

Contested Control at the Margins of the State

Government responses to irregular migration in the Schengen area

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This project analyses the practices and strategies of state agencies that fight back against the unwanted “permeability” of state borders in order to reinstate the central parameter of territorial statehood. It focuses on the detection, identification and deportation of migrants who have successfully participated in the “border games” of the Schengen Area. The project is driven by two interrelated assumptions: First, irregular migrants are neither passive victims nor relentless perpetrators, but individuals who desperately try to vindicate autonomy against the odds and in the process build up capacity for realizing their life choices. Second, while policies envision a completely manageable migrant population, state agents are aware of failing and try to adapt accordingly.

The research adopts a multi-sited approach, comparing control practices in four Schengen Area states (Switzerland, Germany, Italy and Sweden). It homes in on the practices of detecting, identifying, detaining and removing irregular migrants through ethnographic fieldwork in local migration offices and their frontline collaborators, such as labour inspectorates or the police. So far, there is little knowledge of the implementation of migration policies by “street-level” bureaucracy. An in-depth approach of participant observation, informal interviewing and the gathering of grey literature should allow us to find out why migration policies fail. Possible explanations found in the literature include inadequate staffing, bureaucratic inefficiency or political toleration of irregular migration. By comparing the strategies and control practices of control agencies within the Schengen Area, this project will be able to test the extent to which these explanations are valid and interrelate.