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# Border narratives in the French-German Region

Results of a local  
media analysis,  
politics' & citizens'  
interviews

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# OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

1. The media analysis
2. The interviews of MEP candidates
3. The Focus groups with citizens from the border region

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## SOURCES & TIME PERIOD

- ❖ portrayal of borders, cross-border relations, and European integration in local newspapers
- ❖ Time period of the analysis 2019-2022 *i.e.* encompassing: the “Aachen Treaty”; the COVID-19 pandemic; and the invasion of Ukraine.

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“Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace” (DNA)



“Le Républicain Lorrain”



“Saarbrücker Zeitung”



“Die Oberbadische”.

**Die Oberbadische**

*Media analysis*

# METHODOLOGY

- ❖ Harmonised coding within the B-Shapes consortium (see picture □)
- ❖ Extraction of data through a key-word search on the Factiva platform (for 3 newspapers)
- ❖ Comprehensive reading of the archives online for 1 newspaper
- ❖ The national or international sources (Reuters, AFP, etc.) were put aside to focus on truly local issues

gender!	<u>identity</u>	cross-border	more than European Union
Erasmus, young people, students, children	elite	crisis	populism
tourism	trust	EU	left-wing criticism of EU
shopping	commuter	Western Europe(an/s)	right-wing criticism of EU
togetherness	landscape	Eastern Europe(an/s)	borderless Europe
reparations	customs	European Parliament	Schengen
border checks/controls	(im)migration/immigrant(s)	election/campaign	security
resentment	refugees	European Commission	language
cooperation	Covid	**exit (Polexit, Brexit...)	agriculture
crime	local government	Euro the currency	bordering
solidarity	political parties	Fortress Europe'	debordering
<u>seperateness</u>	regional leaders' names	idea of Europe, duty,	

## BROAD CHARACTERISATION AND DEPICTION OF THE NEIGHBOURS

- ❖ An overall very positive depiction of the neighbours
- ❖ German Media: Emphasizes cross-border activities and commuters, rather than generalizing "the French."
- ❖ Alsace: Focuses on shared history and positive relations.
- ❖ Lorraine: Shows more visible distinctions between "us/them. »

“ Martin Graff took advantage of his confinement in the Munster Valley to write *Grenzkabarett - Je t'aime, Ich liebe dich, an essay on Franco-German relations and the notion of borders*. [...] he despairs that de facto borders still exist. Those indestructible “Kopfgrenzen” (borders that haunt us), the most dangerous because they are the hardest to eradicate [...] he pinpoints, with a great deal of humour, all the borders that stand in the way of a true awareness of the opportunity that our two countries have to be the cement of Europe”.

E.H. « Le Cabaret des frontières de Martin Graff », DNA, August 17, 2020.

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## A STRONG RELATION THAT CAN SURVIVE CRISIS

- ❖ Media handled potentially divisive events (such as Covid-related fines) with understanding and balance.
- ❖ A cross-border worker fined in Germany was portrayed with empathy, noting similar practices on both sides of the border : « we all make mistakes ».
- ❖ Even during crises (e.g., Covid), the focus remained on strengthening cross-border ties.

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# Two illustrations

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*Media analysis*

Resilience in friendship



“**Shaking hands, no. Reach out, yes.** This is what Axel Imhot, a pastor in Alsace, and Heiko Schwarz, a pastor in Berg (Palatinate), are doing across the Scheibenhart border, **anxious to resume joint activities** [...] In a joint declaration, the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine, the Evangelical Church of Baden and the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate acknowledged the **usefulness of the administrative measures** taken at state level, but added the following warning: **“the fear of the virus must not give new strength to nationalist clichés that are contrary to Franco-German reconciliation”**”.

DNA, « Un appel protestant et franco-allemand à ne pas amoindrir la coopération », *DNA*, May 2, 2020.

*Media analysis*

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## Avoiding clichés: the police can make mistakes on both sides of the Rhine

A young French father **working in Germany stopped off to do some groceries on his way home** in order to bring a meal to “his pregnant wife and young child”. Unfortunately for him, this cross-border worker had also filled up with petrol at the German supermarket, **which at the time of the pandemic was considered a prohibited activity for foreigners, and was fined a hefty €500**. What's particularly interesting is that instead of pointing the finger at Germany and attributing the injustice of this situation to the fact that it was the German police, the **journalist chose to explain that this kind of unfair situation and this “police overzealousness” definitely exists on both sides of the border**, which proves that the German police can turn out to be exactly the same as the French police, even when it comes to that kind of behaviour.

Philippe VIGNERON, « Polémique sur les verbalisations dans le Bade- Wurtemberg », *DNA*, April 16, 2020.



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## INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND CROSS-BORDER INTEGRATION

*Those public entities were visible in the media and were depicted as key to a good organisation of the borderland region*

- ❖ Media quote European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) as a good means of ensuring viable relations, efficiency in policies and long lasting friendship.
- ❖ The creation of the Collectivité européenne d'Alsace (CEA) in 2020 exemplifies state involvement in justifying regional structures through European integration: the German neighbours were depicted as very happy with this new institution
- ❖ State-driven organizations like the Pamina Eurodistrict and the RegioTriRhena Euroregion are critical institutional relays and are depicted very positively on both sides of the border

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## INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND CROSS-BORDER INTEGRATION: the private entities

- ❖ the European Consumer Centre in Kehl, support cross-border integration by addressing legal and consumer-related concerns. Quoted as a solution in many articles.
- ❖ Similarly, associations and private cultural initiatives (like cross-border art exhibitions or musical performances) play a significant role in maintaining informal, community-level cross-border relations.
- ❖ Churches (see the above mentioned article)

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## EUROSCEPTICISM?

- ❖ On the French Side: The idea of Europe prevails over its institutional reality and concrete achievements
- ❖ On the German side: A more technical and sometimes somewhat eurosceptic tone

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## Going deeper in the analysis: the interviews of the politicians

- ❖ Geographical Origin: Candidates from the French-German borderland region (Alsace, Moselle, Baden, Saarland).
- ❖ Political Party Affiliation: Diverse political representation, ensuring a broad panel.
- ❖ Party Role: Candidates for the European Parliament and their campaigners
- ❖ Gender: Gender parity, inviting women to ensure their voices are heard.
- ❖ Age: Focus on including younger candidates (18-30 years old)
- ❖ Contact? through the party, through social medias (Facebook, LinkedIn), through the local elections that took place at the same time as the EU elections in Germany

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*the interviews of the politicians*

## Politicians' Narratives of the Region

### Positive views ...

- ❖ Politicians emphasize the region's strong European identity. Alsace is seen as "the beginning of Europe" or a region "naturally open to neighbours." Key Quote: "Alsace is privileged, with unique advantages like local law and security distinct from other French regions." (Far-right, ID, French male candidate)
- ❖ The region acts as a leader in economic integration and cross-border collaboration. Key Quote: "Alsace has taken a leadership role in Grand Est Europe, coordinating actions with universities, industries, and the EU." (Les Républicains, EPP, French female candidate)

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*the interviews of the politicians*

... and a few challenges ahead

- ❖ Economic and fiscal disparities due to the region's cross-border nature. Key concerns include social and tax regulations, remote work, and fiscal competition. Key Quote: "We are working on a solution to help cross-border workers who had to always keep an A1 form in order to be able to work and live on both sides of the Rhine." (Die Grünen, The Greens, young German male candidate)
- ❖ Some populist candidates downplay the material challenges of cross-border cooperation, focusing on broader issues like poverty and immigration. Key Quote: "I haven't heard of any such thing as a specificity of our region for cross-border weddings or divorces or anything." (La France insoumise, The Left, French male candidate)

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*the interviews of the politicians*

## The politicians views on bordering

- ❖ General pattern: the interviewees are aware that political parties within the country (especially in capitals) advocate for border closures during perceived threats, like Covid or international migration, while the local politicians wanted the borders open...
- ❖ Die Grünen (The Greens, German): Criticized lack of common EU health policy; generally against border closures, but acknowledges complexity.
- ❖ La France Insoumise (The Left, French): Sees no significant concerns about the French-German border, stressing the importance of keeping borders open as a national thing, but no special interest for the German neighbour
- ❖ Union Populaire (French Radical Left): Warned that closing borders could have catastrophic effects, especially regarding "Frexit."
- ❖ Les Républicains (EPP, French): Supported reintroducing controls if necessary, especially regarding migration but were aware that local economy needs open borders
- ❖ Reconquête (ID, French male candidate): Advocated for stronger external borders and Frontex improvements.

*the interviews of the politicians*

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## Politicians' Narratives on the EU

« We want More Europe » accross the spectrum  
(at least during the interview, maybe not on TV...)

### ❖ Economic Benefits of EU Membership

Les Républicains (EPP, French): Strong support for EU membership due to the benefits for businesses and European funding. *"For me, there are only advantages... the common market is essential for our businesses..."*

### ❖ Challenges of EU Membership

Die Grünen (The Greens, German): Challenges include unfair competition, mobility problems, and pressure on land. *"We have major issues: unfair competition for employees and businesses... There are also mobility problems..."*

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Yet, some challenges are mentioned

❖ Euroscepticism and Local Sentiments

Renaissance (Renew Europe, French): Brexit serves as a cautionary tale; however, there is notable discontent in France. The 2005 French referendum rejecting the EU Constitution remains a key issue in Euroscepticism. *"People were discouraged.. They either benefit from it or not, but they are indifferent."*

❖ Varying Euroscepticism Across the Region

Union Populaire (French): Euroscepticism is more pronounced in poorer regions. *"Euroscepticism here is not as pronounced... The poorer parts of the country tend to be more eurosceptic."*

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## Local vs National Campaign Strategies and the Role of Borders

- ❖ Les Républicains (EPP, French): Previous campaigns focused on local narratives, such as Alsatian flyers for Strasbourg seat.
- ❖ Les Républicains (EPP, French): Macron's push for a national constituency limited regional campaigning, it's a shame but it alligns with my party's conception of politics : « only for the national level »
- ❖ Renaissance (Renew Europe, French): Collaboration across borders ; e.g., CDU in Germany (!) influenced campaign strategies.
- ❖ Die Grünen (The Greens, German): « We would love to have more interactions with our French counterparts, it has been a lit lost over the past years »

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*the interviews of the politicians*

# Cross referencing with citizens directly: the Focus Groups

(November 2024, Eurodistrict PAMINA, Lauterbourg, FR)

- ❖ French-German Mixed Focus Group: 8 participants (5 male, 3 female; 2 young, 6 55+)
- ❖ French Focus Group: 2 participants (2 male; 1 young, 1 55+)
- ❖ German Focus Group: 6 participants (3 female, 3 male; 1 young, 5 55+)
  
- ❖ Target Groups: Women, younger generations, local volunteers, retirees, lobbyists.

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*Focus groups with citizens*

## Description of the Region by the citizens



❖ 1. Shy at first, then emphasized Alsatian identity, language, and pride. 2. Valued the ease of crossing the border daily, accessing services and recreational spaces (schools, pools, sightseeing). 3. Strong sense of Alsatian identity, proud of both French and German roots.

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❖ 1. Identified with the Upper Rhine region's unified culture, disappointed by the existence of borders. 2. Expressed a sense of common goals, particularly in infrastructure. 3. Border region seen as ideal for Franco-German families. 4. Felt "welcome in Alsace" but identified primarily as German.

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*Focus groups with citizens*

## Narrative of Europe by the citizens: a different story from one side to the other...



- ❖ 1. Confusion between the Council of Europe (Strasbourg) and the EU. 2. Strong enthusiasm for the French-German friendship and open borders 3. BUT significant Euroscepticism: EU seen as undemocratic, lacking transparency, promoting mass migration, and favoring business over workers. 4. Criticism of EU trade agreements (CETA, Mercosur) as harmful to local agriculture and industry. 5. Older and younger participants alike associated the EU with mass migration and expressed nationalist sentiments.



- 1. More positive perception of the EU. 2. Strong support for the cross-border job market and regional integration 3. Highlighted EU funding for local projects. 4. EU seen as a guarantor of peace in the Rhenish region. 5. YET, Frustration with regulatory focus on minor details rather than major issues 6. Desire for more legal harmonization.

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*Focus groups with citizens*

## Conclusion on the Citizens

*The French are buying a eurosceptic narrative invented in Paris, that doesn't fit their aspirations: Friendship remains « central »*

- Sharp contrast between French and German perceptions of the EU.
- French group displayed paradoxical attitudes: benefiting from EU integration yet deeply Eurosceptic.
- German participants had a more pragmatic, positive outlook, focusing on EU funding and stability.
- Cross-border experiences shape European identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.
- The local media treatment of Europe was deemed exageretly europhile according to the citizens
- Media and politics stressed the concept of French German Friendship which was also absolutely central for the citizens

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## Conclusion: A Question of Capital(s)?

The German press also expressed frustration with the role of the European Commission in regulating industries vital to regional economies, like Saarland's steel sector or Baden's fruit agriculture. This resentment may not be solely directed at Europe, but at the perceived marginalization of once-central regions. What was once the economic heart of Germany is now seen as peripheral, contributing to the cold tone towards Brussels, while maintaining amicable relations with France □  
« far away Brussels »

It is clear that for *Saarbrücker Zeitung* and *Die Oberbadische*, the capital of Europe is Brussels, while for *Dernières nouvelles d'Alsace* and to some extent *Le Républicain Lorrain*, Strasbourg is the Capital of Europe, making the European Union a more tangible, localized reality in Alsace and Lorraine.

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