

Narrating Europe at the Border: Media, Political and Citizen Perspectives in the French-German borderland

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Abstract

This article explores the narratives that shape perceptions of European integration in the Franco-German border region. Drawing on a three-fold approach combining media content analysis, political interviews, and citizen focus groups conducted within the Horizon Europe project *B-SHAPES*, the study identifies three dominant narrative frameworks: Franco-German friendship as a symbolic foundation of cooperation, a functional yet politically distant European Union, and a border that remains latent but reactivates during crises. By analyzing these narratives across those three sources, a complex 'border narrative ecology' is revealed, in which integration is experienced, contested, and reimagined. The findings underscore both the symbolic centrality and structural fragility of border regions as '*laboratories of European integration*'.

Keywords: European integration, border, borderland, narratives, media, focus groups

Introduction

Within the European Union, border regions occupy a place that is both symbolic and experimental: they embody the promises of integration while crystallizing its limits. The Franco-German border, in particular (Peyrony, Sielker & Perrin, 2022, p. 180), is often presented as a laboratory for Europe (European Commission, 2017; European Commission, 2021), an area of advanced cooperation, marked by a shared history, intense daily mobility and a dense cross-border institutional network.

However, this harmonious image deserves to be questioned in the light of recent crises and the local perceptions that emerge.

This contribution is part of an interdisciplinary study conducted as part of the European research project *B-Shapes - Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies*, funded by the European Union under the Horizon Europe programme. It is based on empirical results collected and analyzed by the authors as part of deliverables 3.1 and 3.2 of the working package dedicated to the study of Euroscepticism in border

regions (Bączkiewicz et al. 2024). This research is based on a rare combination of methods, combining media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005, p. 1; Bączkiewicz et al. 2024), semi-structured interviews with candidates in the 2024 European elections, and focus groups organized with French and German citizens in the PAMINA Eurodistrict in Lauterbourg (France). Our corpus covers a particularly significant period, from 2019 to 2022 and including the year 2024 for the interviews with political candidates. It includes major events for cross-border territories: the signing of the treaty in Aachen in 2019, which aimed to renew and deepen Franco-German cooperation commitments; the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw the sudden reintroduction of controls at the internal borders of the Schengen area, often experienced as a betrayal of the European ideal; debates on territorial resilience linked to economic and health dependencies; or the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, with its repercussions on geopolitical discourse and electoral positioning. These episodes have acted as catalysts for discourse, revealing the tensions between the day-to-day experience of integration and reactions to its crises.

The aim of this contribution is to identify and analyze the structuring narratives that emerge from the intersection of these materials. Rather than juxtaposing the results by type of source, we have chosen to focus on the narratives themselves (Maines, 1993, p. 17), as discursive formulations that organize perceptions of reality, direct emotions and stabilize or destabilize collective representations (Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns, 2005, p. 89). Three levels of actors are compared: the local media, which

produce and disseminate images of the cross-border area (Earthy & Cronin, 2008, p. 420); politicians, who construct a strategic discourse on Europe from the territories; and ordinary citizens, who express their lived relationship with the border in semi-directed but open formats. This approach is part of an interdisciplinary approach involving discourse analysis, the political sociology of European imaginations and an ethnography of borders.

Three dominant narratives have emerged from our work. The first is that of Franco-German friendship, mobilized as an affective and symbolic resource by both the media and political leaders, and presented as the foundation and horizon of cooperation policies. This narrative is performative: it justifies local integration, gives meaning to institutional arrangements that are sometimes abstract, and constitutes a form of legitimization for cross-border efforts. Its reception by citizens, on the other hand, is somewhat more discreet, more floating, sometimes tinged with irony or weariness, but still quite present. The second story is that of a Europe that is useful but absent, where the European Union is recognized for its practical effects – i.e. mobility, infrastructure, social protection, labour law – but rarely claimed as a meaningful political project. This everyday Europe, although omnipresent, seems to be dissociated from Brussels and the institutions, which are perceived as technocratic, inaccessible and even indifferent to local realities. Finally, a third, more transversal and paradoxical narrative runs through all the material: that of a border that nobody wants to close, but which is often closed. This highlights the fragility of an area that is nonetheless presented as integrated.

Border closures linked to Covid, political calls for tighter immigration controls, and security rhetoric about terrorism or fraud regularly reactivate a dividing line that local players agree they want to erase. The new wave of border closings decided at the federal level by newly elected Chancellor Merz, despite being outside of the scope of this study, shows with strength that the picture drawn by the three empirical works is still accurate (Fichter, 2025) and in line with past analysis (Berrod, 2020, p. 53; Wassenberg, 2020, p. 114).

These three narratives are neither perfectly coherent nor fundamentally incompatible. They coexist, sometimes in tension, sometimes superimposed, in what might be called a “*border narrative ecology*” (Grichting, 2017, p. 131). Each of them expresses a way of thinking about and experiencing Europe from the border. Together, they form a complex map of support, criticism and disillusionment with European integration. By analyzing these narratives not as fixed discourses but as forms in circulation, produced, relayed and reformulated by different actors, this study aims to contribute to a renewed understanding of the border not as a line but as a mirror of European contradictions.

Franco-German Friendship as a Founding and Powerful Ambition

Among the various narratives identified in our corpus, that of Franco-German friendship occupies a singular place: it stands out as the most visible, the most stable and, paradoxically, one of the most ambivalent. In fact, this narrative is not only meant to designate a bilateral historical or institutional relationship; it embodies, in the

discourse of the players as well as in media and public representations, a structuring figure of European integration as seen from the border. Its pervasive presence in the media, among political leaders and in interactions between citizens makes it a recurrent element of language, at once mobilized, reinterpreted and sometimes ritualized, without ever being explicitly called into question.

Media Omnipresence Reveals a Regionalized Imagination

An analysis of the regional daily press, both French and German, reveals a high recurrence of the term ‘friendship’ (*Freundschaft* - *friendship*) in articles on cross-border relations – i.e. not of the term cooperation or partnership, but the much more powerful concept of friendship. This term is never used in an innocuous way: it echoes a long tradition of post-conflict cooperation and bilateral integration, structured historically by reconciliation treaties (Élysée in 1963, Aachen in 2019) (Wassenberg & Reitel, 2020, p. 55) and institutionalized through exchange programmes such as Erasmus or municipal twinning. In the newspapers studied – *Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, *Républicain Lorrain*, *Saarbrücker Zeitung* and *Die Oberbadische* – this friendship is frequently cited as a narrative justification for cooperation projects, and as the political goal of regional integration. The Alsatian press, in particular, stands out for its portrayal of this friendship in columns dedicated to cooperation with Kehl, Offenburg or within the Eurodistricts. The media narrative thus seems aligned with a performative vision of the border, seen as a privileged space for exchange,

emotional continuity and social harmony. The repetition of this friendly rhetoric contributes to the naturalization of the idea of integration: cooperation is no longer presented as a negotiated political construction, but as the obvious expression of a pre-existing fraternal bond between two neighbouring peoples (Jolain, 2020; M.S.K, 2020).

A Politically Mobilized Narrative as a Consensual Resource

This omnipresence in the media is echoed almost systematically in interviews with politicians involved in the border region. Whatever their partisan orientation, the political players use this story of friendship as a discursive springboard to base their positioning on Europe and cross-border cooperation. Representatives of pro-European parties (Renaissance, Les Républicains, Die Grünen) see it as a lever for local support: ‘Friendship enables cooperation’, ‘this is where Europe takes shape’. This emotional rhetoric acts as a mediator between a political project perceived as distant and concrete territorial realities. More surprisingly, candidates from groups that are more critical of the European Union – or even openly Eurosceptic (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2009, p. 1) – (La France insoumise, Reconquête) (Jolly et al. 2022, p. 75) do not challenge this friendship head-on, recognizing it as an emotional heritage rooted in regional mentalities. At most, they associate it with a loss of sovereignty or a technocratic instrumentalization of cooperation, without questioning its symbolic legitimacy. The story of Franco-German friendship thus becomes a transparent resource, sometimes used to defend a Europe of

peoples, sometimes to illustrate a local exception in the face of the shortcomings of the European project.

A More Diffuse yet Present Narrative Among Citizens

In the citizens’ focus groups conducted at PAMINA, this narrative appears in a more implicit and nuanced way. It is rarely formulated explicitly, but is apparent in the interactions, particularly during the joint sessions involving French and German participants. We can see signs of attachment to local cooperation, daily mobility and a certain form of trust between neighbours, often described as natural, acquired and taken for granted. However, as soon as the groups are separated by nationality, this consensus erodes: the French participants express concerns about the loss of political control, the lack of national recognition, or dependence on their German neighbours; the German participants, for their part, adopt a more pragmatic, even disillusioned, stance towards European cooperation, and are particularly critical of the unilateral decisions to close borders during the health crisis. Here, Franco-German friendship seems to play the role of a ‘discursive stabilizer’: it makes it possible to maintain a form of apparent coherence in mixed exchanges, while masking deeper divergences in representations of Europe, institutions and the role of the border. The border is not absent from public discourse, but it never emerges as a mobilizing political horizon. It is experienced more than claimed, tolerated more than celebrated, and often relegated to an emotional background with no programmatic translation.

Europe Useful but Not Present Enough

The second narrative that emerges from our survey is based on a central paradox: the European Union is omnipresent in the daily lives of the inhabitants of the border region, through infrastructure, professional mobility, funds or services, but it remains largely absent as a political horizon or as an object of institutional trust. This narrative, which contrasts use and recognition, efficiency and opacity, is recurrent both in interviews with citizens and in political and media discourse. It outlines the contours of a Europe perceived as a condition of possibility for cross-border life, but rarely claimed as a collective project or a factor of belonging.

A Europe That Works but Is Incomprehensible to the Public

In the focus groups, particularly those carried out with French citizens, the evidence is clear that the distrust of the European Union is strong, even among individuals who objectively depend on its benefits (i.e. all the involved French participants worked or had worked in a German factory). Confusion between the Council of Europe and the European Union is common, criticism of Brussels is rife, and the terms used often echo the Europhobic narratives broadcast in the French national media. Some participants denounce a Europe that is *'undemocratic'*, *'corrupt'*, *'favouring multinationals'*, or *'complicit in mass immigration'* and *'mass vaccination against our will'*.

What is striking about these exchanges is the gap between the lived experience of integration – professional mobility, open

borders, use of health, education or leisure services – and the political perception of the Union, which is considered distant, technocratic and ineffective. Citizens recognize the need for cross-border cooperation, and say they are attached to the fluidity of travel and the common living area (i.e. participants on both sides mentioned that they liked to go hiking on the other side of the border for instance) but find it difficult to establish a clear link between these advantages and the concrete action of the European institutions. This phenomenon of cognitive dissociation is particularly clear among young people, who cite the 'OFAJ' or Erasmus as 'the best thing about Europe', while reproducing, sometimes unconsciously, stories that are critical of the Commission or the European Parliament. It should be noted that the Office Franco-allemand pour la jeunesse (OFAJ – French German organization for youth) is a binational organization founded in 1963 to promote exchange, cooperation, and mutual understanding between young people from France and Germany through educational, cultural, and professional programs. Interestingly, it was cited spontaneously by one young French participant as something more tangible than Erasmus, showcasing the remaining difficulties of all students to effectively join an Erasmus programme (Bruyas, 2025, p. 678).

The German citizen participants take a more favourable view of the EU, stressing in particular the role of European funds, the promotion of peace and the professional opportunities offered by the single market:

"Europe stands as one big region, including for work." As well as

“Germans like living in France and the French like working in Germany because there is more industry there. It’s beneficial for both sides.” European funds were also mentioned, showcasing a far better knowledge and hence usage, of the EU potentialities “We are so strongly supported by the European Union – I am thinking of almost 600 projects that have been developed in my time in the field of free testing alone” or for example “I am a huge fan of Europe and the EU. The funding for cross-border projects is fantastic.”

However, they also drew a distinction between the concrete benefits of regional cooperation and the overall functioning of the Union, which was often considered too complex or too far removed from their concerns. The border thus becomes a stage where Europe is visible and useful, but never really embodied.

A Double Political Discourse Between Instrumentalist and Disconnection

The political leaders interviewed, particularly in the context of interviews with candidates in the European elections, had a more structured, but no less ambivalent, view. All recognized the usefulness of the European Union for the region: the Structural Funds, mobility and inter-regional cooperation were cited as essential levers. Some candidates go so far as to say that *“people want more Europe”*, but that this demand is not translated into political action because *“nobody votes for lists that make it their priority”* (a French liberal candidate in Alsace).

In this context, politicians often adopt a two-pronged approach: at local level, they insist on the benefits of European cooperation; at national level, they adopt the more critical or more cautious language disseminated by their parties. This tension is reflected in particular in the treatment of migration issues, cross-border taxation and environmental standards, where Europe is sometimes accused of doing too much, sometimes of not doing enough. Political discourse thus appears to be both Europhile in intention and Eurocritical in practice, depending on the electoral or territorial issues at stake.

Modest Media Visibility Relayed by Local Figures

An analysis of the regional press reveals a discreet but persistent presence of the European institutions. The EU is rarely mentioned directly, except on the occasion of symbolic events such as the debate on the Parliament’s seat in Strasbourg (almost one article a day in the local press from Alsace during the Covid crisis and the following debate about the seat of the EU Parliament), the award of grants or crises such as Covid-19. When it is mentioned, it is often through the prism of local players – elected representatives, associations, universities – who embody Europe from a territorial perspective. In the *Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, for example, Europe is omnipresent in columns linked to Strasbourg, which is described as the European capital, but is rarely discussed as a political or decision-making system. When such is the case, the local outlet generally uses one of the already written

articles of the national French press agency (Agence France-Presse), which then stop representing a local view on the question.

This local mediation of the European idea enables the EU to be positively recontextualized, but also contributes to its erasure as an institutional player. The press relays a Europe that acts but does not speak, a Europe that is present in infrastructure but absent from democratic controversies. When criticism does appear, it is often vague, indirect or focused on peripheral issues (time change, free trade agreements, etc.), which helps to reinforce the idea of a Europe that is vague, distant and confused.

A Border Lived as Invisible... Until It Suddenly Reappears

The third structuring point that emerges from our surveys concerns the fluctuating materiality of the border in the region studied. In a context where the border is often perceived as abolished in everyday practices – fluidity of movement, institutional cooperation, existence of a shared catchment area – its occasional reactivation, particularly in times of crisis, produces a form of collective dissonance. This story highlights a fundamental border paradox: while no one explicitly wants the border to return – not citizens, not elected representatives at least locally (even those from Europhobic parties), nor journalists – it remains a political lever that is repeatedly activated, particularly in discussions about security or health. It thus becomes a symptom of the structural fragility of the European integration project, particularly visible in those areas where it is supposed to be most successful.

In the focus groups carried out on both sides of the Rhine, the dominant perception of the border was that of its functional disappearance. Citizens described it as ‘invisible’, ‘not felt’ and ‘outdated’, to the extent that it no longer consciously plays a part in their travel, work relations or leisure activities. This fluidity is particularly emphasized by the younger generations, who have never known physical barriers, and who see open borders as a natural achievement of the European area. However, invisibility is not synonymous with oblivion. It is constantly conditional on its permanence, as was brutally demonstrated by the unilateral closure of the borders during the health crisis of 2020. This decision, seen as a betrayal of the European pact by many local residents, reactivated a border that was thought to have been abolished. Citizens’ accounts emphasize the arbitrary and humiliating nature of these closures, particularly for French border workers prevented from accessing their jobs in Germany, or for binational families separated by the restrictive measures. Beyond Covid, the border also reappears as a discursive tool in debates on immigration, security and terrorism. Some citizen and political participants spoke of a Europe that ‘opens up too much’, others of a Germany that ‘protects itself’, but all pointed to the ease with which the border becomes visible again when a national interest demands it. The result is a form of permanent disillusionment: the border may be denied in discourse, but it is always ready to reappear in practice (Berrod & Bruyas, 2020). It has become, as one participant put it, “*an emergency tool that is brought out when it is convenient*”.

Political ambivalence between the ideal of openness and the rhetoric of control

The interviews conducted with politicians reflect this fundamental ambivalence. All the candidates interviewed agree that open borders are a valuable achievement of European integration. It is associated with peace, prosperity and free movement, and is the subject of a sincere attachment, often relayed by personal anecdotes or historical references. It is worth noticing in that way that ‘history’ is a powerful local concept: during the May 2025 border closures decided at a federal level by the new German Chancellor Merz, the mayors of Strasbourg (France) and Kehl (Germany) wrote a common statement denouncing a “*A lack of historical awareness and tact*” (Fitcher, 2025). But this consensus breaks down when it comes to issues of security, migration or cross-border taxation. Some candidates argue for ‘reasoned control’, others for a ‘Europe that protects’ (Leruth, Startin & Usherwood, 2018), still others for ‘national management of flows’. The narrative of the open border is therefore used opportunistically, mobilized as a showcase in European discourse, but relativised as soon as the electoral logic imposes security discourse. This tension illustrates a political dichotomy typical of border territories: they are both champions of openness and the most sensitive points of friction during crises (see the stories and contexts given in: Wassenberg, 2020, p. 114).

It is also striking to note that the closure of borders is never explicitly called for. No political player declares himself in favour of it *after the fact*. Closures are always justified

as an exception, a temporary measure, or a decision imposed by exceptional circumstances. This exculpatory discourse reveals the impossibility of rehabilitating the border as a political project, even though it is a regular occurrence.

A ‘dormant’ border, indicative of fragile trust?

This story of a border that nobody wants, but that is always closed, highlights the paradoxical nature of the border in Europe. It is both a medium of cooperation and a symbol of potential rupture, an instrument of integration and a means of national reaffirmation, a space of fluidity and a point of vulnerability. It embodies what we might call a ‘dormant’ border: invisible in normal times, but activable at any time, according to logics exogenous to the territories concerned. This precariousness of the open border raises a central question: on what does its stability depend? The answer seems to lie less in law or treaties than in mutual political trust. It is when this trust breaks down – in the event of a pandemic, migratory crisis or electoral swing – that the border reappears. It then acts as a test of resilience for European imaginations, revealing the fault lines in an integration that claims to be irreversible, but which remains conditional on mutual acceptance of a shared risk.

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