout our interviews. From a political side, La Línea’s mayor Juan Franco and Gibraltar CM Fabian Picardo visited the exhibition ‘Closure’ in Gibraltar where they shook hands with their arms interlocking the gate that once separated the communities they represent (Área 2019a). Reporting on the June 10th meeting between both, Europa Sur wrote that the hug they gave each other on the border crossing ‘staged the brotherhood of the two territories’ (Maíquez 2019).

Despite the dominant narratives of cross-border socio-cultural continuity in the border towns, the 1969 border closure was also decisive in the formation of a Gibraltarian identity (Canessa 2019; Orsini, Canessa, and Martínez Del Campo 2018; Orsini et al. 2019; Remiro Brotóns 2017). Until today, the Spanish state’s continued claim of territorial sovereignty has only strengthened this feeling. The younger generations in Gibraltar increasingly speak exclusively English (Canessa 2019; Carbajosa 2015). Research among almost 300 residents of Gibraltar shows that the Spanish government is still considered ‘the enemy’ and Gibraltarians closely follow the Spanish government’s crackdown on Catalan independentist movements as a measure of how the government would approach Gibraltar (Dittmer et al. 2019). Or, according to one respondent, they use the term ‘fascias’ (fascists) to talk about the Spanish, distinguishing them from a Gibraltarian identity which has been built around democratic ideals (Interview with Gibraltar

resident, July 2018) (see also Martínez Del Campo, Canessa, and Orsini 2019). Another respondent summarises as follows:

[Before the closure of the border] the Gibraltarian was British. From the re-opening of the border onwards, the Gibraltarian is Gibraltarian. (City Historian Algeciras, interview July 2018)

When reflecting on the historically embedded multi-layered processes underpinning the Gibraltar-Spain border, the dominant storyline in local narratives present at the ‘never again’ festival appeared to be the social and economic disruptions, pains, and traumas caused by closing the border. The events provided an – implicit – local-level geopolitical message, pointing to socio-cultural and economic unity, in a context of mounting uncertainty about future, post-Brexit cross-border relations. Although the 1969 border closure drastically transformed cross-border socio-cultural unity, the nostalgia for this unity remains the dominant layer, in the face of the present-day Brexit-threat. The ‘never again’ festival constituted a nucleus where this historically embedded and everyday yet implicit ‘borderwork’ by various local stakeholders could become explicit and politically mobilised.

Local-national Conflicts in the Layering of the Border

The local testimonies and talks of cooperation and unity expressed at the ‘never again’ festival contrast with antagonistic discourses at the national level. Franco’s sovereignty claim over Gibraltar when he closed the border still forms a main pillar of Spanish foreign policy, although attitudes towards the issue do change between governments (Candelas Candelas 2014; Modebadze 2013). Under the left-wing PSOE-government in the early 2000s, cross-border relations improved. The 2006 Cordoba Agreements resulted in a trilateral forum of dialogue concerning cross-border cooperation and joint management of the airport. This was the first time that Gibraltar entered into negotiations through their own institutional representatives, rather than the British (Remiro Brotóns 2017). When the conservative Partido Popular (PP) won the 2011 elections, relations rapidly deteriorated (Modebadze 2013). Since then, the Spanish national government made several provocations. These include halting expansion of the beach in Gibraltar by blocking truckloads with sand from entering Gibraltar (Govan 2013), incursions by vessels of the Spanish Civil Guard in what Gibraltar considers their territorial waters but which is disputed by Spain (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2012; Reyes 2018a, 2019), and slowing down border control, causing hours-long queues (BBC 2013; EuropaSur 2017; Romaguera 2013a).

In response, the Gibraltar government started to collect newspaper articles and recordings of radio and TV programmes to prove that the Spanish government was using mass media to incite hatred towards Gibraltarians (Gómez 2013; Modebadze 2013). In these accounts, Gibraltarians were often

portrayed as ‘parasites’, ‘money-launderers’ or ‘smugglers’ (Gómez 2013; Modebadze 2013). Ultimately, the Cordoba Agreements and trilateral forum were disbanded in 2017 (Del Valle Gálvez 2017).

By closing the border 50 years ago, backed up with present-day national-level symbolic discourses and practical efforts to limit cross-border exchange, Spain seems to have increased the divides not just with Gibraltarians but also between the Línenses and the rest of Spain:

Closing a border, separating families, leaving so many people unemployed that had to migrate abroad [...] of course La Línea also felt that the national government was attacking them. (President of Cross-Frontier Group, interview 2019)

People in La Línea say that the border keeps [them] safe and keeps food on the table. [...] They feel alienated by Madrid [...] The border [economy] is the only economy that protects them and provides for their families. (Resident of Gibraltar, interview July 2018)

In the interviews, respondents mentioned that the rest of Spain has a different opinion related to Gibraltar because they do not understand the situation in the border community:

If today there would be a referendum in Spain: ‘do you want to close the border with Gibraltar, yes or no?’, tomorrow at midnight the border would be closed [...] The residents in the Campo would vote no. (President ASCTEG, interview June 2019)

Tensions between ‘the rest of Spain’ and Gibraltar run so deep, that residents from La Línea have suffered insults because they are close to their British neighbour. For example, the president of ASCTEG (*Asociación Sociocultural de los Trabajadores Españoles en Gibraltar*, effectively the Union of the Spanish Workers in Gibraltar, based in La Línea) remembers how La Línea’s soccer team was insulted for ‘being English’ and ‘having clear eyes.’ These insults also came up in another interview:

— One time they said that the children in La Línea have blue eyes, remember? — There were a lot of these kinds of insults, that the women of La Línea went there [to Gibraltar] to ‘look for’ [people in] the military ... — that they are prostitutes — yeah I didn’t want to use the word. (Dialogue between president and secretary of Cross-Frontier Group, La Línea residents, interview June 2019)

By contrast, local narratives emphasise continuous economic interdependency that partly overlaps with historical social relations:

The thing is, Gibraltar is not even ‘abroad’, it’s like 10 meters. I go there to get gasoline. We have families, brothers, relationships ... (La Línea resident, interview June 2019)

The family ties are the strongest and are unbreakable, they go before politics [...] The economic relationships are very strong too [...] At least 50 percent of the economy of La Línea depends on Gibraltar (President Cross-Frontier Group, interview June 2019)

To protest the deliberate slowing down of border controls by the Spanish government in 2013, employers, small business organizations, and labour unions from both sides of the border organised in the Cross-Frontier Group. A survey that the Group conducted showed that each time a queue was created, the local businesses in La Línea were losing 30 to 40% of their revenues (BBC 2013; Romaguera 2013b). As a consequence of their lobbying, inspectors from the EU came down to investigate whether Spain was violating EU laws. Today, one of the Groups' key aims is to create a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) which would allow the funding of projects including a bilingual university and a cross-border tramline (see also Mut Bosque 2017).

This feeling of economic interdependency is backed up by figures. With more than 15,000 people (11,000 of whom reside in La Línea) crossing the border daily to work in Gibraltar, 'The Rock' can be considered the largest employer of the province of Cádiz (HM Government of Gibraltar 2019). In 2013, Gibraltarians travelling to or living in Spain and Gibraltarian companies spent and invested 426.564 million British Pounds in the Campo (Fletcher, Yeganeh, and Male 2015). As the president of the Cross-Frontier Group told us in June 2019: 'We simply live from them.' Indeed, La Línea was founded from a concentration of barracks next to the border as it attracted migrants from all over Spain to work in Gibraltar. Still today Gibraltar provides Línenses – who face high unemployment levels (35% in 2016: Ayuntamiento de La Línea 2016) – crucial economic opportunities, be it working in the online gaming sector, working without contracts in the construction sector or housework, or contraband activities.

Conversely, Gibraltarians widely benefit from the available Spanish labour force, easy access to Spanish beaches, restaurants, shops, and real estate. Reflecting the high socio-cultural and economic interdependency, 96% of the voters in Gibraltar voted to remain in the European Union during the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Thus, for the Cross-Frontier Group and other border residents, a Brexit (deal or no-deal) is 'a step backwards' and risks to create 'an economic and social rift' (Reyes 2016) between Gibraltar and the neighbouring region in Spain, bringing back bitter memories of the historic border closure from 50 years ago.

Everyday Brexits: conflicting Multi-layered Border Complexes

The 'Third' Brexit

Over the past years, the Brexit negotiations have made conflicts in historic and scalar border layering processes even more visible. The debates on the post-Brexit Gibraltar-Spain border, mostly held on a national or European level, increased already existing tension with local everyday economic and socio-

cultural realities, making the ‘never again’ festival an outlet for nascent political mobilisation of historical border reflections.

Just hours after the referendum results came in, Spain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs of the then conservative PP-government, José Manuel García-Margallo, said that the vote was bringing the prospect closer of a Spanish flag waving on The Rock (Del Valle Gálvez 2017; S. Jones 2016b). Spanish lobbying in the EU resulted in a clause within the Brexit withdrawal agreement (Clause 24 of Article 50) that states: ‘no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom’ (Boffey. et al. 2017; Casquero 2017, 2018; S. Jones 2018; Del Valle Gálvez 2017). For Gibraltar, this handed Spain with a ‘monstrous veto’ in the Brexit negotiations (Gibraltar Chronicle 2018a) and risked to push Gibraltar (and its border with Spain) outside of any post-Brexit agreement between the UK and the EU (Boffey. et al. 2017; S. Jones 2018). Although a change of government in 2018 led to more emphasis on ensuring border fluidity and prosperity for the people of the Campo de Gibraltar after Brexit (Pérez and Hermida 2018; Reyes 2018b, 2018c), controversy was not absent. The new minister of foreign affairs accused Gibraltar of ‘acting as a “parasite” to the Campo de Gibraltar’ (Gibraltar Chronicle 2018b; Pérez and Hermida 2018). Meanwhile, bilateral talks between the UK and Spain about technical issues such as joint management of the airport and cooperation on tax fraud and tobacco smuggling threatened to delay and even jeopardise a Brexit deal (Boffey and Jones 2018).

This renewed momentum to claim Spanish sovereignty was met with critique not only by the governments of Gibraltar and the UK (S. Jones 2016b, 2018), but also by local worker’s organisations from La Línea, urging their national government to finally leave the sovereignty issue behind and work towards getting the best deal possible for the cross-border workers and the broader Campo de Gibraltar (Huguet 2017; see also Remiro Brotóns 2017). As the most symbolic occurrence, the local chapter of the vocal right-wing populist party Vox, with its (geo)political views closely resembling those of the Franco era, disbanded from the party due to disagreement on the party’s stance that the Gibraltar border should be closed.

Amidst fears and protests against Brexit and in their efforts to preserve border fluidity, local politicians, workers’, and employers’ organisations regularly referred to the traumatic border closure of 1969 (S. Jones 2018). In all our interviews, respondents mentioned that the 1969 events are an example of a worst-case scenario for Brexit. In his public speech at the anti-Brexit march held in La Línea in October 2019, ASCTEG’s spokesman said:

Deal or no deal, [you, politicians, should] find a way to let us work peacefully in Gibraltar with all our rights, as it should be, or La Línea will relive in its core the 8th of June of 1969 which was the worst tragedy of its history. (Área 2019b).

For Línenses, their lives and memories are always connected to the border and their British neighbour. Past events necessarily shape their views on the future. For example, during the symbolic moment at the border in June 2019, the leaders of La Línea and Gibraltar emphasised their united past and, facing yet another separation via their common border, their united future:

There are frictions between both communities, most of them caused by people that are more than 600km away, that do not understand [...] that we are brothers, that we have a common history [...] We have big challenges ahead of us, like Brexit, and we hope that [...] we can continue to live a life in common [...] We need to [...] always keep in mind that our destinies are united, as it cannot be any other way. (Domínguez 2019; Maíquez 2019).

In the eyes of Línenses, Brexit does not represent a rupture with their border history. Rather, it presents another stage in the repeated everyday changes to border fluidity they have experienced for generations; that is, as a new addition to the ongoing historical layering of the border:

I do think that the commemoration of this date [50 years border closure] has gotten more meaning because we have this real threat of living a third Brexit. I say third Brexit because, for us, the first Brexit was in 1940 when the whole population of Gibraltar was exiled to other British territories due to the second World War [...], then our second Brexit was in 1969 which meant a brutal economic and demographic crisis from which 50 years later we still haven't recovered. And right now, we are living the third Brexit. (Mayor of La Línea, interview June 2019)

This idea of multiple Brexits appeared in other interviews as well:

In the past, we have lived other Brexits (...) the different changes (...) it was not easy but we were able to adapt and I think that this is a characteristic of the border communities. That we have a better capacity to adapt to changes, cultural changes, social, economic. Because in one way or another in bigger or lesser intensity we live it everyday (City Historian of Algeciras, Interview July 2018)

In other words, the phrase 'Brexit' is retroactively used to redefine the historic border closure while the latter in turn is used to define and reflect on Brexit. Thus, the conflation of several historic layers in the form of the 'never again' events and the Brexit threats provides local residents with the tools to give meaning to and redefine their own history and border relations to the outside world.

On January 31st 2020, Brexit-day, La Línea's mayor posted the following message on his Facebook page:

Today starts a new stage in our history and in that of Gibraltar. With Brexit, our city needs to reinvent itself once again. We will keep fighting so that from now on (and once and for all) the administrations guarantee that the border-crossing will not suffer delays and that necessary measures will be taken so that our workers and the economy of our businesses, since always linked to The Rock, do not suffer more than what they have already suffered. An enormous hug to our Gibraltarian neighbours. Events like this prove that La Línea is a State matter.

In a statement on the other side of the border, the CM of Gibraltar, said:

We must work to protect the frictionless fluidity of people across our frontier with Europe. We must work to ensure first and foremost that the human and family bonds that lie across that frontier are never at risk of being severed or impeded again.

Ultimately, we see a sort of ‘in-between’ identity developing among residents by mutual, historically grown socio-cultural ties and economic dependency. This led to the borderlands increasingly developing as a form of ‘Third Space’, or hybrid socio-cultural and economic place (Martínez 1994, after Bhabha 1994), through local borderwork. This socio-cultural and economic in-between-ness clashes with ever-increasing national geopolitical rhetoric, amplified by the Brexit discussions, in which territorial sovereignty and control gets centre stage.

Linexit or a ‘Fourth Brexit’?

In 2015, a group of neighbours was tired of the problems related to their city and convinced that ‘nobody will come from outside to solve [them], much less the traditional parties.’ (La Línea 100×100 2018). They formed their own political party, ‘La Línea 100x100’, and gained 9 out of 25 seats in the City Council, making them the largest party in the city, together with PSOE, and winning the mayor seat.

When a year later Brexit was voted, the British Pound plummeted, immediately impacting not only the more than 10,000 border workers residing in La Línea, but also the local businesses depending on them. Against this background, the City Council, together with all political parties and civil society members of the city, conducted a socio-economic study of the impact of Brexit on the city (Ayuntamiento de La Línea 2016) and created a Strategic Plan of Impulse and Growth for La Línea (Ayuntamiento de La Línea 2017).

Based on these studies and numerous fruitless encounters with political administrations, including at the EU level, La Línea 100×100 added a new point to their electoral programme: to become Spain’s Third Autonomous City, dubbed ‘Linexit’. The party proposed to gain a special fiscal status similar to that of Spanish overseas territories Ceuta and Melilla as well as create an EGTC (La Línea 100×100 2019). With this rather radical proposal, La Línea 100×100 got re-elected in May 2019 with an overwhelming 21 of 25 seats in the City Council, confirming the broad support that the idea of ‘local exceptionalism’ (the idea that local conditions are drastically different from the rest of Spain) carries in the city (Ayuntamiento de La Línea 2017). Just nine days after his victory, the mayor told us:

Right now, we cannot do other than to work together [with Gibraltar]. We are working in La Línea to obtain a complementary economy. Right now we have a dependent economy. We have to break with this tendency. We have to complement what is offered

in Gibraltar, which is not little, while also maintaining a relationship of friendship. (Mayor of La Línea, interview June 2019)

This example shows again the presence of multiple, profoundly contrasting, multi-layered border complexes in the Gibraltar-Spanish borderlands, expressed through different mediums (e.g. the ‘never again’ festival versus practical border policies) and geographies (e.g. the proposed EGTC versus formal nation-state operations on an EU level). Practically, the same historical occurrence is represented into several distinct historical border layers, with very different narratives regarding the past selected on a national level in Spain compared to those mobilised on a local level in the Gibraltar-Spain borderlands. Borderwork at the Gibraltar-Spain border reflects in narratives on the social and economic interdependency between both sides, referring back to the limitations imposed on the area by the closure during the Franco era. Simultaneously, local borderwork also materialises by resisting against the geopolitical framing of Gibraltar by Spain’s national government, which increasingly favours border situations similar to those during the Franco era. In other words, geopolitics from below through borderwork in the Gibraltar–La Línea area takes place through local cross-border social and economic practices and memories, but also through what Routledge (2003) calls ‘anti-geopolitics’: material and/or discursive counter-hegemonic actions that ‘challenge the notion that the interests of the state’s political class are identical to the community’s interest’. Even more, anti-geopolitics in La Línea could potentially even challenge translocal and cross-border power relations, as shown with the Linexit proposal.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through deconstructing the meanings surrounding the commemoration of the historic 1969 border closure between La Línea and Gibraltar this paper aimed to contribute to the debate on bottom-up geopolitics arising from increasingly contentious borderland situations because of Brexit. With the case study, we uncovered how present-day sentiments in the borderlands build on memories of historical socio-cultural and economic borderland situations, as well as oppose more antagonist rhetoric on cross-border relations by the Spanish national state. In this context, we showed how Brexit has thrown the cat among the pigeons, putting under tension the already loaded core-periphery relations in Spain. Consequently, the commemorative event of the 1969 border closure under the Franco regime resulted in the political mobilisation of latent sentiments and everyday borderwork by residents of the Campo de Gibraltar area, to champion an integrated, cross-border socio-cultural and economic future for the area.

With this study, our paper contributes to the border studies, geopolitics, and political geography literature in two ways. First, the paper has provided an analytical approach to tackling the simultaneous bottom-up and top-down geopolitical construction and representation of borders in a globalising world characterised by renewed territorial sovereignty debates and heightened socio-cultural identity politics. Our focus on the multifaceted layering of borders functions as an analytical tool to unravel contrasting geopolitical forces operating around the contested Gibraltar-Spain border. A focus on borders has previously been mentioned as a method to uncover border-making as a social, political and economic practice of differential inclusion and exclusion of people, goods and capital in social and geographical space (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). We argue that a focus on border layerings, within such an approach, provides a way to uncover how different, often conflicting forces use borders as method to manoeuvre in the increasingly complex global world, both from the bottom up and from the top down. While the idea that borders are historically contingent, socially layered and multi-scalar is not novel in itself (see e.g. Brambilla 2015; Laine 2016; Rumford 2012), we show that a focus on how different stakeholders compose different border layers in their discourses allows establishing a nuanced image on geopolitical processes. In the La Línea-Gibraltar case study, the layered border conceptualisation helped establishing in-depth insights in how different stakeholders operating on different scales and from different locations are selective regarding the historical and social, economic and cultural layerings of the border to represent their interests in a highly uncertain geopolitical context.

As a second contribution, this paper provides rich contextual information on the 'everyday Brexits' (Anderson and Wilson 2018) at the Gibraltar-Spain border, showing how these everyday Brexits do not only take place in the UK territory but strongly impact socio-cultural and economic life also at the other side of the border and even before Brexit came into effect. We show with empirical depth how, for the Gibraltar-Spain border, 'the geographies of Brexit are also about familial relations and histories, neighbourly associations, and workplace relationships' (Anderson and Wilson, 2018, 293), and how these everyday but historically embedded realities for people challenge nation state-centric geopolitics that dominate public discourse. The everyday borderwork by 'ordinary' residents (Rumford 2012), in La Línea increasingly politicised due to Brexit, proved a key driver for bottom-up geopolitics, even anti-geopolitics, in effect strengthening the establishment of a hybrid 'Third Space' (Bhabha 1994) by using memories to make sense of the borderland situation.

In the final analysis, the Brexit event in Campo de Gibraltar is not at all the abrupt change often portrayed (Anderson and Wilson 2018), instigated by the voting behaviour of people on June 23, 2016. The whole Brexit process forms the transition to a new era; an era characterised by more of the same but with renewed intensity, in terms of socio-cultural, economic, and historically

embedded borderwork of people, within the area itself and with antagonistic reference to the symbolic border construction by the Spanish national state. On the basis of these revelations, we argue that current and future research on Brexit geopolitics should more strongly incorporate the non-British side of the story, pay explicit attention to the spatial and historic embedding of Brexit geopolitics, and, not in the least, make further attempts to theorise how (post-) Brexit borderwork and bottom-up geopolitics relate to already existing, historically embedded processes within the personal life sphere of ‘ordinary’ residents, or to what degree novel operations are in place.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank everyone in the Campo de Gibraltar who participated in this research, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

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