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Borders Shaping
Perceptions of European Societies

Deliverable 3.2: Report on the results of interviews and focus groups

Re-evaluating the nature of Euroscepticism in border regions:

Narratives of Europe in a European election year

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Executive summary

In this report, we present a narrative analysis of our original politician interview and citizen focus group data to investigate how borders are featured and narrated in European election campaigns, and how border region residents respond to border narratives in the broader frame of their perceptions of the European project. We use 'structured narrative analysis', whereby we seek out recurring narratives about borders. In this, we include both master narratives that were identified a priori, and narratives that emerge spontaneously from the bottom up.

Border regions are defined by politicians and border region residents in relation to a variety of scales and concepts. This was done by reference to historical-geographical regions such as Alsace or Silesia, to geographical features such as the Baltic Sea or the Carpathian basin, as well as different administrative scales such as municipalities or regions. Only in a few instances was 'border region' used as a key reference category, and in even fewer instances did definitions encompass two or more sides of a border. Politician interviewees and focus group participants sometimes drew on Europe, or parts of it such as Central Europe, in definitions. This was especially true among politician interviewees in the Franco-German border region. However, the notion that living in a border region predisposes border region residents to any particular pro-European orientation must be rejected. For example, Polish borderlanders from the Polish-German-Czech border region explicitly rebuffed any suggested links between their daily experience of open borders and neighbourship with lofty European ideals.

Narratives of European borders in general are threefold:

1) Overwhelming support for open borders: for both practical and normative reasons, politicians and focus group participants narrated open borders inside the EU and Schengen Area as a positive development. Politicians from Danish-Swedish border region are an important exception but also the only exception. Support for 'invisible' borders cuts across political dividing lines, as interviewees from Eurosceptic and pro-European parties alike supported this narrative. The same can be said of focus group participants, most of whom hardly noticed borders and welcomed this invisibility.
2) This stands in contrast with the second narrative about the negative effects of a return to border visibility. This was witnessed during the Covid-related border closures and reintroductions of border controls at some borders. Some politician interviewees and focus group participants produced a highly critical narrative of a return to visibility, while others were more understanding. However, this disagreement does not run clearly along party lines or general orientation towards the EU.
3) A third narrative, promoted by pro-European and Eurosceptic politicians alike, is that open borders inside the EU and Schengen Area depend on strongly enforced external borders. In other words, support for open borders is not universal but hinges on the question of whether the border in question is an external or an internal one. This narrative did not feature prominently among border region residents, who tend to be more focused on the local effects of the local border.

Narratives of the European Union and European integration are somewhat linked to narratives about borders: most politicians and focus group participants – even if they were broadly Eurosceptic – could name some benefits of European integration. Open borders were foremost among these, but we also detected narratives about beneficial economic exchanges resulting from European integration. At the same time, there was a recurrent Eurosceptic narrative of a bureaucratic and distant EU that tends towards over-centralisation. Specific policies were sometimes singled out as examples. The Green Deal and other environmental policies featured prominently in at least some border regions, but there was also a clear narrative that links the EU's migration policy – which was criticised by politicians and focus group participants – with border narratives, notably the abovementioned narrative that the

external border needed to be enforced more effectively. No politicians advocated leaving the European Union, but some produced narrative of alternative models of integration, such more state-centric models or older models like the European Community. Some of our focus group participants produced very Eurosceptic narratives, but only in the Danish and Swedish border region did we detect any – albeit muted – support for leaving the EU.

Our politician interviews revealed that borders do not feature prominently in European election campaigns, but they feature to some extent. In all our border regions, we found evidence of standardised campaigns organised by national (or regional) parties that have some local overtones. This was noticed by some of our focus group participants, who would like to see more locally tailored campaigns, to overcome some of the perceived distance between the borderlands and the EU. There is some evidence of cross-border links between parties and some joint campaign activities. However, some parties also noted their difficulties in identifying partner parties in neighbouring countries.

Finally, our focus group participants took on the role of co-analysts of our media analysis presented elsewhere (Bączkiewicz et al., 2024), and our politician interviews. This revealed that these citizen scientists are sceptical of some of the heavily pro-European narratives produced especially in the media in the Franco-German border region. This scepticism was also found among citizen scientists from the Franco-German border region itself. Elsewhere, we found that media narratives of local conflict over borders or environmental issues were received by citizen scientists with some scepticism, though sometimes also localised support. For example, the Polish focus group participants echoed Polish media concerns over the Turów coal mine, whereas the German and Czech participants did not. However, these citizen scientists also revealed some gaps in the media reporting and in politician narratives. They offered their own narratives, e.g. to highlight areas where the EU should take action (as on Slovakia's treatment of Slovak-Hungarians taking Hungarian citizenship), or to point to differential contexts in border regions in Western Europe and East-Central Europe.

1) Theoretical Underpinnings

This report is based on qualitative interview data from two sources: a) one-to-one semi-structured interviews with candidates as well as party officials and campaigners in the 2024 European elections, and b) focus groups with borderlanders from our four case study regions: the Danish-Swedish, Franco-German, Polish-German-Czech and Slovak-Hungarian border regions. The report specifically analyses narratives around borders in general, as well as the specific border regions under consideration, narratives about the European Union and the European integration process, as well as depictions of the 2024 European election campaigns.

In B-SHAPES, borders are understood as narratives, and narratives are defined as 'attempts by actors to develop and convey plausible accounts and interpretations of a phenomenon, event or series of events, person or a group of persons' (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2021). In particular, narratives are ways of making sense of the world, where meaningful events are assessed in terms of their effects but also in terms of their moral quality, and where specific actors are sometimes identified as the driving force behind such events (Jones and McBeth, 2010).

Narrative analyses of data collected through interviewing methods (such as one-to-one interviews and focus groups, as in our case) seek to explore how people make sense of their own experiences through storytelling. As narrative analysis originated in an interpretivist paradigm, stories are not interpreted as facts, as indicators of an objective truth, or as accurate accounts of events (Earthy and Cronin, 2008). Rather, narratives are investigated as interesting in their own right (Plummer, 1995) because they allow a glimpse of the narrators' own interpretation of their experiences and own ways of presenting their story.

Some scholars are interested in the formal structure of narratives, including the sequencing of events, or in identifying the different storytelling elements that make up a fully formed narrative (Labov, 1972; Maines, 1993). In contrast, we follow Plummer (1995) in focusing on the function that particular narratives perform, or what he calls 'the social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they change, and their role in the political process.' (Plummer, 1995: 19). In other words, we ask: what purpose does a particular narrative serve, and why is it presented in the way it is?

Moreover, it is important to recognise that narratives are not produced by atomised individuals in isolation. They are also shaped by the culture and context in which the narrators are embedded. In narrating their stories, people draw on their local experiences, shared meanings, and on a reservoir of possible shared stories to tell. As such, narratives are 'a way to engage with the everyday, situated experiences of people in place' (Wiles et al., 2005: 94). This allows the researcher to pursue contextual analysis by linking narratives to broader social experiences clustered in space (Wiles et al., 2005). This strength sets narrative analysis apart from its cousin in qualitative research, thematic analysis. Scholars using narrative analysis take more seriously the importance of subjective meanings, as well as the embedded meanings of narratives in particular contexts, a fact long recognised by geographers (Sayer, 1989; Price, 2010; Ryan et al., 2016).

However, where narrative analysis sometimes falls short is in its focus on the story arch of individual narratives, and in analysing the patterns of interaction between interviewee and interviewer, all without necessarily looking for other examples of a particular narrative in the data set. Therefore, we propose a 'structured narrative analysis', which combines the key strengths of thematic and narrative analysis. We investigate the narrators' (i.e. the interviewees') own account of their experiences in a particular local context (the border region), while looking for the role that their stories play in generating broader social and political meaning. However, we do so by imposing a shared analytical

structure, common in thematic analysis, that enables us to identify overarching commonalities between narratives in border regions, as well as local flavours in specific border regions. Such structured narrative analysis contributes towards the following objectives:

- to investigate how border region residents create and respond to narratives of the historical and cultural past connected with a border
- to determine the importance and instrumentalisation of borders in European election campaigns taking place in border regions, specifically by
    - determining whether and how different political parties draw on, and politicise narratives about specific borders and their historical legacies in localised election campaigns
    - analysing how these narratives influence border region residents' responses to the European project and perceptions of its legitimacy

A two-pronged approach is adopted in our subsequent analysis: we look for examples of certain master narratives that have been defined *a priori*, as well as spontaneously emerging narratives that arise from the bottom up. On the former, WP3 contributors seek to identify narratives including, but not limited to, the six master narratives identified by Opiłowska et al. (2023) for B-SHAPES. These include, first, a narrative of crisis happening *in* Europe or, if European integration itself is causing the crisis, a narrative of a crisis *of* Europe. Second, they include a narrative of the visibility or invisibility of borders, including the question of whether borders are more visible to some population segments than to others at different points in time. Third, they include securitisation narratives of borders in and around Europe being under threat. In this narrative, fortifying borders is presented as a necessary measure to make Europe and Europeans safe from the threat in question. A fourth narrative presents borders as immunological barriers that protect society from pathogens, both literally as in the case of Covid and figuratively, where there is a clear link to narratives of the required securitisation of borders to protect the European body politic from unwanted external elements. A fifth narrative highlights the clash between narratives of the securitisation of borders and broader humanitarian values, casting the enforcement of borders as inhumanitarian to varying degrees. The sixth and final master narrative is one of self-critical introspection, where borders are contested in the name of values such as cosmopolitanism and the overcoming of boundaries. As far as bottom-up narratives are concerned, we leave room for local stories emerging in different borderlands contexts, and we identify and explore them as they occur in interviews and focus groups.

1) Methods

Two qualitative interviewing methods were used to probe narratives in border regions during European elections: semi-structured elite interviews with candidates, party officials and campaigners in the 2024 European elections, and focus groups with young border region residents.

Interviews

We recruited our interviewees based on their party membership. We did this to avoid selection bias but also to investigate the extent to which Euroscepticism is present in parties normally presented as Eurosceptic but also in those usually defined by experts as more pro-European. First, we identified significant parties that were contesting the election. We used the Chapel Hill Expert Survey dataset to classify parties as more Eurosceptic and as generally more pro-European, using the item 'EU_position' as an indicator of the overall position of the party leadership on European integration (Jolly at al., 2022). As the CHES dataset ends in 2019, we also included in our search newer parties that were not yet captured, and we tried to contact these if we judged them likely to be a significant political force. We also allowed for the possibility that party positions could undergo significant change, as happened with the Slovak SaS party, which morphed from a rather Eurosceptic party into a much more pro-European one after and as a reaction to the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, which led to the formation of a populist government led by Robert Fico. Where possible, we identified candidates with a connection to border regions, such as candidates from Alsace in France, from southern Slovakia, where there is a significant Hungarian-speaking minority, or from the Polish lubuskie and dolnośląskie voivodeships. We contacted candidates and representatives of local party offices via email and followed up with further emails and phone calls.

We carried out 37 usable interviews in total:

- Brunel University London team: 5 interviews on the German side of the Polish-German-Czech border region
- Eötvös Loránd University team: 7 interviews on the Hungarian and Slovak sides of the Slovak-Hungarian border region
- Halmstad University team: 7 interviews in the Danish-Swedish border region
- Technical University of Liberec team: 6 interviews on the Czech side of the Polish-German-Czech border region and the Slovak side of the Slovak-Hungarian border region
- University of Strasbourg team: 6 interviews in the Franco-German border region
- Wrocław University team: 6 interviews on the Polish side of the Polish-German-Czech border region

In **Czechia**, we interviewed candidates from the right-wing populist ANO party that is Eurosceptic, from the soft Eurosceptic Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS) and from the more pro-European liberal Mayors and Independents party (Starostové a nezávislí, STAN).

In **Denmark**, we interviewed candidates from Det Radikale Venstre (Radical Left-Social Liberal Party), and the Det Konservative Folksparti (Conservative People's Party), both of which we classified as generally pro-European based on the CHES data. On the more Eurosceptic side, we interviewed a party representative from the right-wing Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party).

In **France**, we interviewed candidates from the generally pro-European right-wing party Les Républicains (The Republicans), as well as from the liberal and generally pro-European Renaissance party. In terms of more Eurosceptic parties, we interviewed candidates from the generally Eurosceptic far-right party La France fière – Reconquête (Proud France – Reconquest) and from the far-left Eurosceptic La France insoumise – Union populaire (France Unsubdued).

In **Germany**, we managed to interview candidates and campaigners from four parties, namely the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), the Green Party (Die Grünen), the radical-left Left Party (Die Linke) and the radical right Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). The SPD and the Green Party are broadly pro-European parties. The AfD was included as a Eurosceptic party. The Left Party can be defined as a moderately Eurosceptic party according to CHES data.

In **Hungary**, we interviewed candidates and municipal politicians from the nationalist and Eurosceptic Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom), the conservative Eurosceptic Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz–KDNP pártszövetség) and the generally pro-European centrist Momentum Movement (Momentum Mozgalom).

In **Poland**, we interviewed one candidate from the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), which is often classified as moderately Eurosceptic (criticising the EU institutions, but not pushing to leave the EU), and its politicians tend to self-describe the party as 'Eurorealist'. Furthermore, we included candidates from the self-described pro-European New Left (Nowa Lewica) party and the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), an electoral alliance led by the pro-European Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska). But it should be remembered that some parts of the Polish mainstream pro-EU parties adopted some Eurosceptic arguments and strategies, e.g. regarding migration and the securitisation of borders. Furthermore, we interviewed candidates from the electoral coalition Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy (BS, Non-Partisan Local Governors), which was formed under the Eurosceptic label Normalna Polska w Normalnej Europie (Normal Poland in a Normal Europe), together with the far-right Eurosceptic party around Janusz Korwin-Mikke. Finally, we interviewed a candidate from the far-right Eurosceptic coalition 'Konfederacja' (Confederation), which is a member of the National Movement (Ruch Narodowy).

Two of our interviewees from **Slovakia** were actually Hungarian speakers. They included a representative of the pro-European Hungarian Alliance (Magyar Szövetség, MSZ), which represents ethnic Hungarians in southern Slovakia. Another was a local politician who was independent. Among Slovak-speakers, we interviewed two candidates from the formerly quite Eurosceptic Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS) party, which suddenly became much more pro-European from late 2023. We also interviewed one candidate from the pro-European Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko, PS) party.

Our Eurosceptic parties from **Sweden** include the nationalist Swedish Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) and the radical Left party (Vänsterpartiet), from both of which we interviewed candidates. The Liberals (Liberalerna) and Moderate Party (Moderata samlingspartiet) were included as pro-European parties, and we interviewed a candidate from the former and an assistant to a candidate from the latter.

Interviews were carried out in person and online, following a common interview guide that covered four broad areas: 1) the (border) region and Europe, 2) borders in Europe, 3) the 2024 European election campaign, and 4) perceptions of European integration and the European Union. With our interviewees' informed consent, we recorded our interviews, transcribed the recordings and pseudo-anonymised the transcripts. These transcripts were analysed using structured narrative analytical techniques.

Focus groups

We started out by defining a similar recruitment strategy for all our case study regions. Our target group were men and women who live in the respective border region. It was decided to over-recruit young borderlanders aged 18-30 because their voices are not often heard in research on Euroscepticism and border regions. However, we decided against recruitment straight from

universities, to avoid selection bias, as it is a well-known fact that youth and education correlate highly with pro-European attitudes (Fox and Pearce, 2017).

The Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) contacted their members in our case study regions, insofar as they exist,[1] to help with the recruitment of focus group participants from their networks. However, we also faced considerable difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of focus group participants, which is why in three of our border regions (the Danish-Swedish, the Slovak-Hungarian and the Polish-German-Czech border region), we employed additional or alternative ways of recruiting participants in at least parts of these border regions, e.g. through the youth wings of political parties or through our personal networks with municipal officials. Having identified willing contacts who would provide a venue for the focus groups and help with the recruitment of participants, we organised ten focus groups in total:

[1] The Øresund region is not a member of the AEBR, and so the recruitment strategy was pursued directly by the Halmstad University Team.

Border region	FG (language)	Location	Date	No. participants	Profile	Moderator
Danish-Swedish	Swedish	Ferry between Helsingborg and Helsingør	16 August 2024	3	All Swedish; all male; all senior	Sara Svensson
	Swedish, Danish and some English	Malmö	12 November 2024	4	2 Swedish, 2 Danish; all male; all young	Sara Svensson
	Swedish and Danish	Copenhagen	26 November 2024	4	2 Swedish, 2 Danish; 2 female, 2 male; all young	Sara Svensson
Franco-German	French	Lauterbourg	20 November 2024	2	1 young, 1 adult; both male	Pierrick Bruyas
	German	Lauterbourg	20 November 2024	6	1 young, 5 adult; 3 female, 3 male	Birte Wassenberg
Polish-German-Czech	German	Zittau	13 November 2024	5	All young; 2 women, 3 men	Katja Sarmiento-Mirwaldt
	Polish	Liberec, but with participants from Bogatynia	14 November 2024	10	2 young, 6 adult, 2 senior; 5 women, 5 men	Łukasz Moll
	Czech	Liberec	12 November 2024	9	All young; 2 women, 7 men	Artur Boháč
Slovak-Hungarian	Slovak	Šahy	19 December 2024	8	All young; 6 women, 2 men	Hynek Böhm
	Hungarian	Esztergom	25 November 2024	6	5 young, 1 adult; 3 women, 3 men	Péter Balogh

Note: young = 18-30 years old, adult = 31-60 years old, senior = 60+ years old.

All focus group moderators followed a common guide of subject areas to cover, though the order in which they were covered could vary depending on the flow of the conversation. These areas are as follows: 1) their home region, 2) Europe and the European Union, 3) reactions to headline findings from the media analysis covered in Bączkiewicz et al. (2024), and 4) borders and the border region.

Insofar as focus group participants were invited to comment on the results of a regional media analysis covered in Bączkiewicz et al. (2024), there is also a citizen science element (Gold et al., 2022), where our research subjects became co-analysts of the research data that we collected from their regions. We sought above all to learn our participants' reactions to our media analysis and some headlines, as well as their judgment of how well local problems were addressed in this media material, and in the election campaigns.

Having obtained our focus group participants' informed consent, we audio-recorded the focus groups, transcribed the recordings and pseudonymised the transcripts. Transcripts were again analysed using structured narrative analytical techniques.

2) The border region

Different politician interviewees defined 'their region' by reference to different scales. Some used large administrative and historical regions such as 'Alsace', 'Silesia' or 'Saxony', while others referred to smaller or long-superseded districts. Definitions therefore vary in their geographical extent. For example, in the Danish-Swedish border region, they range from very compact, focusing on the Copenhagen-Malmö area, to more inclusive definitions that potentially include North Jutland and Bornholm. A Danish politician from the pro-European liberal Radikale Venstre party described the island of Bornholm and its relation to the region:

> Bornholm is an interesting case. We are geographically at the edge of Denmark, but with European integration and projects like the Energy Island initiative, we are becoming more central. We have strong ties to Sweden, and people here often feel closer to Europe than to mainland Denmark, especially when it comes to energy and security. (DK_1_m)

In their definitions, some interviewees referred to geographical features such as the river Odra (PL_2_m, D_1_f), the Baltic Sea (SE_3_f) or the Carpathian Basin (HU_2_m), or to regionally concentrated activities such as coal mining (DE_3_m). There was also diversity in the extent to which interviewees described their region as a border region or a European region. One Hungarian interviewee said: 'The first thing that comes to mind is that this is a border region.' (HU_5_m). Likewise, a Polish interviewee defined his region as a trans-border region because of transport connections (PL_6_m). However, the reference term 'border region' was not often mentioned spontaneously and thus cannot be counted as a prominent narrative of regional identity.

In the Franco-German border region, 'Europe' emerges as a particularly common reference category. For example, one French politician said: 'The region is already Europe – its role is central with a particular historical background, marked by both war and cooperation.' (FR_2_f). The role of the region was defined by interviewees through its ability to act as a leader in cross-border cooperation and as a driver of economic integration within Europe. Some interviewees discussed the broader historical role of Alsace in embodying European ideals and maintaining social cohesion across borders, e.g. 'The region's role in the EU is integral – it has always been a gateway for cross-border collaboration and economic integration.' (FR_2_f). However, one can also find this 'region as European interface' in other border regions, albeit less widespread. One German interviewee described the Berlin-Brandenburg region bordering Poland as follows:

> So for me it is a region that is in the middle of Europe, certainly geographically, but also a bit of a melting pot between West and East, not only for Germany, but above all for Europe. And for me it has always been a region that was actually quite cosmopolitan in terms of results, even historically with the Huguenots etc. (DE_4_m).

A Polish interviewee also described the EU as a 'natural phenomenon' in the borderland (PL_5_f). However, just as 'region as border region' was not a prominent narrative, most interviewees did not necessarily volunteer 'European' as part of their definitions.

Economic disparities that coincide with borders were frequently cited as a defining feature of the respective region. Almost all French interviewees noted this, but they conceived of it more in terms of red tape than in terms of a welfare gap. In the words of a German Green politician from this region:

> 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. We need to address this material problem to make it easier for citizens to move around freely. (DE_6_m)

Another German interviewee, this time from the border region with Poland and Czechia, claimed that the developmental gap between Germany on the one hand and Poland and Czechia on the other made cooperation at the Polish-German-Czech border harder than at the Franco-German or Dutch-German borders (DE_5_m). Another described the Polish-German border region as a 'left behind border region', a sentiment he claimed facilitated hostility towards Poles (DE_4_m). In contrast, a Polish interviewee described the closeness of borders and living in the western part of Poland as beneficial – in comparison with the eastern part of the country (PL_3_f), a contrast that was echoed by two other Polish interviewees (PL_4_m, PL_5_f). On the Czech side, all politicians acknowledged that the border areas of Sudetes, face unique challenges such as brain drain, limited infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities (CZ_1_f, CZ_2_m, CZ_3_m).

One striking contrast that emerged only in the Polish-German border region is between differential narratives of neighbourliness. All the German interviewees from this region produced a narrative of neighbourliness, in which exchanges are normal and desirable. In contrast, on the Polish side, two interviewees noted anti-Polish attitudes and discrimination against Poles on the German side (PL_2_m, PL_3_f), although several others did not perceive any such issues. One German and one Polish interviewee criticised the relationship as somewhat one-sided, with the Polish side investing more effort – e.g. in terms of language learning – than the German side, which tends to treat the Polish side as a junior partner (DE_1_f, PL_2_m). Another German interviewee from the far-right AfD noted that a lack of in-depth knowledge about Poland can be a cause of baseless prejudices:

> There are these prejudices in our region, where people say 'Oh, the Poles, they steal cars.' Of course, now and again you meet someone, people who say that. Those are, I would say, people who only know Poland from the petrol station or the Polish market [Polenmarkt]. They have never been to Wrocław, Krakow or Warsaw, they don't know that at all. (DE_3_m)

This differential perception seems to exist only in the Polish-German border region out of our case study regions. Indeed, the French-German border region stands in contrast to this, as most of the interviewees presented the cross-border nature of the region as something that the citizens have always known and taken for granted. We can only speculate over the reasons for this, which may be related to the long period during the Cold War when the border was closed or even the boundary shifts and forced population movements preceding the Cold War, which meant that Poles and Germans in the region had had no prior experience with neighbourship. It could also be due to stereotypes and other mental barriers. Regardless, the fact that this narrative of differentiation exists in the Polish-German border region suggests that it is a noteworthy aspect of border regional relations and identity in this region, and one that is likely to complicate cross-border relations in at least some instances.

A key narrative in different border regions in Central Europe casts infrastructure links as an important aspect of regional identity. As already noted, one interviewee from Poland defined his region as a trans-border because of transport connections (PL_6_m), while another claimed that her region had better infrastructure than many other parts of Poland (PL_3_f). In contrast, many interviewees bemoaned a lack of infrastructure. This includes a Polish interviewee, though she did not necessarily link poor infrastructure to the border regional location issue (PL_5_f). A Slovakian-Hungarian MEP lamented the poor road infrastructure in southern Slovakia, adding that if northern Hungary did not provide such infrastructure, the connections among southern Slovakian regions would be even worse (HU_2_m). Indeed, two Hungarian interviewees described their border region, especially the Slovak

side, in terms of peripherality (HU_4_m, HU_5_m), something that was also echoed by Slovak focus group participants. Both politicians also noted that infrastructure investment, e.g. in the Mária Valéria Bridge or from the Slovakia–Hungary Interreg programme, had strengthened cross-border links. Finally, a German interviewee bemoaned poor cross-border road infrastructure in his region and blamed political forces for this (DE_3_m).

The border regional location was sometimes also presented as a source of potential: a centre-left candidate from Germany described her district as a 'key region' because of the opportunities that were arising from its proximity to Berlin and from the change in government in Poland in 2023 (DE_1_f). A Polish interviewee from a Eurosceptic party noted that investments in the region should raise its position in terms of export and economic changes, if new infrastructure was built. Accordingly, the closeness of the border should be beneficial for the development of the region, not harmful, and the border could be a bridge (PL_2_m). A Slovakian-Hungarian candidate said there were significant interactions between the two sides, but these were 'not intensive enough' (HU_2_m), though he also noted some positive recent developments such as the opening of a public bus line between Komárno and Komárom. Another Hungarian interviewee described the city of Esztergom as a regional hub economically and culturally, implying that it could bring tourism to the region, including the poorly-connected Slovak side (HU_4_m).

Some of these narratives were echoed in our focus groups. The extent to which narratives of the historical and cultural past connected with a border are presented varies between different border regions. In the Franco-German, Danish-German and also Slovak-Hungarian border regions, such narratives are stronger than in the Polish-German-Czech border region. One key question is whether border regional identity is linked to 'Europe'; this was done especially by the French but also some German and Polish participants. For Swedish focus group participants, the Øresund waterway as a national border and as the defining topographic feature of the region has created a strong sense among Swedish citizens that the border region links them to Europe, such that Europe is to some extent distinct from their own area. As one Swedish focus group participant put it, 'I usually say it's very quick to get to Europe from here.' (Rolf,[2] Swedish senior male). In other words, one 'gets to Europe' rather than already being there. For the Danish participants, this works in slightly different ways, since 'Europe' is rather pulling them away from the cross-border region, reinforcing the impression that Sweden is not really part of a Europe, which actually starts 'on the continent'. Thus, the Øresund region is created by a perceived closeness to the 'other side' (Sweden or Denmark), but 'Europe' can serve as either a wedge or a link.

In the Hungarian focus groups, there was some identification with the term Central Europe or East Central Europe. Here, one lady thought the more general 'Europe' was more difficult to identify with as 'we find ourselves in a rift: neither really East, nor really Central – a bit of a no man's land, a kind of Mordor' (Rita young Hungarian female). Another focus group participant framed this differently: 'I wouldn't say no man's land, but rather a transition zone' (Tóbiás, young Hungarian male). On the Slovak side, there was also a clear identification with Europe, though more so with the local town and region, which were described by participants as quite peripheral and linked better with Budapest than with Bratislava. In the Czech border region with Germany and Poland, there was some indirect link with Europe that was, however, derived from national affiliation: 'But I am a part of the Czech Republic and Europe. I feel like the heart of Europe because that is what people say about the Czech Republic.' (Helena, young Czech female). While Europe was acknowledged as a shared cultural and geographical entity by Czech participants, few expressed a strong emotional connection to it – and none of them to the other side of the border. In the German focus groups, both in the border region with France and that with Poland and Czechia, there was little identification with Europe. In the German border

[2] All names of focus group participants have been changed to safeguard their confidentiality.

region with Poland and Czechia, most defined their hone region as Upper Lusatia. Here, only one generally very cosmopolitan participant from Zittau included parts of Poland and Czechia in her definition of her 'home region', while the others excluded them. In the German focus groups from the Franco-German border region, identification was primarily with Germany, whereas on the French side, it was primarily with Alsace and the common French and German roots.

On the Polish side of the Polish-German-Czech border, a connection between daily life in a border region and a resulting 'exceptional' European identification was explicitly rejected by focus group participants as too idealist and abstract. The participants were eager to use their geographical location in the border triangle to get EU funds, and to present in public cross-border cooperation and everyday border crossing in terms of 'building Europe', but in reality, their attachment to the idea of Europe was rather pragmatic and instrumental. They differentiated between everyday openness and mobility, which might be called 'banal Europeanness', and a lofty ideal of Europe as promoted by the EU. While the former is performed almost naturally in everyday life, the latter is seen as rather alien and bureaucratic – as something to which they refer to get EU funds, but they prefer to distance themselves from it in honest conversation. Although there were some responses in which participants identified Bogatynia as 'the European Union in miniature' (Grażyna, Polish senior female and pointed out their exceptional way of life in the border triangle, there was resistance to speak of their experience in overly ideological terms.

To summarise, politicians and residents alike draw on historical, geographical, social, administrative and economic registers in producing a narrative of 'home'. Definitions of home regions vary widely in their radius. Not all of them involve a reference to border regions, and very rarely do they span borders. 'Europe' or parts of it such as Central Europe do feature, and in some cases, such as for politician interviewees in Alsace, they appear fundamental to a sense of self. In other cases, Europe is presented as being elsewhere, as in the Danish-Swedish border region; Europe is rejected as a reference category in defining 'home'; or lofty European ideals of a borderless Europe are juxtaposed with the more mundane, lived cross-border reality in a border region.

3) Narratives of borders

In our data gathered from interviews with politician about the general role of borders and the specific role of 'their' border, three narrative themes stand out: overwhelming support for open borders; border closures and border checks being presented as a threat to that very openness; and open internal borders as being contingent on effective enforcement of the border regime at the external borders. All of these were echoed to some extent in our focus group discussions, but some are more prominent than others.

The first two of these narratives very clearly echo the master narrative of the (in)visibility of borders. The vast majority of our interviewed candidates and politicians present invisible borders within the EU and the Schengen area as very a positive aspect of European integration. At the same time, quite a few of them see the Covid-related border closures, as well as more recent checks that were temporarily introduced at the internal borders, as a return to visibility. This was presented, often with great concern, as an indicator of the fragility of the Schengen Area. The third narrative presents open borders and freedoms within the EU and the Schengen Area as contingent on strong enforcement of the external borders. This narrative is linked to the master narrative of the (in)securitisation of borders, where the securitisation of the external border, in the shape of more stringent border controls, is presented as a remedy for perceived problems, such as the arrival of large numbers of migrants, be they illegal immigrants or asylum seekers.

Overwhelming support for open borders

A very prominent narrative is one of support for open borders. Almost none of our politician interviewees questioned open borders within the Schengen Area and the EU, and one can detect many examples of strong enthusiasm for open borders in most of our case study regions. This supportive narrative comes in two flavours: support for passport-free travel within the Schengen area and support for free movement within the EU, though interviewees and focus group participants do not always distinguish between the two.

Open intra-Schengen borders were described by a Slovakian-Hungarian border-town representative as 'a wonderful thing'. He went on to say: 'it is very difficult to verbally express how great Schengen and open borders are – they are super-great!' (HU_5_m). In the Slovak-Hungarian borderlands, there is the added dimension that the border cuts across ethnic communities, so that open borders are perceived as a way of preserving links across the border: thus, a Fidesz candidate (HU_6_f) described open intra-Schengen borders as 'generally important … from a national-policy angle, to unite the nation – that is, in order to avoid that the movement of Hungarians beyond the borders is not made difficult.' A Hungarian Alliance candidate described open borders as 'a very positive thing, because we were previously unable to visit the kin state, or later with a passport only' (HU_2_m).

Passport-free travel in the Schengen area is frequently presented as one key advantage in this narrative of the benefits of open borders. Free movement, including free movement of labour, is another aspect of the same narrative. For example, none of the interviewees in the Franco-German border region raised the issue of European migration of their own accord. When asked about EU citizens crossing the border – EU citizen coming from South or Central Europe especially – the candidates did not see any problems in this. While we did not define the term 'open borders' in interviews, some politicians touched on benefits arising from the single market, which includes the free movement of labour. For example, our Slovak-speaking interviewees presented open borders as a cornerstone of European integration. One described them as 'one of the biggest advantages of the EU' (SK_3_f) that brings tangible benefits such as increased trade, investment, and opportunities for Slovak citizens not only in the border region but across Europe. On the German side of the Polish-German-Czech border, one centre-left politician (DE_5_m) portrayed open borders as an elementary part of European integration that had also been positive for economic development.

Many interviewees developed the narrative of open and invisible borders being desirable into one where open borders have a positive effect on attitudes in the border region and on neighbourship. For example, a Czech interviewee who described open borders as 'one of the EU's greatest achievements' (CZ_3_m) especially highlighted their role in facilitating cultural exchange. At the Polish-German and Czech-German borders, many interviewees noted approvingly how normal it had become to cross the border, to see Poles and Czechs working on the German side (but not vice versa) and the benefits of labour migration and cross-border commuting (DE_1_f, DE_3_m, DE_4_m, DE_5_m, CZ_1_f, CZ_2_m, CZ_3_m, PL_1_m, PL_3_f, PL_5_f, PL_6_m), though among Czech interviewees this came with a concern about brain drain (CZ_1_f, CZ_2_m, CZ_3_m, also SK_3_f). Among many Polish interviewees, too, one can detect a perception that shopping, sightseeing and travelling are a normal aspect of life of the border region (PL_4_m, PL_5_f): in everyday life, borders 'do not exist in our consciousness' (PL_5_f). Far-right and centre-right candidates alike (PL_4_m, PL_5_f) also claimed that these contacts between people on both sides of the Polish-German and Polish-Czech borders had abolished mental barriers, and one of them added that the levels of nationalism in the border region were lower than in the interior of Poland (PL_5_f). This chimes with the claim of a campaigner from the centre-right Koalicja Obywatelska, who claimed that inhabitants of Poland's lubuskie region bordering Germany were more open, tolerant and pro-European because of the closeness of the border and 'the impact of the West' (PL_6_m).

The narrative that open borders are positive is not limited to centrist candidates and campaigners from generally pro-European parties. Far-right Eurosceptic candidates and campaigners, whom one might normally expect to favour strict border policies, were also in favour of open borders (FR_4_m). In the Franco-German border region, such candidates exhibited a reluctance to advocate for internal border closures, especially at the French-German border, which was viewed by a focus group participant as a 'secure and essential link' (Alfred, senior French male). In Czechia, Germany, Hungary and Poland, too, far-right interviewees (DE_3_m, HU_1_m, CZ_1_f, PL_1_m) presented open intra-EU borders in a positive light. For example, a far-right interviewee from Hungary (HU_1_m) said, 'in many other territories the border's opening has been positive; where small Hungarian villages have been dead-end settlements up until accessing the EU and Schengen'.

The Danish-Swedish border region is the only exception to the overall pattern. Here, representatives of parties with various attitudes to Europe expressed support for some form of border controls under current circumstances (referring to migration and/or criminality). This was true also for young people engaged in party politics. The difference was mainly those of parties of more pro-European colour would so with much regret, whereas Eurosceptic politicians emphasised that national policies should be in control over how borders are handled. This included support for reintroduction of permanent border, as expressed by the Eurosceptic Danish People Party, which also expressed that they had received support for this view among the general Danish public (DK_2_m). The more Eurosceptic politicians emphasised the need for national policies to control how borders are handled.

The narrative of the normalcy of regular exchanges and lively neighbourship was also echoed in a number of focus groups. In the Danish-Swedish border region, focus group participants said they did not cross the border as often than one might think. Yet, they characterised the act of crossing as mundane. They did so because of the seamlessness of cross-border traffic due to easily accessible infrastructure such as the bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen or the regular ferry connection between Helsingborg and Helsingør. Mobility in the Øresund region is viewed in two contrasting ways: on one hand, (young) residents appreciate the opportunities it brings, such as studying across the border, often linked to European

initiatives. On the other hand, the growing association of freedom of movement with the spread of criminal activity undermines this positive perception.

In the Franco-German, Slovak-Hungarian and Polish-German-Czech border regions, focus group participants reported crossing the border often, e.g. weekly for some Hungarian participants (though far less frequently for those Slovak participants who have no Hungarian roots) or even multiple times a day for some French ones. They do this to shop, taking advantage of price differentials of different products, for leisure, for tourism or to work. As a French participant put it 'it's part of who we are, we could not live with a closed border' (Lucas, young French male). Some from Slovakia, Germany and France noticed certain differences between the two sides of the border, based on the quality of the houses or the state of the roads. However, among others there is a distinct sense that the border is invisible. For example, one Hungarian participant put it as follows: 'I don't think it even makes sense to talk about a state border here, as one cannot even perceive one!' (József, adult Hungarian male), a sentiment shared by two focus group participants. One of them said that 'we just notice it through the different currency in use (Zoltán, young Hungarian male), but the other added that even that matters less now with card payments' (Lea, young Hungarian female). Similarly, a Czech participant perceived the border as barely noticeable:

> I live in Varnsdorf, right on the German border. I don't really perceive the border much. It depends on where I'm crossing it, but most of the time, I just see a sign that says "Bundesrepublik Deutschland." (Milan, young Czech male)

On the Slovak side of the Slovak-Hungarian border region, the perceived visibility of borders varies: some participants claimed not to notice them and to feel no specific emotions when crossing borders, e.g., 'I feel neither fear nor joy; it's a very familiar environment' (Martina, young Slovak female). However, others pointed to potential controls, former border checkpoint facilities, or signs, and expressed concerns about not being able to pay in euros as well as language-related fears: 'I feel like I'm entering an unfamiliar country whose customs I don't know, and I also have language concerns' (Svetlana, young Slovak female). Bilingual respondents with Hungarian roots often said they felt at home across the border.

In short, in narratives of open borders, we find strong connections with the master narrative of the invisibility of borders. Invisible, open borders within the Schengen zone and the EU are presented almost unanimously (except for the Danish-Swedish border region) as beneficial and desirable. Lively exchanges are reported across all case study borders. This contrasts strongly with the next narrative, in which borders suddenly become visible again and act as barriers to the normalcy of exchange. This shows that borders' ordinary function is seen as connecting, and people resent it when borders depart from the ordinary and take on a barrier function.

Border closures as a threat to openness

While there is a dominant narrative of open internal borders being a good thing in most border regions, reactions to border closures – be it during the Covid-19 pandemic or for other reasons, such as Germany's October 2023 decision to introduce border checks at its borders with Poland, Czechia and Switzerland – were more diverse. Some interviewees reacted with understanding, especially to the Covid border closures, or with indifference. Others were much more critical. For example, a critique of border closures was formulated by a French candidate from a far-left Eurosceptic party: 'The reflex during Covid, with certain ministries, was to limit movements. Geographical borders were tested in this crisis situation. However, borders must remain open. (FR_5_m). Such a narrative implicitly contrasts the sudden visibility of borders with their prior invisibility. Divergent reactions to

this contrast can indicate how important open borders are to people's understanding of their region and daily life in it.

In the Slovak-Hungarian border region, some politicians were quite understanding of Covid-related border closures (HU_6_f, HU_7_f, HU_3_m, SK_2_f, SK_3_f). However, a Slovakian-Hungarian MEP candidate, a border-town representative, and a far-right MEP candidate were more critical. This is perhaps no coincidence as borderland residents were particularly disadvantaged by the restrictions, and right-wing politicians tended to be more sceptical of Covid measures in general. Among the Slovak-speaking interviewees, too, there was one candidate who criticised the restrictions as overly restrictive and disruptive, noting that they complicated daily life for commuters and cross-border workers. He emphasised the importance of maintaining mobility even during crises (SK_1_m). One Hungarian border town representative was the only Hungarian interviewee respondent to bring up Covid of his own volition and was highly critical of the border closures: 'I could not agree with them, and do not believe they have really affected the number of cases or even the spread of the whole thing. Therefore, it is not certain that these [border closures] were necessary.' (HU_4_m). Another said that Covid had made people's lives much more difficult, though he did not think Covid has had any repercussions on the two sides' cooperation (HU_5_m). One of the Fidesz candidates tied the Covid measures more generally to the question of sovereignty over borders, arguing that Covid has shown that 'interestingly enough, if the Member States want to close their borders, they are able to do it.' He added that 'terror threats and pandemics, or – if unhalted – illegal migration may lead to internal border controls' (HU_3_m). In other words, different considerations weigh on respondents differently when they formulate their position on border closures. Arguments against tend to be bolstered by reference to narratives of the desirable and beneficial invisibility of borders, while arguments in favour tend to link to narratives of national sovereignty and security.

Similar to the Slovak-Hungarian border region, border closures were viewed differently by different politicians in the Polish-German-Czech border region. Some interviewees had barely noticed the Covid-related border closures (DE_1_f, PL_3_f), did not consider them harmful (PL_3_f, PL_4_m) or thought that other Covid-related measures such as curfews had had worse effects than border closures (DE_2_m). Some Polish interviewees were worried not only by the Covid-related border closures, but also by Germany's decision to reintroduce border controls (PL_1_m, PL_6_m). A centre-right party official considered this a serious problem for the inhabitants of the border region and criticised the decision (PL_6_m). However, others expressed understanding for it because of illegal immigration into Germany (PL_3_f, PL_5_f), showing again that different people draw on different narratives when explaining their positions on border closures.

Other politicians in the Polish-German-Czech border region described the border closures in much starker terms, as a 'catastrophe' (DE_4_m), a 'calamity' (DE_3_m) and as 'traumatic' (DE_5_m). One Polish candidate mentioned his shock at seeing the police and army at the border during the Covid-19 border controls (PL_1_m). Czech interviewees, too, were united in criticising the Covid measures, which they found chaotic and poorly coordinated (esp. CZ_1_f and CZ_3_m). It must be said, though, that many other interviewees did not blame governments for unilaterally closing the borders during Covid; indeed, more criticism was made of other decisions to limit civil liberties. However, the negative effects on families, workers, local firms, and cross-border traffic were outlined in vivid detail. According to a Polish candidate from a far-right party coalition, the reintroduction of controls by Germany was a reminder that borders had not disappeared, as it had been perceived after Poland's accession to the Schengen zone (PL_1_m). The fragility of open borders was also noted by a far-left German candidate (DE_4_m). One centre-left candidate summed it up as follows: 'So you have the actual, the actual advantages of the open internal borders and the free movement of labour, so you have ruined them.' (DE_5_m). He also noted that, in the future, there should be a more orderly process for possible border closures due to emergency situations, something echoed by all Czech interviewees.

For the most part, these critical positions on border closures and controls rest on the more general narrative of open borders being especially beneficial for borderlanders, and the negative effects of these benefits being undermined.

In the Danish-Swedish border region, politicians were unsure when it came to answering questions about their attitude towards the Covid-19 controls. While local politicians at the time protested against these, the interviewed politicians who were active during the EU elections appeared to feel that Covid-19 was a long time ago. It was also not something that came up during discussions with voters, as they recalled. Indeed, the memory of Covid-19 had already faded in the minds of our focus group participants in the Danish-Swedish border region. Instead, border politics, e.g. over criminal cross-border activity, between Sweden and Denmark, already mentioned in the previous section, were far more salient to these borderlanders.

In sum, among the politicians in most border regions, the narrative that border closures and controls pose a threat to openness and make life difficult for border region residents can be found in most of our case study regions. However, the narrative is by no means unanimous, as there are at least some who react with forbearance or support. Thus, interviewees draw on divergent broader narratives to illustrate their position, including the narrative of the invisibility of borders being beneficial, a narrative of sovereignty and security, or a general position of indifference.

Our focus groups reveal that most borderlanders also produce narratives of the Covid closures as harmful. In the Hungarian border region with Slovakia, this came with a broader criticism of Covid measures. As one man put it, 'the border was not where it is now but has moved to the front of our doors – so, the border has moved closer to ourselves… It was terrible in all sorts of ways.' (József, adult Hungarian male). Another man said that 'everything we heard about borders were turned upside down. We've heard for ten-something years about borderless Europe and free labour, but all that came to a halt (Zoltán, young Hungarian male). József, quoted above, added that it was not just about state borders but also our personal freedom was restricted.' On the Slovak side, the Covid-19 border closures received mixed reactions—some saw them as justified for infection prevention, while others viewed them as unnecessary or outright negative. The direct impact on respondents was minimal, except for two individuals whose family members or acquaintances commuted to work in Hungary.

The German focus group participants in the Polish-German-Czech border brought up Covid unprompted and noted that during the pandemic, one could only go North due to the geographical location of the town of Zittau in the very South-East of the country. As a result, the participants described the feeling as 'closed in on' (Marie, young German female), 'depressing' (Daniel, young German male) and 'imprisoned' (Mark, young German male). As Daniel elaborated, 'Because one is used to this freedom, to always be able to get to the other country somehow, I think that would feel very weird.' Polish focus group participants described a similar feeling of being imprisoned in an exceptional location that is surrounded by national borders with Czechia and Germany. On the Czech side, too, there was near-universal agreement that border closures during Covid-19 had a profound and often negative impact. Czech respondents described feeling isolated, frustrated, and restricted. These narratives illustrate the significant role borders play in citizens' lives, not as barriers but as connectors that facilitate a unique cross-cultural and economic exchange, and that this is noticed particularly clearly when the taken-for-granted connecting role of an invisible border is hampered.

However, some focus group participants on the Polish side also described certain 'creative' ways to evade border closures and sanitary procedures, which chimes with a claim from the French participants, who said they were not affected by the border closure because they did not respect it. The latter also displayed a visible mistrust towards the political institutions, as shown in the following example:

> I crossed the border six to eight times a day during the lockdown. No one can prevent me from going on the German side! No one! I continued my life just as before. Covid is a scam and fake news meant to control us and restrain our freedoms. (Alfred, senior French male)

At the Polish-German border, the border controls introduced by Germany were also raised, and they were seen differently from the Covid-related border closures. With one exception, the German focus group participants were relaxed about these controls and said they did not take up much time and were a small price to pay for the 'security' of knowing who enters the country. In stark contrast, on the Polish side there was strong resistance to these controls, which resulted in feelings of anger, shame and humiliation: 'My German neighbours look into my trunk' (Aneta, adult female from Bogatynia, PL). There is a sense betrayal in captured in this quote. However, on both sides, the controls were also seen as leaky, as not all border crossings were controlled.

This section has presented findings on the narrative of the drawbacks of border controls and closures. While this narrative is not unanimous, it is widespread among both politician interviewees and focus group participants. Referring back to the master narrative of the (in)visibility of borders, such an invisibility is often taken for granted, which is why a return to visibility, as during Covid, provoked such strong negative reactions.

Open borders contingent on external borders

The abovementioned narrative of support for open borders – both in terms of passport-free travel in the Schengen Area and in terms of free movement – frequently comes with another, namely a stipulation that internal freedoms and open borders depend on securing the external borders. This often goes hand in hand with the narrative that external border controls are not strong enough, in turn justifying controls at the internal borders. There is a clear link here with the master narrative of the need for securitising (external) borders. And whereas the narrative of the benefits of open borders was embraced by mainstream politicians and those of the Eurosceptic far-right alike, the narrative of strong external borders was likewise promulgated not only by far-right Eurosceptics but also by mainstream centrist politicians.

In France, the praised openness of the Franco-German border stands in contrast with a narrative that the external border – located far away from the region – should be controlled strictly. According to a far-right candidate from the region, 'Monitoring Europe's external borders: We need to come together in a decision-making union to strengthen Frontex. The goal is to improve, not to be dogmatic or ideological. Financial resources need to be allocated. (FR_4_m).

Politicians' narratives in the Danish-Swedish border region, too, are dominated by the perceived need to secure Europe's external borders in order to save open borders internally. As stated by a Swedish candidate from a party commonly classified as Eurosceptic, 'If you think that the free movement within the EU is a good thing, then you must realise that it requires strong external border protection.' (SE_1_m). Accordingly, securing borders can be done with the help of better technology, more coordination within the border agency Frontex or more resources. This narrative featured very strongly among right-wing Eurosceptic parties, and it was also displayed prominently in campaign material:

> And all the people I've met, mostly 90% of the people I met, was very happy about our Danish border control and they want to have a very strange and secure border control in the future as well. (If we leave Schengen) we don't have we have border control to be approved by the EU Commission. If border control was permanent then we could use technology much better. Which we cannot do today because we don't know if we have a border control in one year or

> two years. Effective technology to be used in this kind of way could be to scan people who have a criminal history, scan their faces, and you can see what they have in their trucks by using technology and so on and so on. (DK_2_m)

However, as elsewhere, the policy position that strong external borders are needed are not unique to right-wing Eurosceptic parties. This narrative is present across most of the political spectrum. As a Swedish mainstream politician put it:

> We don't like internal border controls, but if we aren't going to have internal border controls, then we must have external borders that are strong enough to support this free movement. (SE_4_m, also DK_3_f)

On the Hungarian side of the Slovak-Hungarian border, one of the Fidesz candidates (HU_3_m) stressed the importance of open intra-Schengen borders and the protection of the external border. Similarly, a far-right interviewee from this region presented open intra-EU borders in a positive light but stipulated that the EU external border was the key question, wishing to stop 'especially the illegal migration' (HU_1_m). No corresponding narrative about the external borders could be detected on the Slovak side.

In Czechia, two candidates argued that maintaining public trust in open borders requires effective management of external EU borders and migration challenges, as internal freedoms were presented as depending on external security (CZ_1_f, CZ_3_m). A similar narrative can be found on the German side of the Polish-German-Czech border region, where one interviewee from the Eurosceptic AfD party, who travels a lot in Europe, described open borders as a big relief: 'I think it's great, provided that the EU's external border is secured. But that wasn't done.' (DE_3_m). His party colleague, too, criticised the fact that open borders made it possible for economic migrants and asylum seekers to 'flow through' and unlike 2015, Poland and Czechia no longer take them back, even though asylum applications should not be lodged by people who came through a safe country (DE_2_m). In other words, both these generally Eurosceptic interviewees claimed that open borders within the EU made it easier for people from outside the EU to cross over the external EU border, e.g. over the Polish-Belarussian border, to move into Germany. Both also criticised the current German approach as being inefficient in catching illegal immigrants and people smugglers and the lack of a deterrent effect due to the decision not to deport illegal immigrants. A better approach, according to one of them would be a 'Europe of sovereign states' (DE_2_m). Crucially, according to him, the borders would be open, but there would be spot checks at the internal borders, as well as deportations of illegal migrants.

On the Polish side, too, many interviewees made the link between the free flow across open borders in the Schengen zone and a necessary strengthening of the external borders of the EU. For example, one party official from the centre-right Koalicja Obywatelska stated that the border controls should be strengthened to 'catch' illegal immigrants. According to her, Germany decided to reintroduce border controls because of Polish failures to control the border with Belarus, which is why her party would not intervene in Germany to get it to end the border controls (PL_5_f). Another Polish interviewee from a far-right Eurosceptic electoral coalition highlighted the difference between the internal and external borders of the EU: accordingly, external borders should stop illegal immigrants, but the functioning of the Schengen zone should be maintained (PL_4_m). A third Polish interviewee claimed that the EU should take more responsibility for protecting its external borders rather than relying so much on national governments (PL_6_m).

Our Polish focus group was the only ones where the external EU border was mentioned, and it was mentioned in the context of the unilateral German border checks. Here, participants made a distinction between Polish commuters and workers on the one hand, and immigrants from outside

the EU on the other. Some of these participants described the checks as a populist trick by German authorities. Conversely, others demanded a securitisation of the external borders, such as the Polish-Belarussian border in order to keep the internal borders open: 'If the external border would not be sealed, then the Schengen zone will collapse' (Lucjan, adult Polish male). There is a clear link here with migration policy, which will also be discussed in the fourth section of this report. While the Schengen zone and open internal borders were perceived as one of the most valuable prizes of the European integration, these focus group participants were concerned that 'uncontrolled immigration' and leaky external borders would result in a further transfer of the controls over 'illegal migrants' to the internal borders, and this could mean the end of Schengen. The reintroduction of border controls by Germany was seen as a manifestation of such a process. As a result, one can safely conclude that the Polish focus group participants support open borders for themselves, but closed and securitised ones for the 'immigrants', a term they used for any people coming from outside the EU, and this is a strong echo of one of the findings from our media analysis (Bączkiewicz et al., 2024).

Some limited opposition to the narrative that external borders must be secured should also be noted. It is worth quoting a German politician from the far left at some length:

> [Borders] are artificial lines on a map, and I also say in discussions, I have said again and again when the migration issue was discussed, that anyone who believes that they can conclusively secure borders is living in a complete illusion. You can try all of this if you want, then you increase the costs, so to speak, both for the refugees and for the societies that try to raise these limits in some way, artificially. And the greater the suffering of the people, the more opportunities they will find to overcome these boundaries, and in this respect I personally consider boundaries to be a construct, which I hope will no longer exist at some point in the distant future. (DE_4_m)

This last quote links up with two master narratives identified by Opiłowska et al. (2023) that had not until this point been detected. On the one hand, it is a self-critical narrative of European values, such as open borders, being undermined. On the other, the critique of the 'suffering of the people' is not merely one of the ineffectiveness of such controls, but also one where a clash between humanitarian values and measures to securitise borders is suggested.

The humanitarian narrative was also raised by two Polish focus group participants. One of them claimed that there was not enough empathy and interest in this issue; the situation was complicated and uneven, but there were human dramas there. The participant was worried that people care mostly for themselves (Dorian, adult Polish male). Another claimed that there was a natural, human impulse to help people in need, regardless of their nationality, race, and regardless of our geographical location (Aneta, adult Polish female). This participant raised some humanitarian concerns over people who suffer at the external borders, but not sufficiently to seriously challenge securitisation. The humanitarian narrative is not very common, as it was raised by only one interviewee and two focus group participants, but the fact that it was raised suggests that ethical considerations about borders and border enforcement do preoccupy at least some politicians and borderlanders in the Polish-German border region.

In summary, we find that the narrative that open internal borders depend on the securitisation of the EU's external borders is widespread among politicians of all colours. Pro-European politicians, in particular, sometimes simultaneously promote open internal borders and strictly enforced external borders. However, in the focus groups, citizens did not make the same link, except on the Polish side of the Polish-German border region. Perhaps this is because the Polish-Belarussian border as a porous external EU border has been in the recent news (cf. Bączkiewicz et al., 2024), Polish borderlanders

were more sensitive to the issue than elsewhere in our case study regions.[3] Be this as it may, the disconnect between interviewed politicians and focus group participants on this issue elsewhere is palpable.

[3] This finding is unlikely due to a prompt from the moderator, as the prompt used for this part of the focus group was a headline about the *internal* borders: 'German border controls paralyse borderland in Lubuskie'.

4) Narratives of Europe, the EU and European integration

Perceptions of European integration have been analysed through a major body of research into Euroscepticism, or critical attitude towards the EU (de Vries 2018). A distinction is often drawn between 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2009). Hard Euroscepticism denotes principled opposition to the European project, while soft Euroscepticism taps into dissatisfaction with the process, outcomes or specific aspects of European integration. In our interviews with politicians, insofar as we discovered Eurosceptic narratives, these were clearly of a 'soft' Eurosceptic variety (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2009): we detected no blanket rejection of the EU, even among politicians from clearly Eurosceptic parties such as the German AfD, nor any suggestions that one's country should leave the EU. Rather, some benefits of European integration are generally appreciated, but certain interviewees contest its mode of governance, which is presented as bureaucratic and with unwelcome tendencies towards centralisation, as well as certain policies such as the Green Deal.

There are links here with two master narratives, as identified by Opiłowska et al. (2023). First, a critique of the EU as distant and bureaucratic could be construed as a narrative of crisis *of* Europe, as choices about how to govern a supranational union of 27 states is inherent in the institutional design of this organisation. Specifically in the critique of certain policies, there is also a narrative of crisis *in* Europe that is related to problems such as the oft-quoted migration crisis. But there is also a more specific border-related narrative that presents immigration across the external borders into the 'area of freedom, justice and security' as a security threat. This narrative of the insecuritisation of internal borders often culminates in calls for the securitisation of the external borders through tougher controls, as shown in the previous section. In this narrative, freedoms within must be safeguarded by enforcing borders more forcefully at the external edges of the EU.

Benefits of European integration

In line with our previous finding that Eurosceptic and pro-European stances can exist side by side (Bączkiewicz et al., 2024), we find that many interviewees – even those from far-right Eurosceptic parties or those who can list a long number of grievances about the EU – can also produce some narratives about benefits from European integration in all our case study regions.

Foremost among these are economic benefits. These include economic integration through the single market programme (DE_5_m, CZ_1_f, SK_1_m), investment (PL_4_m, SK_3_f) as well as European funding (FR_1_f, DE_4_m, HU_4_M, SE_1_m, DK_1_m, PL_2_m, PL_3_f, PL_4_m, PL_5_f, SK_2_f). EU funding, be it specifically for cross-border initiatives or through more general references to EU funds, was mentioned in every single one of our case study regions. As one French candidate from the right-wing pro-European Les Républicains put it, 'For me, there are only advantages. I can't imagine France leaving the EU. The common market is essential for our businesses... There are benefits for the region. And European funding.' (FR_1_f).

Another major benefit frequently associated with European integration, is free travel with the EU, which links with the abovementioned narrative of the benefits of open and invisible borders (FR_2_f, DE_3_m, DE_4_m, DE_5_m, CZ_2_m, CZ_3_m, CZ_1_f). A German left-wing candidate from the Polish-German border region linked this narrative with his own experience: 'I experienced it as a student when the border with Poland was closed. In that respect I see that as an advantage.' (DE_4_m, also echoed in DE_5_m and SK_1_m). One Hungarian interviewee highlighted the benefits of free movement and cross-border shopping (HU_4_M). A Slovakian-Hungarian border-town representative confirmed that 'the open border is very important to people' in the area, not just for shopping but also for education, extracurricular activities, employment, small trade, and culture (HU_5_M). A Polish

interviewee noted as a benefit 'more contacts with neighbours and travel opportunities; general well-being of the population; educational exchanges, e.g. Erasmus; cultural development.' (PL_4_m).

Certain interviewees perceived the Schengen Agreement to sit slightly apart from European integration, due to its historical origin outside the European Community (PL_1_m, DE_4_m). One interviewee added that 'my sense is that we may not sufficiently make clear that this is all thanks to all of us living in a coordinated European Union' (HU_5_m). One German politician from the centre-left said Schengen is valuable but also vulnerable:

> The question, then, is always how strongly the people attribute the lived neighbourship that they have and that they like – of course, even an AfD voter likes to go hiking in Czechia, no? – whether they attribute this to the EU or say 'It's always been that way, they are our neighbours and we have always been doing something with them', that I would say is very controversial. (DE_5_m)

One point that was already raised in the previous section was reiterated by some interviewees in the context of being asked about the European Union. This captures the beneficial effects of freedom of movement in the EU. This freedom of movement, e.g. of workers, is also seen as a major benefit that is sometimes captured under the term 'open borders'. It was mentioned particularly frequently by Polish and German interviewees from the Polish-German-Czech border region, including by Eurosceptic politicians (DE_1_f, DE_3_m, DE_4_m, DE_5_m, PL_1_m, PL_3_f, PL_5_f, PL_6_m, SK_1_m).

A German interviewee from the otherwise Eurosceptic AfD credited EU with preventing armed conflict among EU member states, though he was the only politician interviewee to do so:

> Something that really has to be credited to the EU, through this unification of all the states in the EU and these bureaucratic mergers and these billions that are being distributed, the big plus is that there will most likely be no armed conflicts between each other. Right? Because they are really trying to keep the peace with the EU, with Europe. (DE_3_m)

One German focus group participant from the Franco-German border region also mentioned peace in Europe, but particularly in the Rhenish region itself: 'The younger generation has so many opportunities. We live in a peaceful region of Europe – that's a huge advantage.' (Ursula, senior German female).

In our focus groups, we found the same narrative about positive aspects of European integration again and again. One of the most common was about the freedom to move and to meet neighbours, which was found in the Czech, Polish, German, Slovak and Hungarian focus groups. In the words of a German focus group participant from the Franco-German border region: 'Europe stands as one big region, including for work' (Walter, senior German male). A Hungarian woman described the EU as 'a system which has many advantages and disadvantages alike. The best thing is obviously that capital, services, and labour can freely flow. I think it would be bad if we weren't a member. (Lea, young Hungarian female), though she also noted problems of emigration that resulted for Hungary. Other benefits were mentioned by focus group participants, though more sporadically than free movement. Czech, Slovak, German and Polish participants identified European funding as a benefit, while Czech and German participants from the Polish-German-Czech and Slovak-Hungarian border regions highlighted programmes such as Erasmus and economic cooperation.

In summary, even the most ardent Eurosceptics can find a least some aspects to like about European integration. Much of this relates back to open borders, but other benefits were highlighted by politicians and citizens alike, such as EU funding or economic opportunities.

The EU as bureaucratic, distant and over-centralising

Many politician interviewees, especially but not exclusively from Eurosceptic parties, tend to produce a narrative of the EU as overly bureaucratic. We found such examples in all but the Franco-German border region. The bureaucracy criticism captures both the assessment of the interviewees themselves as well as their assessment of voters' associations with the EU. As one interviewee from a generally pro-European Swedish Liberal party put it:

> An overwhelming majority, about 90% of everything they bring up, is about bureaucracy. That the EU intervenes in how vegetables should be bent or not bent, what standards should be used, you know, all those kinds of things. And the question is how to change that perception, as it reflects the reality of those voters. But that's what people point out: that the EU meddles in people's daily lives in a way it shouldn't, and that decisions should be made in Sweden instead. (SE_2_m)

A sense of distance from and lack of understanding of the EU was also noted as part of this narrative. For example, concerning local borderlanders' attitudes, a Slovakian-Hungarian candidate cautiously generalised:

> The EU and its decisions are incomprehensible, alien, unknown, and hence of limited concern. As a result, we have been having the lowest voter turnouts. I believe though that this is changing, since many themes have now been incorporated among the EU's competences – whether it be migration or the war. The latter is also seen as a more pressing issue the further east we find ourselves in Slovakia. But the issue is that while many citizens know their local representatives, they have no idea about what an MEP is doing. I believe this also the source of resistance: that people do not know what MEPs are doing or think they are doing little but are getting huge pays. (HU_2_m)

This sentiment points to a broader disconnect between citizens and the EU, driven by a perceived lack of responsiveness to local needs. This also came out in two interviews with Czech politicians: here Eurosceptic and more pro-European candidates alike emphasised the importance of regions as intermediaries that translate EU and national policies into practical outcomes for citizens. However, they stressed that these policies must be more sensitive to regional specificities. The more Eurosceptic candidate of the two criticised the EU for imposing uniform solutions that fail to address local realities, particularly in smaller municipalities (CZ_1_f), while the more pro-European one advocated for empowering border regions to leverage EU policies for revitalisation and innovation (CZ_3_m). Both also noted that Euroscepticism is amplified in border regions by economic disparities and the feeling of being overlooked in high-level decision-making. A Slovak candidate echoed this, highlighting the disconnect between local needs and EU-level decision-making as a driver of Euroscepticism in economically lagging regions (SK_2_f).

Conversely, in the Franco-German border region, we find a local narrative of Euroscepticism that is specific to this border region. All French interviewees mentioned the French referendum during which a majority voted against the 'Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe' in 2005, 18 years later. One candidate articulated the issue as follows: 'I think that currently, there was the issue of the 2005 referendum. People were discouraged... They either benefit from it or not, but they are indifferent' (FR_4_m). This suggests that the referendum was a specific form of trauma for this particular border region (FR_2_f, FR_3_m, FR_4_m, FR_5_m).

In our focus groups carried out in Central Europe, we frequently encountered the narrative of the EU being overly bureaucratic and prone to over-regulation, as having inscrutable modes of governance, and as being disconnected from the daily concerns of its citizens. This narrative is clearly present in the Slovak-Hungarian border region as well as all sides of the Polish-German-Czech border region. In Hungary, a participant who was quoted above as praising free movement, also said 'At the same time, some regulations come with it that we may not want to live up to.' (Lea, young Hungarian female). Like many Czech participants, she could not give an example. Some Polish and Hungarian focus group participants mentioned a directive on bottle caps. No corresponding narrative of a bureaucratic EU was detected at the Franco-German border, but at the Danish-Swedish border, this sentiment was expressed:

> People know that the EU exists, but the knowledge is very, very low. It's a large, complex issue, and many are not interested. People know it's there, you have the parliament, etc., but that's where it ends. At the same time, I would say there's quite a bit of scepticism about the EU getting involved in certain matters, with people thinking, "Why should the EU decide on this?" Why should German and French politicians decide on our EPA tractors when it should be our own parliamentarians? So there's a certain scepticism, but it's very mixed, and unfortunately, many don't have much knowledge about it. (Oscar, young Swedish male)

To summarise, accusations of the EU being overly bureaucratic and opaque are more than a cliché in our case study regions. Such a narrative is quite prominent in most of our border regions, though not in the Franco-German border region. In the Danish-Swedish, Slovak-Hungarian and Polish-German-Czech border regions, the narrative was reproduced by politician interviewees and focus group participants alike.

Critiques of European policies

While general criticisms of the EU as bureaucratic or distant are nothing new, not least because we found this in our media analysis (Bączkiewicz et al., 2024), there were also some substantive criticisms of EU policies. Two narratives were particularly common, namely criticisms of the Green Deal and more general ecological policies on the one hand, and migration policies on the other. There were others, on more niche issues, e.g. on the failed bid to abolish the biannual clock change, energy security, as well as a general anxiety about the war in Ukraine (though with no clear idea of what the EU could be doing differently on this), but the Green Deal and migration policies stand out.

The Green Deal was criticised in the Polish-German-Czech border region, both by politicians themselves and by politicians outlining the Eurosceptic positions of citizens, even if they themselves did not always agree with these. In this narrative, the Green Deal was presented as economically harmful, 'repressive' (PL_2_m) and 'forced' (PL_6_m). Ironically, on the Polish side, the Green Deal was presented by politicians as a German endeavour (PL_4_m), but a German politician also claimed that citizens were critical of this the Green Deal (DE_5_m). Other German interviewees criticised measures that would endanger jobs such as the phasing out of coal production (DE_2_m, DE_3_m, DE_5_m), though one also said that implementation in Germany tended to make well-justified plans unnecessarily difficult (DE_4_m). A Polish interviewee was very critical of climate policy of the EU and the Green New Deal in agriculture as unrealistic, ineffective, dangerous for economy, undermining Europe's position in the world (PL_2_m). Another differentiated between an anti-EU and an anti-ecological stance, believing that many voters vote for more Eurosceptical parties not because of their anti-EU views, but because of their rejection of 'the ideology of ecologism' (PL_1_m). On the Czech side, too, Euroscepticism was linked to a narrative of the Green Deal limiting freedoms (CZ_2_m). The Green Deal was also mentioned in the Polish focus group, along with related criticisms of the EU's handling of the Turów coal mine dispute, as well as forced changes from Brussels over climate policy.

This was mentioned in one other focus group, namely the French one, which took place during the publication of the proposed EU-Mercosur trade deal.

Migration is the second key issue. This was mentioned particularly among Polish and Hungarian politician interviewees (HU_4_M, PL_4_m), whereas it was more of a borders issue among German interviewees. Polish and Hungarian interviewees took issue with EU-imposed migrant quotas. Thus, a Slovak-Hungarian MEP candidate stated that 'The other key issue is … the enforcement of migrant quota on the Member States. Slovakia may only have to accept 280 or so migrants, but this is a matter of principle! Why make something obligatory that you do not want?' (HU_2_m). Relatedly, he also argued the following:

> Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland have accepted tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, providing them with education, healthcare, and social benefits. Yet these refugees are not counted into the migrant quota – perhaps because the EU counts as migrants only people from Africa and the Middle East. The third issue is how the war is treated. We need to say that the sanctions against Russia hurt all but Russia. We have destroyed our SMEs with the growing energy prices. Hence, our goal is a new EU leadership that stands on the side of peace and legislates primarily in the interest of its Member States and citizens. (HU_2_m)

Other ideological currents are intertwined with the migration issue. For example, a Polish interviewee criticised the 'politics of multi-kulti' (PL_4_m), whereby Western countries, which had earlier adopted these unwise policies, intend to export their problem, i.e. immigrants, to countries like Poland. A Hungarian interviewee made a related point, stating that 'Europeanness is also paralleled by a great amount of openness. And whether this openness can also weaken us, our national or ethnic values, traditions etc. People are fearing and a certain threat may be sensed, which I find valid.' (HU_5_m). Other objections include a weakening of Polish sovereignty (PL_4_m) and the argument that Poland was never colonial country, so it should not be expected to participate in dealing with someone else's problem (PL_2_m). Concerns about migration policy were also linked with those about sovereignty by Czech politicians: 'People in Czechia are very sensitive about the migration of people with culturally different backgrounds.' (CZ_2_m). Conversely, while migration was a key issue between Denmark and Sweden, this theme did not bring up criticism of EU migration policy in the Danish-Swedish border region, or only insofar as it related to narratives of failed external border controls. Otherwise, the 'blame' was squarely put on Sweden for having had an 'irresponsible' or 'generous' migration policy.

Perhaps surprisingly, the only focus group where migration was a strong theme was in the Franco-German border region, where this theme had hardly been mentioned at all by any politician interviewees. The French focus group participants felt very Eurosceptic and criticised the EU for allowing for mass migration. As one of the participants puts it: 'I support Marine Le Pen, I must say I'm against migration, France is for the French people, we cannot have immigrants because they don't like to work.' (Alfred, French senior male). They then concluded that it would be acceptable for the French and German police to control the border again: 'I love crossing the border, I do it every day, but it's okay that the French or German police controls the border, they are only doing their work. It's normal for a country to protect its borders.' (Lucas, young French male).

No exit but several alternative models

A final point to note on narratives of European integration is that no politician interviewee advocated for their country to leave the EU. Insofar as it was mentioned, they all rejected this. As was noted by a representative of the Danish People's Party:

> And I will say that the we were were trying not to have this kind of typical discussion about 'in and out of the European Union' because when we go to into the European Parliament

> elections, it is to decide what you want to happen and not so much about discussion (about membership)… if I met someone who were more EU positive, it was mostly a discussion about Ukraine. It was mostly discussion about how we can solve our defence policies in the European Union. (DK_2_m)

Only among Danish and Swedish youth parties was any support for leaving the EU detected. In the focus groups of the right-wing and left-wing youth party members, there were voices for Swexit and Dexit. This differentiates them from the 'mother parties', which generally do not have exit as an option an offer. To some extent this reflects youth parties' tendency to be more radical, and those participating in the focus groups appeared to be undecided about their youth party's stance themselves, but they certainly did not rule it out.

However, a few politician interviewees proposed alternative models for integration. For example, a Hungarian border municipality representative with an affiliation with Fidesz expressed his hope that 'that forces will be strengthened that are working toward a committed alliance of sovereign nations, because this was the vision of the founding fathers and should still be guiding.' (HU_4_M). Fidesz and its figurehead Viktor Orbán were also a key reference point for a German Eurosceptic interviewee, who outlined a vision of a 'Europe of independent states' that work together as the European Community did previously. He made the rather surprising statement from an AfD politician 'We actually want to save Europe.' but added 'The way Orbán does it.' (DE_2_m).

A narrative about implied pre-Maastricht models of European integration being desirable (though never called this by interviewees) was expressed by another Hungarian border municipality representative, who envisaged a union in which 'national traditions are also a bit more observed' (HU_5_M). Similarly, one Polish interviewee, who was campaigning with the slogan 'Normal Poland in Normal Europe', described a vision of a decentralised Europe with heterogeneous member states (PL_1_m). Specifically, he supported older patterns of integration (such as the European Economic Community), securing the Schengen zone, the admission of the new member states (e.g. Ukraine), and the progress of a borderless Europe. He stipulated that the 'Eurofederalisation' will be stopped or slowed down because of the resistance seen in many countries (PL_1_m). Another, too, noted approvingly a new movement acting in defence of national sovereignty and national culture are on the rise against 'melting away in the EU' (PL_4_m).

On the Czech side, there was similar support for earlier models of integration, which focused on removing barriers to cooperation but stands in contrast with the EU's current perceived trajectory of centralisation and overregulation, which one interviewee said undermines regional flexibility (CZ_2_m). He advocated for a return to a model of 'negative integration', focusing on removing obstacles rather than imposing top-down initiatives. A candidate from a right-wing populist party advocated for a union that respects national sovereignty while fostering collaboration (CZ_1_f).

In our Central European focus groups, we found a similar resistance to centralisation. In Poland, Hungary and Germany, objected to the idea of pushing European integration towards a European state. In the words of a Hungarian focus group participant:

> Everyone knows that the Brussels leadership is not good. Yet the question keeps popping up whether there should be a European empire – a United States of Europe (USE) – or the Europe of nations should prevail. This needs to be agreed upon, but I personally think there cannot emerge a USE already because a Frenchman will never claim to be more European than French. The differences are too big (within the EU) for any European empire or USE – even though it's more centralisation that would genuinely move the whole thing forward. But that

> is utopistic. Theoretically I would find that better but don't think it can be realised. (József, adult Hungarian male)

In the Polish focus group, there was support for the notion of a Europe of the homelands and Europe of (cross-border) regions, where diversity should be cherished against unification. The same sentiment was expressed by some German residents of the Polish-German-Czech border region. Here, and among Hungarian focus group participants, the idea was expressed that the EU should become more grassroots democratic and transparent, and then trust the EU might increase.

Finally, it is important to mention the Danish-Swedish border region. Here, the Nordic alliance is often presented as an important complement – though not alternative – to the European Union, and also as something that is based on feelings of belonging.

> Sometimes we have to stand together in the Nordic region. It is important to me that the Nordic community is strong, and that we stand together on many issues, just like when we, as politicians, stand on a common platform. For we are quite few. In Denmark, for instance, we are 6 million, and in the Nordic region, we are also few. In Germany, there are 80 million, and in the world, the EU accounts for only 6% of the world's population, while Europe makes up 12%. (DK_3_f)

This sentiment was also expressed in a focus group that we carried out in the region:

> Yes, but as a conservative in Sweden, one would probably prefer a strong Nordic cooperation over a completely European one. Instead, the focus is more on strengthening relationships within one's immediate surroundings. In that case, Scandinavia and the Nordic countries become a very good arena, especially when considering historical, cultural, and linguistic similarities, and so on. So, I can see how ideology plays a role there. (Oscar, young Swedish male)

The Franco-German border region, where our media analysis revealed pro-European sentiment to be particularly strong (Bączkiewicz et al., 2024) is the only case study region where our politician interviewees proposed no alternative or complementary model to European integration. Their only sense here is that sometimes 'more Europe' is needed. But while no alternative model emerged from the French focus group carried out in the same region, it is important to note that the French focus group participants were far more Eurosceptic than their politicians and certainly did not support 'more Europe'.

5) The 2024 European election campaign

To what extent do different political parties draw on narratives about specific borders and their historical legacies in their European election campaigns, specifically their local versions of these campaigns? To what extent do they politicise such narratives in their campaigns? In answering these questions, it is important to note at the outset that European election campaigns can be regionally based only to a limited extent. This is because in seven of our eight case study countries – Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia and Sweden – there are single national lists with no regional constituencies. Only in Poland were there 13 regional constituencies. However, some interviewees – e.g. in the Danish-Swedish border region – suggest that geographical representation is important in the composition of national lists. Elsewhere, local party branches and candidates can have some autonomy in setting local priorities in their versions of the broader national campaign strategy (Zittel and Gschwend, 2008). Considering this, it is worth examining their reflections on the cross-border dimension of campaigning for Europe.

Scales interacting

It is common in the literature to describe European elections as 'second order elections', i.e. elections that are contested by national parties about largely national themes and based predominantly on national electoral cleavages (Reif et al., 1997). Indeed, one German politician from the Polish-German-Czech border region argued that European elections were protest elections to give the German government a bloody nose (DE_3_m), while another said that at the very least European election campaigns were strongly linked to national themes (DE_5_m). The same was found on the Czech side, where none of the candidates or campaigners identified any cross-border dimensions in the campaign. On the Slovak side of the Slovak-Hungarian border region, too, one interviewee emphasised that local campaigns in border regions were identical to national ones, with no tailored materials or strategies (SK_1_m).

However, our analysis shows that electoral scales beyond the European can have an influence on European election campaigns. For example, the simultaneous or recent experience of other elections was clearly identified as relevant in Hungary and Germany. In Hungary, the European elections coincided with local and regional elections, which established a clear link between European and local border regional themes. In the German border states Baden-Württemberg, Saxony and Brandenburg, municipal elections took place at the same time as European elections, which meant that the European campaigns took on some local overtones, and also that local election themes sometimes dominated the campaigns (DE_2_m). One Polish interviewee noted that voters were tired of politics because the European election campaign was the third – after parliamentary and local elections – to be held in a short period of time (PL_4_m).

In general, candidates and campaigners noted that election materials and messages were largely chosen by the centre. For example, on the German side of the Polish-German-Czech border region, local campaign managers could choose from some centrally produced images and election messages. This was somewhat different on the German side of the Franco-German border region. As one German candidate from this region put it:

> At the national level, most candidates had to focus on their states. We didn't have specific flyers for the state or Baden. But at the local level, they did create local flyers because we happened to have also had local elections at the same time. (DE_6_m).

In France, there was once a tradition of localised campaigning that recognised the significance of regional identity and issues, but it was noted that the centralisation of broader campaign strategies was a recent invention. One candidate remarked:

> In previous campaigns, I always had a more local flyer. The Parliament seat in Strasbourg allowed us to distribute Alsatian leaflets. Others, in other departments, did similar things. But not this time. Macron wanted the constituency to become national and it deprived us from having a local story to tell. (FR_1_f).

Secondly, we see a juxtaposition of scales when it comes to the issues that were emphasised and discussed during the campaign. For example, in the Danish-Swedish border region, the conducted interviews show that, even though national issues dominate, they intersect with global, local and cross-border issues (DK_1_m).

In France, some candidates expressed a sense of disillusionment with the campaign dynamics. A representative from the left articulated this as follows: 'There was a tendency in this campaign about forgetting that we are in European elections. We need to remember the alliances in Parliament.' (FR_2_f). This sentiment captures a certain frustration with a lacking focus on European issues and the perceived dishonesty from rival parties, with Les Républicains being criticised specifically for misleading statements. The opposite was found on the German side of the Polish-German-Czech border region, where one candidate from a far-left party argued that an analysis of previous elections had shown that Left Party's campaign needed to have stronger European dimensions, which it did in 2024. However, the party was now facing the dilemma that people who were gained as voters were persuaded because of European themes, while the voters that left the party did so because of federal German themes (DE_4_m).

Borders in the campaign

In the Danish-Swedish border region, political party representatives across party spectrums described the experience of taking part in a European Union parliamentary election campaign as interesting, as something that differs from the regular elections. At the same time, they said it could also be frustrating because citizens are often uninterested in European issues:

> It has been really interesting to be a candidate at this time, just like it was in 2019. However, I have mixed feelings about this election because I have been involved in both, and I can see that ordinary Danes are not very interested in European elections. In fact, I've noticed that they are less interested than they were five years ago, and there have been very few debates and discussions in the media about this election. It feels like it's only in the last couple of days leading up to June 9th that people have really realised there is an election. (DK_2_m)

> So, for me, it has been quite interesting because I also have to manage social media and write some articles to make myself relevant in the election and to help my party's campaign. Overall, it has been very interesting, but it's a bit odd to spend so much time on a topic that very few people are interested in.' (DK_2_m)

Relatedly, in one of the focus groups we carried out in the region, the following was said:

> We particularly discussed energy and security policy in the European Parliament election campaign. And then there was something that was about how much the EU would regulate in relation to Denmark's national government. And there are three relevant questions for a joint European election campaign, so I think the whole part actually worked quite well. There were some things, I think, we discussed really, really much, like plastic straws. Such a disproportionate amount. It was an example of whether the EU should regulate what could actually be a national issue, but it is also relevant legislation. Likewise, it was also discussed that some basic rules have been introduced on the Danish labour market, which stem from the implementation of EU rules.

> But it was very much about energy and security policy in light of the wars in Ukraine, the energy crisis and climate change. (Mads, young Danish male)

Nevertheless, on the whole, in the Danish-Swedish border region, specificities in the borderlands did not feature prominently in the campaign. Several Hungarian politicians also said that their border and the border region did not play a major role in their current campaign (HU_1_m, HU_4_m, HU_5_m), as other themes – such as anti-globalism and the Ukraine war – were more pressing. Accordingly, the campaign had limited regional dimensions. A key exception is Slovakia's Hungarian Alliance, which by definition tends to be a regional party because it represents the Hungarian minority, which clusters in the southern parts of Slovakia.

One Slovak candidate emphasised the strategic importance of border regions in the campaign. She framed cross-border cooperation as a cornerstone of regional development and highlighted its potential to stimulate economic growth, attract investment, and improve infrastructure (SK_2_f). Another took a more generalised approach, with limited focus on borders in the campaign. While acknowledging the importance of cross-border trade and mobility, she did not emphasize tailored messaging for border regions (SK_3_f).

One Social Democratic interviewee from Saxony noted that different districts would have different campaign flavours (DE_5_m). Similarly, two interviewees from the AfD noted that local districts could choose from different motifs for their campaigns. 'Secure borders' was one of them, and this was not about closing the borders but about spot checks (DE_2_m). A left-wing interviewee argued that the AfD message about re-introducing border controls at the Polish-German border did raise the topic of the border, but that the external EU borders dominated the borders theme in the campaign (DE_4_m). However, especially in the border region, the argument in favour of open borders was ready-made because 'our wealth is dependent to a great extent on our export structure and import structure' (DE_5_m). At the same time, crime and drugs are also related to the border, as Saxony borders on a drugs hotspot in northern Bohemia (DE_5_m).

In Poland, too, there were mostly standardised national campaign messages, but local politicians raised some local issues such as the ecological protection of the river Odra (PL_6_m), while other issues, such as the uncertain future of the Turów coal mine were deliberately not raised in the campaign (PL_3_f). One politician sought to highlight bigger European issues in local interventions and examples to show how EU politics concern ordinary people in their everyday lives. For example, he mentioned the support for the farmers' blockade of the border before the elections (PL_4_m).

On the Czech side, two interviewees (CZ_1_f, CZ_3_m), noted the alignment of regional campaigns with national strategies. However, they advocated for a more tailored messaging to address border region-specific issues, such as cross-border labour mobility, wage disparities, and infrastructure development. One of them suggested that regional campaigns should spotlight the unique issues facing border regions, particularly those tied to historical legacies and economic disparities, to engage local voters more effectively (CZ_3_m). In contrast, the third politician interviewee downplayed regional specificity, suggesting that campaigns largely remained uniform across the country (CZ_2_m). In contrast, in the Czech focus group, participants expressed frustration with the limited tailoring of messages to local contexts. They felt that election materials often prioritised national or European-level themes, neglecting pressing border-specific concerns such as infrastructure gaps, wage disparities, and access to EU-funded projects. This disconnect sometimes fuelled scepticism, as voters struggled to see how campaign promises addressed their immediate realities.

Cross-border links and campaigning

Cross-border political linkages, and to a certain extent even campaigning, have become a common feature at least in Hungarian politics over the past decade or so. The same is true of the Danish-Swedish border region, where some party representatives make an effort to reach out across the border to work together along ideological lines. The politician interviews documented this taking place in three different ways.

Learning: in the Danish-Swedish border region, party representatives reported meeting up to learn from each other in relation to policy and the art of campaigning/conducting politics. A party may believe that their sister-party is better at doing something, such as outreach activities. Such meetings can be initiated bottom-up or happen within the structures that the parties generally have for Nordic (and European) cooperation. Almost all interviewees stated that this had happened, but sometimes their knowledge of this was very vague. That is, the interviewees themselves had not taken part, and they did not know exactly what the meetings had entailed:

> We did that in the spring, and last fall we went over to Copenhagen. That was when I was there talking about campaign methods. They are skilled at getting to know their voters, pinpointing what works best for door-to-door canvassing and what yields the best results. They are better at targeting ads on social media and such than we are because they collect more data, all in accordance with GDPR. We have no structure for that; it's ad hoc for each election. So we are trying to learn from them. (SE_2_m)

Something similar can be observed in the Franco-German border region. One German candidate from this region pointed out 'For us in Heidelberg, we just communicate, and we inspire, from our *sister party* in France' (DE_6_m) emphasising the importance of local connections within the broader European framework.

Joint material/campaigns: representatives of some parties have written joint op-eds, which have been published in both a Danish and a Swedish newspaper, and with subsequent coverage. Examples of this include an article written by the Swedish Left Party together with the left-wing Danish Unity Party (Enhedslisten):

> We have had certain campaigns together with the Unity List, which is the Danish Left Party, and there we have collaborated on common issues and so on. Primarily in train traffic, where we want a Scandinavian high-speed train. We put forward a proposal for a Scandinavian night train because we want to encourage more people to take the train instead of flying. But for that, politics needs to invest in it. We have chosen to campaign together with the Unity List in Denmark, so we have campaigned with them, and they have campaigned with us, especially in Helsingborg, Helsingør, Copenhagen, and Malmö. (SE_3_f)

Similar dynamics can be observed in other border regions such as the Polish-German-Czech border. Here, one German left-wing candidate, who is very active in his European party group, carried out campaign activities in France, Czechia, Poland and Italy. There were some video conferences with the Polish Lewica party, but 'nothing much came out of this, much to my regret' (DE_4_m). Another interviewee from the same region thought transnational lists would be a good idea, especially in border regions (DE_1_f). However, the local party did not want to focus the campaign on her candidature specifically for Europe. She nevertheless did so, and did not dare to also push for common campaigns across borders. Another interviewee from the same party noted the Socialists and Democrats' common framework electoral programme and *Spitzenkandidat* but admitted that there had been few common activities. One such activity was the three-countries train that had also been used in the 2019 European elections through Berlin, Saxony, Poland and the region. However, 'one

should not expect too much from this': 'Of course, one could do a joint event or something like that, but the idea of producing joint materials and such, really, the balance between effort and benefit doesn't make any sense.' (DE_5_m).

Joint campaigning is less prominent in our other case study regions. One Hungarian border town representative first said that he and his party were not coordinating any campaigns in a cross-border manner. He later mentioned that some candidates on both sides had approached his party to come and participate in their local campaigns, but they did not want to intervene in the affairs of other settlements and regions (HU_4_m). On the Slovak side, there is limited cooperation with Austrian parties (SK_1_m) and primarily after elections, but one candidate's campaign actively engaged with regional stakeholders in border areas, tailoring messages to address local challenges and opportunities (SK_2_f).

Joint debates: one instance of a joint debate with Swedish and Danish candidates was mentioned. This was a debate that took part on the ferry between Helsingborg and Helsingør, and coverage of this was also featured in the media analysis (see Bączkiewicz et al., 2024).

> The problem was that it was in the middle of the week, so normal people could not really be there. But we had a small debate, and we were two Danes: a Social Democrat, and me. And a (Swedish) Christian Democrat. It was a real pleasure, and *Helsingborgs Dagblad* was there; they deserve a thumbs up for that. (DK_3_f)

A Hungarian interviewee had also partaken in two cross-border roundtables in Romania (in the border city of Oradea) and in another one in Slovakia (HU_6_f). It should be noted that all these three types of activities happen at the margins of political activity; creating cross-border political links and spaces happen outside normal party logics. At the same type, they show a potential for the borderlands to create of a more linked up European polity.

Which partners?

In principle, it should be easy to identify sister parties, as MEPs elected through national parties sit together in eight political groups in the European Parliament. But while this makes the identification of natural allies a little easier, it is not always obvious with which parties there would be good rapport. This is because political groups in the EP are even more heterogeneous than national parties, and sometimes there is no party from the neighbouring country in the same political group.

Some French interviewees constructed narratives about which parties on the German side they felt closest to, even if these were in a different grouping in the EP. For instance, a candidate from the right-wing Les Républicains said 'I knew my position on the list, I accompanied the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) candidate from Baden-Württemberg, and we spent a day together. It's part of the job.' (FR_1_f). One candidate from the liberal Renew Party admitted that she was more inclined towards working and collaborating with candidates from the centre-right CDU party, despite being officially a member of the Renew alliance (FR_2_f). She indicated that she did not really understand the liberal MEPs and that she felt much closer to the CDU as the German conservative party. This is particularly relevant in the French context where traditional parties more or less disappeared after the election of Emanuel Macron, though as mentioned, a German Green candidate still felt very close to the French Green party (DE_6_m).

Cross-border linkages are particularly important for Hungarian parties because of the presence of significant Hungarian minorities across the borders with neighbouring states. A Hungarian candidate

listed several European parties with which his party, Our Homeland Movement, had been building ties in recent years. He said the following about his party's contacts in Hungary's neighbouring states:

> a national–right-wing party has more difficulties finding a similar party since automatically, some national antagonisms, revisionism, or national-identity issues emerge, which are typically clashing. But to a small degree, we have overcome this: after all, over 100 years have passed since Trianon and this trauma has alleviated a bit – which does not mean that we are friends forever with any party, but we are already communicating. We can now find the common points and have been able to identify the national forces that are not anti-Hungarian. (HU_1_m)

The same respondent explained that Fidesz had monopolised the network of ethnic Hungarian parties in the neighbouring countries, and so his party did not wish to divide those communities and were thus maintaining a cautious approach (HU_1_m). However, he confirmed that they have a division in Nové Zámky in Slovakia:

> although they were not too active. When we have a campaign or some event in Hungary, they are coming over and helping us. But they are not actively participating in local politics [in Slovakia]… They belong to Our Homeland Movement and identify with the kin state, but have a registered local organisation over there. (HU_1_m)

Another Hungarian interviewee from the Slovak side described coordination with Hungarian parties and the desire among locals to counter the danger of the assimilation of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia (HU_5_m). An interviewed Fidesz candidate (HU_6_f) shared that there is a committee under the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) that includes ethnic Hungarian parties. The leaders of the latter – including that of the Hungarian Alliance – had signed a joint agreement ahead of the elections, ensuring mutual support and stressing that 'the Hungarian question is important to be jointly represented in the EP' (HU_6_f).

Many interviewees pointed out that they find it difficult to identify a matching party on the other side of a border. The reasons range from Social Democracy being quite weak in Poland and Czechia (DE_5_m), generally greater religiosity in Poland than in Czechia and Germany (DE_3_m) and lack of specific contacts (DE_3_m). One party that an AfD interviewee defined as a good cooperation partner is the right-wing Freedom party of Austria (FPÖ) (DE_3_m), but none were identified on the Polish or Czech sides.

On the German and Polish sides of the Polish-German-Czech border region, right-wing extremism was mentioned by all interviewees of centre-left and left parties (DE_1_f, DE_4_m, DE_5_m). This was mentioned as a reason to cooperate across party lines within Germany. One interviewee said her region had a key role in resisting right wing extremism, as there are political forces that can bring people together against the right (DE_1_f), while another also noted that the mainstream parties had to work together to resist the right (DE_4_m). However, this put his left-wing party (Die Linke) in a difficult position because in these demonstrations, they were associating themselves with other parties in government that had failed people and caused some of the current problems (DE_4_m). Conversely, interviewees from the AfD that is shunned by the other parties criticised that other parties would not work with them even on topics where consensus should be possible, e.g. on school meals (DE_2_m) or cross-border infrastructure development (DE_3_m).

There is an added complication insofar as the AfD is perceived in Poland not only as a right-wing party but as an anti-Polish party, both by two focus group participants (Kacper, adult Polish male and Lucjan, adult Polish male) and by some politicians (PL_1_m, PL_4_m). Indeed, one Polish candidate from a far-

right electoral alliance said that trans-European resistance against over-centralisation in the EU was rather impossible because similar national parties, such as the AfD, are very often not only critical towards the EU but also anti-Polish, despite talks in the past (PL_4_m). An interviewee from the AfD rejected this as 'absolute nonsense' and responded: 'I know nobody among us privately or such, anti-Polish… that we are against Poland is total nonsense.' (DE_3_m). Be that as it may, the perception among at least some Poles that the AfD is anti-Polish is likely to hinder cooperation.

In short, we found only limited evidence of the instrumentalisation of borders in European election campaigns. Borders are more important in some campaigns than in others: for example, the historical legacy of the Slovak-Hungarian borderlands means that there are stronger ties across borders, but political sensitivities must also be observed. Insofar as borders are instrumentalised in campaigns, it is more in conjunction with criticisms of migration policies and thus more focused on the external EU borders. Local campaign flavours exist, but European election campaigns remain dominated by national themes. While it is not always easy to find a partner party, there is evidence of a lively exchange between political parties of different countries, but these are not necessarily focused on the borderlands and do not go beyond fairly limited activities.

6) Citizen science insights

Citizen science is an increasingly popular approach to conducting social science. Notoriously difficult to define, it usually means including members of the public who are not professional researchers *as* researchers (Haklay et al., 2021). Doubts have been raised about the scientific integrity of such an approach, but there is a recognition that 'amateur scientists' can have valuable perspectives to add. In this section we describe the results from our endeavour to recruit citizens – our focus group participants – as co-analysts of data produced from our media analysis and/or interviews with politicians.

In some of our focus groups, we contrasted the results from the media analysis in the Franco-German border region, as the one where pro-European sentiment and neighbourship were most prominent, with the results from the respective region. In the Franco-German and Polish-German-Czech border region alike, the reaction was one of scepticism. For example, on the German side of the Franco-German border region itself, one participant, who only expressed positive views on Europe still highlighted the glaring lack of criticism in the media from his border region: 'There are not many well-informed journalists express their own opinions. They are mostly blindly pro-European.' (Johann, adult German male). The French participants had a similar opinion. Likewise, some Czech and German focus group participants thought the reporting on the Franco-German border and friendship sounded positive, but many also criticised it as overly optimistic:

> I would also say that it sounds more like it's been glossed over because I think it leaves out the problems behind it. People always have differences of opinion, and things don't always work out, of course, and it's not a bad thing if something doesn't work. But I think reporting like this shows, and hides a little, the problems behind it, because it promises something that is desirable and nice, but it skips the path to getting there, I think. (Mark, young German male)

The Czech and German participants also highlighted the contrast between the Western European Franco-German border region and their own. For instance, Czech respondents noted that narratives about the Polish-German-Czech border regions often neglect to mention structural inequalities and the slower pace of integration compared to Western European borders. Some German participants also noted the higher language barrier in the Polish-German-Czech border region, as well as economic problems after German unification. They developed this in a narrative of the contrast between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, where mentalities and ways of doing things were different.

This said, the Czech and German participants also valued the reporting on cooperation in the Franco-German border region. For example, the idea of emphasising shared economic and cultural projects resonated well with respondents who valued regional collaboration. However, they criticised the lack of concrete follow-through on initiatives that could tangibly improve cross-border mobility or employment opportunities. Respondents were particularly aware of the symbolic role of borders in election campaigns but noted that these representations rarely translated into actionable policies. On the German side, too, some focus group participants criticised the fact that many cross-border cooperation projects were pilot projects but that partnerships hardly ever evolved beyond the pilot phase.

In the Hungarian focus group, there were a few reactions to newspaper headlines about Slovakia. On reading the headline 'The EU is the only realistic space in which Slovakia can imagine itself', the participants suggested that Slovakia was doing something right and was westernising rapidly and emerging as a winner from European integration. There was more disagreement on another headline that presented southern Slovakia as developing more slowly than other parts of the country. One man said that he did not think southern Slovakia was peripheral, which contrasts with the views of two

politicians (HU_4_m, HU_5_m), as house prices are high. Yet, another participant agreed with the statement as he was aware of the internal disparities within Slovakia.

Focus group discussions in Hungary also referred to the Treaty of Trianon, which had created Hungary's borders, which now cut across ethnic communities. Thus, focus group participants were shown photos of a 1934 border monument located in Esztergom, whose inscription refers to the state border as a temporary one. One lady (Lea, young Hungarian female) reacted by lamenting that Trianon was still so vibrant in Hungarian national discourse. A man thought that the monument could be preserved as a remnant of the past, to see how our ancestors have thought about this issue and thus be used in education (Zoltán, young Hungarian male). Another one concurred and added that the monument cannot be deemed as provocative in the current political circumstances (József, adult Hungarian male). Lea, quoted above, commented that 'the interpretation always lies with the viewer, as there is also a monument in Budapest that glorifies the WWII Soviet heroes. In the context of the current Russo-Ukrainian war, many tourists may not grasp how this monument can still stand here but those knowing Hungarian history do.' (Lea, young Hungarian female). In other words, the participant accepted the border where it runs but did not think it was necessary to revise historical monuments that imply a rejection of the border.

More generally, there were doubts about the unification of the Hungarian nation, which, having accepted the border, they interpreted as a cultural rather than political project, not least because some minority Hungarians could not take on Hungarian citizenship due to Slovak laws. Indeed, the participants were presented with a headline about a famous case of an old lady stripped off her Slovak citizenship after having obtained Hungarian passport. One participant linked this back to the EU and criticised its inaction:

> the EU should end its double standards and stick to its own principles. Self-determination should be taken more seriously; e.g., when the Catalans were revolting the EU didn't do anything. So, it is terrible that Slovakia can do something like that and that no one says anything about it. (Zoltán, young Hungarian male)

In Poland, we gauged focus group participants' reactions to local controversies in the headlines. One prominent such controversy relates to the Turów coal mine that is located on the Polish side in the border triangle. The mine is an important employer in the region, but it also produces a lot of environmental problems in the whole border triangle. The Czech government took the Polish government to court over Turów, and the European Court of Justice ordered the closure of the mine. Poland defied the order, for which fines were imposed. A newspaper article from *Gazeta Lubuska* touches on this issue and reported on representatives of the national populist PiS party visiting Turów. Focus group participants' reactions were divided: one participant blamed the Polish government more than the EU. Other participants were very critical of the European Court of Justice's 'top down' decision over Turow that was made without any local expertise. They also identified a certain hypocrisy as there is coal mining on the German and Czech sides, too. According to these participants, the controversy damaged trust in the EU on the Polish side. Others viewed the PiS politicians' visit as a publicity stunt, though many also noted that the party's stance on Turów had been consistent. In the Czech and German focus groups, in contrast, Turów was not identified much of an issue, and the participants certainly did not blame Poland in the way one might have expected based on our media analysis.

Another article with the headline 'The dramas of the borderland' was about the Covid-19 restrictions. The Polish focus group participants reiterated some well-known problems that border closures had brought for commuters and students. Some respondents described the border closures as unnecessary and ineffective in containing the virus, but four participants also described creative ways

of evading the border closures and other Covid measures. One mentioned some funny situations such as attempts to establish a cigarette trade with soldiers who guarded the border. The special situation of Bogatynia, which is almost entirely surrounded by the borders with Germany and Czechia, was also highlighted, and local protests against the border closures were also recalled.

In the Czech as well as Danish and Swedish focus groups, participants reflected on the 2024 European election campaigns. In the Danish-Swedish border region, connections from the campaigns to local issues were perceived as relatively weak. However, the prominent featuring of borders in right-wing politics meant that the border between Denmark and Sweden did feature in campaign rhetoric. Border controls at the bridge, usually symbolising friendship and connection, but recently rather symbolising easy cross-border criminal activity, did become a part of the elections.

In Czechia, citizens expressed frustration with the limited tailoring of campaign messages to local contexts. They felt that election materials often prioritised national or European-level themes, neglecting pressing border-specific concerns such as infrastructure gaps, wage disparities, and access to EU-funded projects. This disconnect sometimes fuelled scepticism, as voters struggled to see how campaign promises addressed their immediate realities. This, together with Czech responses to the media analysis, underscore a broader desire for greater focus on local realities in border regions, coupled with more transparent and relatable narratives from political representatives. These findings point to the need for campaigns to bridge the gap between high-level EU policies and the everyday experiences of border region residents.

In summary, our citizen science reflections in the focus groups reiterated some narratives that had already been detected in the media analysis and the interviews with politicians. One finding from our media analysis was confirmed (Bączkiewicz et al., 2024), namely the narrative that cross-border cooperation is easier in Western European border regions than in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the participants also criticised the fact that such cooperation is often stuck in the pilot phase, implying that lively citizen relations across the border are farther advanced than the state of cooperation between local governments, schools or rescue services.

On some issues, our focus groups shone a new light. For example, while we had detected a narrative that Covid-related border controls were harmful, evasions of these controls had not until this point been raised. Similarly, it comes as no surprise that the Turów controversy is associated on the Polish side with a narrative of foreign and EU meddling, but it is more surprising that we encountered no narrative of negative environmental spillovers on the German and Czech sides in our focus groups. And finally, contrary to the practice described by most politician interviewees, we found in focus groups that there would be some popular support for linking European election campaigns more clearly to local issues.

Thus, in turning the tables and treating our focus group participants not only as research subjects but also as co-creators of analysis and knowledge, we encountered some additional dimensions that enrich our analysis. Some of these, such as the desire for cross-border partnerships to evolve beyond a pilot phase, or concerns about cross-border crime and environmental issues, also have a clear policy relevance.

7) Conclusion

In this report, we sought to re-evaluate the nature of Euroscepticism in border regions considering recent processes of re-bordering by analysing the narratives that politicians produce about the nature of borders, the historical and cultural past connected with their border, as well as the influence of the EU in border regions. We also tackled these narratives through focus groups with border region residents. We did all this in a European election year, 2024, because we wished to analyse the importance of borders in European election campaigns taking place in border regions, both from the perspective of political parties and from the perspective of border region residents.

Politicians and border region residents alike produce different narratives of their home region. Even though our research took place in regions that can objectively be defined as border regions, borders do not always feature in definitions of a home region, though feature they do. A key narrative suggests that open, or 'invisible' borders in the EU are beneficial because they facilitate day-to-day interactions and cross-border competence. In this narrative, borders have a connecting rather than dividing function, though it takes a crisis such as border closures for this realisation to sink in. However, this 'banal' or 'mundane' Europeanness does not necessarily come with a European identification. 'Europe', often defined as the EU, brings benefits but is mostly narrated as a bureaucratic, opaque institution that promotes dangerous tendencies of over-centralisation and locality-blind policies such as ecological or migration policies. Thus, Europe is frequently rejected as a reference category in defining 'home' by some Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans alike.

Three general border narratives stood out: overwhelming support for open borders; border closures and border checks as a threat to that very openness; and open internal borders as being contingent on effective enforcement of the border regime at the external borders. The most interesting finding here is that the political orientation of those producing these narratives turned out to be a very poor predictor of who voices them. For example, support for open internal borders was prominent even among Eurosceptic politicians and focus group participants.

Conversely, a narrative that the securitisation of the external EU borders was required to safeguard internal freedoms was put forward among Eurosceptic and more pro-European interviewees alike. This is important because it challenges what we know about the role of borders in Euroscepticism: previously open internal borders were associated mostly with pro-European voices, while strongly enforced external borders were seen as an issue owned by the right (Schimmelfennig, 2021). Yet, we did not find such associations. Potentially, it is the border regional connection itself that blurs the link between certain political orientations and the narratives associated with them. Equally, it is possible that several successive border crises – first during Covid and then through media narratives of the threat that immigrants from third countries pose to the cohesion of the EU (Galantino, 2022) – have done the blurring. More research is clearly needed to investigate the causes of this disassociation. However, it must also be noted that this narrative is prominent among politicians but not focus group participants, except in Poland. Here, even though our focus was on the western Polish regions that border on Czechia and Germany, there was an acute awareness of Poland's eastern border, which coincides with the external EU border, and its broader relevance for the western border. However, elsewhere our focus group participants did not make this connection.

We found only limited evidence of the instrumentalisation of internal borders in the 2024 European election campaign. They are more important in some local campaigns, such as the Hungarian-Slovak border region, than others. However, borders are instrumentalised in the campaign more in connection with criticisms of EU migration policies. Thus, they emphasise the external EU borders more than the internal ones. Local campaign flavours exist, but European election campaigns remain dominated by national themes, something that at least some border region residents deplore.

This last finding, that there would be an audience for more locally-focused campaigns that highlight the links between broad European issues and local (border) regional concerns is only one of the conclusions from our citizen science approach. In recruiting our focus group participants, who possess local knowledge and first-hand experience of life in a border region, we were able to identify some qualifications to the media and politician narratives we encountered. Sometimes these were added dimensions, but at other times, they challenged our impressions from other parts of our analysis, such as the narrative that the Turów controversy is equally important to all sides of the Polish-German-Czech border triangle. This vividly illustrates the usefulness of a citizen science approach in making sense of research data derived from other sources. As is often found in borders research, local knowledge and experience are essential, and not only in collecting data but also in interpreting it.

To revisit the master narratives described at the outset and identified by Opiłowska et al. (2023), we identified instances of all of them. Particularly prominent were those narratives concerned with the (in)visibility of borders and those of the (in)securitisation of borders, particularly the narrative construction of a link between invisible internal borders and a securitised external borders regime. Yet, we also discovered some references to master narratives that had not hitherto been detected, notably those of (in)humanitarian borders and self-critical narratives that contest borders in defence of a cosmopolitan ideal. This shows that narratives of the perception of Europe draw on a rich and multi-faceted repertoire of borders narratives.

References

A. Information about interviewees and focus group participants

Danish-Swedish border region
DK_1_m: male Radikale Venstre (Social Liberal Party) candidate from Denmark, 17 June 2024, online.
DK_2_m: male Danish Folk Party, 17 June 2024, online.
DK_3_f: female Conservative Folk Party, local party representative Denmark, 18 June 2024, online.
SE_1_m: male Swedish Democrats candidate from Sweden, 14 May 2024, in person.
SE_2_m: male Liberal assistant to candidate from Sweden, 30 June 2024, in person.
SE_3_f: female Left party candidate from Sweden, online, 10 June 2024, online.
SE_4_m: male Moderate assistant to candidate from Sweden, 18 July 2024, online.

Franco-German border region
DE_6_m: male Die Grünen (Green) candidate from Baden-Württemberg, 11 June 2024, online
FR_1_f: female Les Républicains (right wing) candidate from Alsace, 4 June 2024, online
FR_2_f: female Renew Europe (liberals) candidate from Alsace, 6 June 2024, in person
FR_3_m: male Union populaire (radical left) candidate from Moselle, 7 June 2024, in person
FR_4_m: male La France fière - Reconquête (far right) candidate from Alsace, 10 June 2024, in person
FR_5_m: male La France insoumise (far left) candidate from Alsace, 12 June 2024, in person

Polish-German-Czech border region
CZ_1_f: female ANO candidate from Zlin Region, 30 May 2024, in person – Int3
CZ_2_m: male ODS candidate (elected) from Moravia-Silesia, 14 May 2024, online – Int1
CZ_3_m: male STAN candidate from Olomouc region, 18 June 2024, in person -Int2
DE_1_f: female SPD candidate from Brandenburg, 30 April 2024, in person
DE_2_m: male AfD politician from Saxony, 14 May 2024, in person
DE_3_m: male AfD politician from Saxony, 13 June 2024, in person
DE_4_m: male Left Party candidate from Brandenburg, 15 July 2024, online
DE_5_m: male SPD politician from Saxony, 12 August 2024, online
PL_1_m: male Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy candidate from dolnośląskie, 16 May 2024, online
PL_2_m: male Prawo i Sprawiedliwość candidate from lubuskie, 6 June 2024, in person
PL_3_f: female Lewica party official/campaigner from dolnośląskie, 20 June 2024, online
PL_4_m: male Konfederacja candidate from dolnośląskie, 3 July, in person
PL_5_f: female Koalicja Obywatelska party official/campaigner from dolnośląskie, 8 July, online
PL_6_m: male Koalicja Obywatelska party official/campaigner from lubuskie, 11 July, in person

Slovak-Hungarian border region
HU_1_m: male Our Homeland Movement (HU) candidate, 21 May 2024, in person
HU_2_m: male Hungarian Alliance (southern SK) candidate, 22 May 2024, online
HU_3_m: male Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance (HU) candidate, 23 May 2024, in person
HU_4_m: male border municipality representative, Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance (northern HU), 24 May 2024, in person
HU_5_m male border municipality representative, independent (southern SK), 24 May 2024, in person
HU_6_f: female Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance (HU) candidate, 11 June 2024, in person
HU_7_f: female Momentum Movement (HU) candidate, 19 June 2024, online
SK_1_m: male SaS candidate from Bratislava, 4 June 2024, in person
SK_2_f: female Progresívne Slovensko candidate, 4 June 2024, in person
SK_3_f: female SaS candidate from Bratislava, 5 June 2024, in person

B. Academic literature

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