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ARTICLE

Integration Outside the European Union: The Léman Express and Cross-Border Cooperation in Greater Geneva as a Vector of Europeanisation

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This article examines the governance of cross-border transport infrastructure through the case of the Léman Express regional rail network linking the Geneva metropolitan area with neighbouring French territories. Situating the project within the broader evolution of European cross-border regionalism, the article argues that the Léman Express emerged not primarily from top-down European integration, but from the gradual consolidation of multi-level and cross-border governance arrangements anchored in the Grand Genève metropolitan framework. This research adopts an interdisciplinary political science–law–European studies perspective, using qualitative documentary analysis and multi-year fieldwork. The author's participant-observer position as a doctoral researcher and head of the CEVA Safety Body project provided direct access to actors' interactions, negotiation logics, and the structural tensions shaping cooperation in the Lake Geneva region.

***Keywords**: Cross-border cooperation, Greater Geneva, Léman Express, mobility, European integration.*

Introduction

Cross-border governance linking the European Union (EU) to non-Member States—like the Schengen Agreement, which removes border controls between European signatory states both inside and outside the EU—function as political and institutional laboratories, ideally suited to analyzing the differentiated effects of European integration (Zaiotti 2011, 78). Although they remain marginal in the formal priorities of EU policy, they respond to concrete needs articulated mainly by operational actors rather than political or administrative elites (Martel 2015). Their governance is highly fragmented, revealing a paradox: while shared management instruments are being developed, there is persistent structural reluctance to endow these cooperative ventures with genuine capacity to act at the European scale. Accordingly, cross-border cooperation is built empirically and contextually, through a dense mesh of agreements, routines, and multi-level mechanisms designed to reconcile local, regional, bilateral, and European objectives. It does not yield a homogeneous cross-border community, but pragmatic settlements tailored to specific territorial dynamics, which often—paradoxically—reinforce Schengen logics of mobility and technical coordination.

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After many ups and downs, the EU and Switzerland —a non-Member State—finally resumed bilateral talks, officially opening a new round of negotiations in March 2024 (Swiss Federal Administration 2024). To this end, the Swiss Federal Council has approved a negotiating mandate with the EU which aims to provide Switzerland with tailor-made access to the EU's internal market by updating existing agreements, drawing up new agreements, establishing more binding cooperation arrangements, and making Switzerland's contribution permanent (FDFA 2024). These discussions on stabilizing and perpetuating relations between Switzerland and the EU are part of a new dynamic that places bilateral relations between Switzerland and the EU in perspective with the geopolitical and security challenges facing Europe. This geopolitical context could favour negotiations where the EU no longer sees Switzerland as destined for membership, and where Switzerland may wish to give a more political and symbolic dimension to its cooperation with the EU (Koller 2025).

Switzerland stands out as a special case of participation in the future of Europe on the margins of both day-to-day European public action and the EU itself. Attempting to find its place, Switzerland is mobilizing Europeanisation and cross-border cooperation to become involved in the implementation of free movement and is renewing its definition. It is proposing multiple specific spaces in which the border retains a special place, depending on its relations with the neighbouring EU Member States (Clouzet 2022a). The internal debate in Switzerland remains more open than ever since the approval of the texts of the agreements negotiated in 2024 with the EU: the Federal Council wishes to confront the opinion of the Swiss people and submit these agreements to an optional referendum on the Switzerland–EU package. In order to ensure that the referendum process runs smoothly and that the message is adopted by Parliament in the first half of 2026, Switzerland and the EU have established transitional rules concerning the scope of their partnership (Swiss Federal Council 2025). Thus, a rich and lively debate is developing between opponents and supporters of Bilateral Agreements III (Schwok 2026).

Switzerland did not want to implement a single cooperation model for all its borders but opted to define agreements specific to each country, with a particular arrangement for each border zone. The Confederation thus has various cases of cooperation: the Haut-Rhin commission and the Lake Constance region with Germany, the Insubrica region with Italy, the Basle trinational Eurodistrict, etc. Although the cross-border area is far from being systematically mobilized as a "landing zone" (Latour 2017, 11),[1] it is emerging as a space of European connection. The cross-border area offers a special space where actors take advantage of the plurality of overlapping scales of Europe to advance a common, potentially European project, where practices become entangled and intertwined, where the territory is invested by different actors beyond simple relations between states, and where we can observe both existing institutions and future objects (Clouzet 2024).

Within this phenomenon of cross-border cooperation, the Franco–Swiss border is a special case whose definition is the consequence of its geographical position and the political choices made by Switzerland in relation to the EU. Both the external border of the EU and the internal border of the Schengen area, the border between France and Switzerland has always been a means of regulating the territory, the porosity of which can change according to circumstances and needs of the time. Today, it supports cross-border cooperation as an alternative and complementary tool for re-enchanting Switzerland's links with the EU, as opposed to an enigmatic solution based on non-adhesive, partial, and unstable integration (Vallet 2010, 54).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the experience of bringing the Léman Express into service, insofar as it mobilized a singular change management method and contributed to strengthening cross-border cooperation on the borders of the EU. At the outset of this project, those involved were confronted with the lack of conceptual and operational tools for devising and implementing a public cooperation policy adapted to the complexity, in particular, of safety in a cross-border context. By investing in the field of cross-border cooperation, Switzerland manages to optimize the effects of its geographical position while bypassing the traditional forms of institutional integration. Far from any logic of standardization, this dynamic has given rise to differentiated arrangements, helping to consolidate functional links with the EU without calling into question its formal sovereignty. In this context, the need for a flexible framework for action capable of responding to the challenges of multilevel regulation and the diversity of scales is imperative. It is to this end that the mobilization of the concept of "functional space" can be seen as a relevant tool for structuring public action in a cross-border context.

Generally speaking, Stéphane Nahrath, Frédéric Varone, and Jean-David Gerber have noted that the sectoral orientation of public action must be called into question because of the growing interdependence of social phenomena, with the aim of achieving substantial coherence between a number of sectoral policies. They then develop the concept of "functional space" (Nahrath & Varone 2007, 235–249), which they define as a "social space, more or less clearly territorialized, organized around rivalries—and therefore the public regulation of these rivalries—for access to, appropriation

and redistribution of the goods and services, both tangible and intangible, needed to satisfy individual and collective needs or to carry out activities" (Nahrath et al. 2009, para. 6).

The concept of functional space, proposed both as an analytical tool and as a management approach for a new political steering of public action in favour of sustainability (Terribilini & Varone 2004, 243–278), has the advantage of providing a means for public action aimed at overcoming the limitations of policy analyses with so-called spatial implications (Horber-Papazian 1992, 31–48), which struggle to fit into a sectoral and territorial division of the world (Lascoumes 1994, 100–107). In order to overcome this limitation, as well as a utilitarian vision of a tool for observing and explaining a phenomenon of friction between different sectoral policies, functional space as a steering tool is no longer defined simply as a space organized around rivalries but as a space within which governance attempts to ensure in a more or less rigid manner that these rivalries are organized according to the defined problem.

This research was carried out by analyzing a range of data from various readings, reports, meeting minutes, and press articles, as well as the author's data from a survey involving participant observation as a doctoral student and leader of the CEVA (Cornavin-Eaux-Vives-Annemasse) cross-border cooperation project for six years. The project sought to position itself as a place where different systems could meet, influence, and compare (Brodeur & Monjardet 2003, 61–90). As part of this specific operation, the project team was made up of two delegations, the composition of which enabled a surprising and valuable dialogue between professional circles with heterogeneous codes and standards. The CEVA safety body was the tool used to produce a model to prepare for the safe crossing of a border by a train in the event of the implementation of the fourth rail package,[2] by mobilizing action research.

In order to explore this particular experience, we will first offer a Swiss perspective on the European project (I); then we will question the experience of the Léman Express (II) and the mobilization of cross-border cooperation from a European perspective (III) and from Geneva's distinct perspective (IV). Finally, this will lead us to take a closer look at the scale of Switzerland's Europeanisation and to consider the question of Switzerland's ability to propose a European way forward (V).

1 Switzerland and the European Union

Switzerland is struggling to define its relation with the European Union. As a result, the Federal Council has often had to opt for political rejection in order to respect the rejection of membership of the European Economic Area by popular vote in December 1992 (Hazan 1998), while envisaging, not without difficulty, the bilateral path (Haute-Savoie 2000). The Swiss *Sonderfall*, or 'Special Case' (Dézé & Girod 2006), calls for the protection of the Swiss national identity triangle of neutrality, federalism, and direct democracy, thus supporting a Europeanism tinged with mistrust of the EU.

However, its geographical position obliges it to maintain privileged relations with the EU and its Member States, which Switzerland expresses politically through its desire to assert itself as a leading economic partner (Vallet 2010, 54). In a reflex to protect its individuality and specific characteristics, Switzerland is dealing with the diversity of the EU's administrative regulations by reasonably integrating itself "into the curious phenomenon of the so-called associated states", contrary to the provisions defining a criterion for accession and the Schengen integration mechanisms within the EU's institutional framework (Filliez 2010).

Aware of its landlocked position and lack of natural resources, and concerned to ensure its continued prosperity, Switzerland is quietly Europeanising its relations with the EU in order to respect the popular vote on the one hand and, on the other, to constantly seek a favourable solution that will allow it to focus on its own interests by creating optimal framework conditions. An active European policy is pursued through bilateral sectoral agreements and by making its legal framework 'eurocompatible'.

Swiss foreign affairs staff are trying to get used to negotiating in a multilateral forum and to position themselves in the face of a European Parliament that criticizes them for their lack of commitment to the accession process (Hazan 1998). In order to acquire the European reflex, Switzerland, like the British Cabinet Office, has gradually been able to set up a lean, motivated, and competent administration with precise instructions that will enable it to negotiate draft EU acts in Brussels with great expertise and to provide its own after-sales service for the transposition of draft standards that it has negotiated on the margins (Clouzet 2024).

In this way, Switzerland is developing its own distinctive model of collaboration through its practice of altruistic individualism. By this we mean the method by which Switzerland is developing a genuine European policy that goes beyond rhetoric, both by making the most of its enclave and by developing a "good pupil of the European Union" attitude that makes its legal framework and practices compatible with European arrangements. Switzerland negotiates those elements on the margins but only as long as it is certain of preserving its independence and thus working to ensure the continuity of its identity and prosperity (Clouzet 2024).

Switzerland adopts only those developments in European law that may be of interest to it, in complete independence and in application of its own approval

processes, based on the principle that an area without internal borders does not automatically imply the total disappearance of borders (Biancarelli 2012, 126–142), even from the point of view of economic development. This Swiss position is fully asserted in negotiations with the EU. Feedback from Switzerland's bilateral approach has long been positive for the country.

The vote on 9 February 2014 approving the initiative "against mass immigration", current geopolitical events such as the war in Ukraine and the breakdown of negotiations between the Federal Council and the EU in 2021, followed by the resumption of new negotiations, have made relations between Switzerland and the EU more complex. Nevertheless, in order to move forward with Europe without rushing the Swiss people, cross-border cooperation, particularly with France, enables Switzerland to expand to the dimensions of the EU by proposing a hybrid Swiss model in the face of a France whose administrative organization will always seem too "Jacobin" or even "imperialist" (Ares 1997, 63–67), i.e. whose decision-making system is fully dependent on the vision and arbitrations of the Parisian political authorities, who might be tempted to impose standards or arrangements without seeking consensus.

In the final analysis, the need for membership would be above all a need for the European Union in its perspective of deepening and widening. On the European scale, Switzerland is far more European than it is perceived to be. Sharing the EU's common principles and values, Switzerland imagines itself as part of an 'à la carte or multi-speed Europe', which would enable it to make the most of its mastery of a certain institutional and normative complexity. As soon as the Maastricht Treaty was signed, Switzerland wanted to be part of the process of revitalising cross-border cooperation in the region, coupled with changes in European law (Madrid Agreement 1980) with the signing of the Karlsruhe Agreement on 9 November 1991. At stake was the acquisition of legal personality by the various cross-border bodies, which would thus be able to take control of a larger area whose natural borders replaced the political borders (Haegi 1995).

With the resumption of negotiations, Switzerland has tried to extricate itself from a complex situation in which the breakdown of negotiations would exclude it from the main European programs, such as the Horizon university program. Otherwise, the cost of maintaining links with the EU via unreviewed sectoral agreements could become unbearable. This is a far cry from the status quo presented by anti-European Swiss politicians such as the Democratic Union of the Center Party (UDC) as a positive expectation for Switzerland in its relations with the EU (Jaberg 2023). The latest developments in Switzerland's negotiations with the EU demonstrate the ability of its political staff to reflect on a global strategic relationship, even if this means offending neighbouring France (Hess 2025).

The Swiss response is structured around three pillars: bilateral cooperation, Euroregional and global cooperation, and metropolitan cross-border cooperation at cantonal level (Clouzet 2024). This approach to politics can destabilize certain Member States, including France, which, in the context of European integration, attaches less importance to the "voice of the people" than to the expression of representative sovereignty. On the other hand, this enables it to respect the division of competences between the federal, inter-cantonal, and cantonal levels.

2 Léman Express: the Train that Sought to Redraw the Map of Greater Geneva at the Heart of Europe

It is in this legal and institutional context that the Léman Express has been operating since 15 December 2019. As the "largest cross-border regional rail network in Europe", it is a technical-political object whose ambition is to enhance the perception of the daily reality of Greater Geneva, its cross-border mobility, and its territory, which includes a border. As a link between France and Switzerland, this train challenges the French and Swiss technical and political players to propose a joint cross-border production. In the search for a balance between representation of common identities and of what constitutes the personal identities of the French and Swiss players, particularly those from Geneva (Dagognet 2001, 202–207), the Léman Express provides an opportunity to observe a particular form of cross-border management at the France–Vaud–Geneva border in Europe. This is distinct from other cross-border situations such as SarLorLux, the Lille European Metropolis, the Basel–Mulhouse Metropolis, or the Upper Rhine–Lake Constance Metropolis.

The Léman Express—a metropolitan rail operating system using a modernized rail infrastructure called CEVA (Cornavin-Eaux-Vives-Annemasse), which connects Cornavin and Eaux-Vives in the city of Geneva with the city of Annemasse in France—is representative of Swiss practice in the EU. CEVA and the Léman Express are purely Franco–Swiss projects that are influenced by the legal framework produced at European level and applying to its area. This does not, however, make it a fully European project. It is this distinction between the European legal framework and Franco–Swiss cooperation in implementing this framework that encourages the tinkering of tools (Zittoun 2017, 65–89) to respond to shortcomings of the European legal framework.

The Léman Express has been and continues to be exposed to the Europeanisation of law, which imposes a "European law test", i.e., a search in positive law for elements common to the legal systems involved. Sometimes, it is European law that forms the element common to two national laws. Sometimes it is national law that forms the common element of two European

laws (Bergé 2013). In some areas, it even has the paradoxical experience of seeing European law facilitate the implementation of its operations in a European context (ibid., 153). But it also exposes itself to a test of "cross-border lawmaking", where European law and national law are not self-sufficient but support and articulate each other (ibid., 152), in the search for complementarity, a capacity for aggregation with a view to producing its own legal effect. This complementarity does not always exist (ibid., 129), and it was necessary to create it for the Léman Express.

To go from the paper project to the reality of operation, the Léman Express has gone through numerous and very different stages.[3] As part of the fourth rail package, Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) has been granted safety approval as an infrastructure manager for the first time to operate rail services on French territory in accordance with the CEVA inter-state agreement (Switzerland & France 2014).[4] Operating on French territory is a real challenge for SBB, as it involves going through a particularly complex administrative process to obtain safety approval. The fact that these regulations have not yet been implemented on French territory offers a specific window of opportunity. SBB had to compile an initial authorization file for which the analysis grid had not been finalized by the independent French administrative authority. The clause-by-clause negotiation of the safety approval revealed some surprising positions among the players. Faced with competition from a foreign operator, French National Railway Company (SNCF) tried to preserve its monopoly by limiting the concessions made to SBB. Collaboration was more fruitful between SBB, the French public rail safety body, and the Swiss Federal Office of Transport, which had to find the compromises necessary for the success of the project from both a national and a European perspective.

SBB sought a balance to resolve the contradictions arising from the operating obligations under the provisions of the fourth railway package and the internal desire not to create any specificities for the Léman Express. In fact, in the context of each of the project's themes, the aim was to find a balance between positions that would not satisfy the majority of stakeholders but rather encourage them to adopt a tool, the definition of which is provided by a European standard, in order to consolidate and validate it. The creation of a bi-national emergency plan was symbolic of a need for mediation that was all the more glaring in that the framework of the plan had to meet the definition of an emergency plan as defined by the European provisions of the TSI-SRT (European Union 2016a, 2016b), going against both existing documents and the acceptance of change by the players; as the intervention and safety plan is a planning tool that only exists in France, it was decided to create a specific plan that met the expectations of the two supervisory authorities. And we could go on to discuss different issues that the project had to deal with: video protection (Clouzet 2023, 181–190), Franco–Swiss cross-border security (Clouzet 2022a), posting of workers (Clouzet 2022b, 466–472), etc.

Despite these reservations, it was necessary to erase the border effect by linking the Swiss and French projects. From a legal point of view, this has meant the creation of a network of agreements and other standards designed to build a link by means of various tools, which are the legal expression of an operational pragmatism: inter-state agreements (Switzerland & France 1881; Switzerland & France 2014), safety approval (Rousse 2019), and agreements between infrastructure managers (Switzerland & France 2014).[5] This was also done through the creation and superposition of different specific border zones. While the agreement initially provided for a border zone between Geneva, Eaux Vives, and Annemasse (Switzerland & France 2014, Article 1), in terms of safety, the infrastructure has a specific border zone of 2.7 kilometers running from Chêne-Bourg station to the entrance signals of Annemasse station, known as the "CEVA border section". The border section is a legal tool, a geographical area covered by the railway infrastructure, and an actant in its own right, defined as "the part of the line located on either side of a national border or an international concession, which allows two infrastructure managers to exchange rail traffic safely, thanks to jointly agreed operating, maintenance, capacity management, and liability rules adapted to the regulatory requirements of each State." Technically, this is generally a section of line delimited by signals and located between two stations on either side of the border between France and Switzerland. In this case, the regulatory provisions that apply to it are either the safety rules of one of the States or the infrastructure manager, or safety rules specific to it.

Thus, technical infrastructure such as trains or border sections connect spaces and give rise to a special meeting place. Within this space, there are specific kilometer points: the connection point for railway facilities and a border section that has no uniform definition but constitutes an interface zone (Switzerland & France 2019).[6] But connecting also means joining and linking what is different, while preserving the means of distinguishing each other through the limits of signalling installations or the separation of contact line installations between SBB and SNCF by a section (Switzerland & France 2019, Preamble, 14). In this case, as soon as technology creates friction, "an organisational document must be drawn up between the two networks" (Switzerland & France 2014).

> *For the infrastructure managers, "connecting" has meant exploring a process for producing rules and responsibilities that cover the Swiss and French parts of the border section in a similar way, to enable cross-border users to benefit from operation. This process has been institutionalized through a series of tripartite*

> *agreements or agreements between SNCF and SBB. However, while there are plans to create a "common" system, this process highlights certain limitations, particularly in terms of the training and accreditation of infrastructure staff. Each company remains responsible for training its own staff (Switzerland & France 2019, Preamble, 8).*

This configuration highlights the growing difficulty of understanding public action from a strictly status-centric perspective, given the tendency for the boundaries between the public and private spheres to blur. As a result, hybrid players are emerging between state institutions and non-state organizations, whose main role is to act as an interface and mediator. This was the case of the cross-border cooperation project manager, who embodied the figure of the *policy broker*. As an intermediary player, it was up to this individual to assume a dual role: that of generalist, able to mobilize a diversity of resources and skills, and that of broker, responsible for encouraging the circulation of ideas, interests, and information between the various stakeholders. This position proved to be decisive in developing compromises likely to win the support of all the players involved. In this context, the project leader also took on the role of *policy entrepreneur*, both promoting institutional innovations and negotiating shared solutions.

3 Cross-border Cooperation to Talk with the EU

The experience of the Léman Express in a territory bordering Lake Geneva enables us to observe cross-border cooperation, which in fact becomes a means of finding a new balance at a negotiating level other than the European level. The most significant scale does not mean excluding European, national, regional or metropolitan perspectives, but it does mean finding the most appropriate and effective linkage.

Since 1882, the Swiss–French border has been shaped by economic dynamics (Switzerland & France 1882, 1938). It was only with the "border funds affair" (Chevalier 2004) of the 1960s, however, that cross-border cooperation began to function as more than mere good-neighbourliness: it became a policy instrument for moving beyond symbolic collaboration and for seeking a workable balance between participation in European integration and the fear that this very project could contribute to the Confederation's fragmentation (Haegi 1995). A new doctrine is gradually being established in favour of more than just mutual understanding: the Comité Régional Franco-Genevois (CRFG)[7] was established as the main forum for developing cross-border policy in the Geneva area (Switzerland & France 1973, Article 3). The aim of this committee is to define the tools needed to develop cross-border cooperation. However, it will not be able to demonstrate the necessary resilience to gradually impose a new doctrine for the organization of a common cross-border area based on more than just mutual knowledge, and to structure suburbanization in Geneva's area of influence in Haute-Savoie and Ain (Jouve 1994, 150–156).

Cross-border cooperation around Lake Geneva highlights a number of major pitfalls that are part of a certain permanence (Baettig & Ricci 1995) and give the impression that cross-border cooperation is primarily a tool of Geneva's regional power. Franco–Swiss cross-border cooperation around Lake Geneva initially confirms a definition of cross-border cooperation as a tool for promoting dialogue between France and Switzerland and inter-cantonal dialogue in Switzerland in order to find solutions to concrete shared problems (Clouzet 2024). Since the 1990s, it has been noted that powers overlap, particularly in France, that cross-border organizations overlap geographically and in terms of their sectoral competences, that there is a difference in political culture, and that there is no real cross-border identity on the territory (Clouzet 2024), and that cross-border organizations have no legal personality (Haegi 1995). This is reflected both in the multiplicity of key cross-border organizations such as the Franco-Genevan Regional Committee (CRFG) (Switzerland & France 1973), the Lake Geneva Council (Switzerland & France 1987), the Greater Geneva Local Cross-Border Cooperation Group (GLCT) (Switzerland & France 1996, 2011), and the Lake Geneva Metropolis (Switzerland 2011), which overlap in the same geographical area. But it is also apparent in the significant difference between the constitutional powers of the various actors involved in cross-border cooperation (Clouzet 2024).[8]

In order to distinguish themselves as a meeting place between two States whose frame of reference is different from that of the actors in the territory concerned, the local authorities therefore grouped together within the Conseil du Léman and at the same time moved towards a cross-border cooperation grouping (GLCT): they thus seized the opportunity to express a frame of reference specific to a territory by supporting the definition of the development charter for the France–Vaud–Geneva cross-border conurbation. Beyond Parisian fears, the management of this issue show the fragmentation of the players in this territory on both the Swiss and French sides (Jouve 1994, 150–156). However, the Greater Geneva GLCT area is located at the crossroads of a strategic Europe for Switzerland, to ensure that it reaps the benefits of European policies without being part of the European Union. The symbolic dimension of this external border of the EU is predominant, reinforcing the political stakes of the neighbourhood phenomenon. Greater Geneva is caught up in power struggles that highlight the absence of a common political vision, shaky governance, and an undefined political stake despite the positive political discourse associated with the succession of agglomeration projects (Grand Genève 2025).

The conurbation project on which Greater Geneva is based was initially conceived in the context of the bilateral negotiations[9] with a view to maximizing the potential impact on the conurbation: it was built on the desire to overcome the contradictions and responsibilities of each party to enable the construction and implementation of a new form of territorial governance. This period saw the beginning of a shift in the debate from the CRFG to Brussels, where the issues at stake for Switzerland were located (Haute-Savoie 2000, 2). Mobility is now part of a global vision that includes fiscal and social issues such as access to the labour market and housing (ibid., 20). Nevertheless, this movement requires a distinction to be drawn between the issues facing Switzerland and those facing Geneva and its cross-border territory. In the second phase, the project will consolidate the development of stronger links between central areas and the heart of the conurbation; then, from 2012, it would stabilize a system based on multipolar entities, prior to the integration of the five regional catchment areas. This second phase saw the consolidation of "a multipolar, compact and green conurbation" (Grand Genève 2016, 5), primarily based on a financial rationale in the absence of any real common political vision (Clouzet 2022a).

The French départements then became enveloped by a general feeling that they had to fight to "escape a fate as the suburbs of Geneva" (Haute-Savoie 2000, 15). However, only the département of Haute-Savoie is developing a strategy of its own, linking two constraints: correcting the negative effects of the advantages gained by Switzerland, while at the same time making the most of the increased synergy within the Greater Geneva conurbation (ibid., 18). The need for an effective departmental policy supported by the State is then highlighted; all noting that the rift between Paris and the local area arose because the Parisian negotiating bodies failed to take account of cross-border needs (ibid., appendix 2).

Symbolizing "a third stage in the same conurbation project" (Grand Genève 2016), the Léman Express has opened up a new perspective for the development of the cross-border area by incorporating a change in the centre of gravity and balances: it stands out, along with CEVA, as the embodiment of a new stage in cross-border cooperation (Bussard & Zimmermann 2005, 132). In this context, cross-border mobility seems to be a stabilization policy for Greater Geneva, and the Léman Express its "knowledge tool" (Akrich 2010, 217). However, confirming the observations of Charles Ricq, we continue to observe that the development of the Greater Geneva cross-border area cannot be satisfied with the marginal political impact of both the Franco–Genevan regional committee and the Léman Council (Bussard & Zimmermann 2005, 127). Switzerland's practice of "altruistic individualism" complicates and blurs the boundary between the status of associate state and that of third state in the European Union.

4 Cross-border Cooperation through Greater Geneva

Addressing the question of the reality of Greater Geneva seems to require a spatial register (Tissot & Poupeau 2005, 5) where territories compete despite a movement towards integration. Public action in this area is dependent on the institutions mentioned above, which define its contours through binding institutional and administrative definitions. However, mass mobility challenges this definition by connecting and superimposing local, metropolitan, and regional levels of cooperation, thereby transforming the relationship between center and periphery, between Geneva and its hinterland.

So, if we were to draw a map of this space, it would show us a territory whose divisions no longer have the same meaning, revealing competition between territories that are unevenly endowed or unevenly conceived by policymakers. The Léman Express redraws both an integrated territory of Greater Geneva whose development in 15 years will have been similar to that of Greater Paris in 50 years; and a connected territory of influence, wider because of the proposed mobility. It confirms the Franco–Vaud–Geneva border, in particular, as a space of exchange, as a specific cross-border space that includes both an internal border of the Schengen area and an external border of the European Union. This cross-border area is still searching for a new form of governance that is less vaporous (Maudet 2018) and more modest (Crozier 1991); and more conducive to the development of a new cross-border policy: new alliances must be forged. A reference framework for Greater Geneva remains to be written, ensuring continuity between the Greater Geneva cross-border area and its sphere of influence.

Geneva plays an essential role at the heart of this reoriented cross-border space. This role of metropolitan pivot implies responsibility for defining and developing a sense of belonging: it is up to Geneva to convince by mobilizing a narrative that creates both a balance with the local and Franco–Swiss attractions and a distinction in favour of the cross-border attraction. No longer able to withdraw into its own identity or turn its gaze away from a cross-border area influenced by the EU in order to sustain a dynamism subject to a certain amount of free movement (Bussard & Zimmermann 2005, 124), Geneva is being offered an opportunity to extricate itself from its malaise by finding a new balance to its perpetual pitching between an assumed modernity and a tradition that restricts (ibid., 11). Assuming and defending this status implies clearly defining its interests in order to break with the absence of a regional vision (ibid., 75), coordinating its action with and its territory of influence (ibid., 87), permanently legible.

In order to be in a favourable position to forge alliances capable of proposing a genuine division of labour imposed at the heart of the cross-border space and

its territory of influence, the current period allows us to take the counterpoints of incomplete collaboration between Geneva and France (ibid., 134) but also of rather meagre inter-cantonal collaboration, in particular, between the cantons of Vaud and Geneva (ibid., 135). In contrast to the disruptions observed in the tacit agreements on the distribution of economic activity in this area (ibid., 135), the development of Greater Geneva puts Geneva in a favourable position to play a regional game by encouraging establishments in an enlarged cross-border area and by going beyond a merely institutional area to reflect a genuine area of influence: the affirmation of a capacity to distribute economic activities across the cross-border area while avoiding the pitfalls that are holding back its development (ibid., 109) and respecting the constraints of the climate emergency. Through its multitude of statutes, Geneva continues to face the great dilemma of whether or not to arbitrarily determine its development (ibid., 112). Yet responding to a climate emergency and environmentally-friendly development are nuances to this dilemma: asserting oneself as a "green tourist complex" (Fleury 2022) implies creating "common ground" in the governance and management of objects such as Lake Geneva, Mont Blanc or the Jura Mountains, or in the management of cultural and leisure offerings during Geneva's nightlife and its mobility.

Mobility in the Greater Geneva region reveals a problem that mainly affects the department of Ain in France, and in particular a part of this department called Pays de Gex. The issue of Pays de Gex as a central challenge for improving mobility is being re-examined. Pays de Gex is not historically a coherent territory but rather a territory with a communal reflex (Chevalier 2004). The creation of the Pays de Gex Community of Communes is indicative of this difficulty in finding consolidated common positions, in making the link between strong communal specificities and a common inter-communal destiny. The process of reflection is slow to take shape and is almost entirely confined to spatial planning. For the time being, Pays de Gex appears to be the big loser in any development of Greater Geneva.

It is astonishing to observe Pays de Gex ignoring competition between regions, sparing no effort,[10] remaining unconvinced about connecting to the Léman Express lines, while the Haute-Savoie region is fighting to optimize its branches as far as Annecy; not to mention the reactivation of the Tonkin line via Saint-Gingolph (Lecomte 2022). The region seems to have locked itself into a distant fear of colonization by Geneva. By perpetuating this position, Pays de Gex is failing to offer a service that will enable it to reposition itself within Greater Geneva. In so doing, it is confirming its weak position and seems content with its role as a dormitory for Greater Geneva.

The Léman Express thus confirms that while the integration of flows has now largely been achieved, the construction of a truly coherent and democratically legitimate cross-border metropolis remains a challenge. It is a clear illustration of the cross-border metropolitan integration dynamic described by Sohn, Reitel, and Walther, combining a significant functional advance with governance that is still incomplete (Sohn et al. 2007, 62–75). Now fully operational, it is asserting itself, in a sense, as a politically strong instrument capable of producing a mode of social organization in an extended cross-border area. However, its successful operation without a strong cross-border political and administrative system could lead to the implosion of Greater Geneva—by promoting increased competition between French departments (Ain and Haute-Savoie) and also within the same department through its structuring of the territory and facilitation of the settlement of cross-border workers. Thus, the more significant its success, the more the unregulated effects of this competition will be felt in the overall development of the region. However, it is clear that French political actors are struggling to present Swiss and Geneva political authorities with positions that have been fully and completely agreed upon in advance of each negotiation. A single leitmotif appears in the French political narrative: to what extent will Geneva or Bern finance their projects (Clouzet 2022a).

By structuring this territory, the Léman Express confronts local and European aspirations that converge intermittently. It participates in this dynamic of creation with a European perspective: the fifth[11] agglomeration project and the development of an organizing authority for mobility institutionalized by a Franco–Swiss metropolitan regional express service (SERM) are part of this dynamic.

5 Switzerland, an Inspiration for the European Union

Given its long experience of cross-border cooperation, could Switzerland be a source of inspiration for the European Union? This hypothesis, as intellectually stimulating as it may be, rarely emerges in the Swiss public debate. Similarly, Switzerland is not one of the central issues in discussions within the European institutions. It is more often than not perceived as a "good pupil" with no insurmountable problems (Schwok 2024). Yet its European experience is particularly rich. Switzerland takes up the major classic questions of European integration—effectiveness, legal certainty, legitimacy—and proposes an original approach to supranationality, which it deals with by means of cooperation between juxtaposed sovereignties rather than by merging them (Georgopoulos 2005).

Switzerland illustrates the position of those states and peoples that are not resigned to seeing the nation-state transformed into a post-modern European state, placed under the authority of supranational bodies (Chevallier

2004, 107–120). And yet, like Monsieur Jourdain who wrote prose without knowing it, Switzerland is "doing Europe" without being formally part of it, by adopting its own version of an open method of coordination (Georgopoulos 2005). This method corresponds to its pragmatic political culture, in which regulation through acculturation plays an important role. Switzerland maintains a regular dialogue with the European Commission, responds to common policy guidelines, aligns itself with shared denominators, and converges with the Member States, sometimes as a recipient, sometimes as a producer of good practice. However, it remains firmly attached to the foundations of national sovereignty, which it refuses to loosen.

The functional spaces that have long lain dormant around Lake Geneva and Greater Geneva are a particularly eloquent demonstration of both a social perimeter and a geographical perimeter that are considered relevant for dealing with the specific issues of a complex cross-border territory. Yet these spaces could encourage the emergence of modest governance: governance that is concerned to listen to and understand a cross-border community, to get to know a territory and its area of influence better, and to make a limited but essential contribution to the creation of shared common ground (Crozier 1991).

Greater Geneva is a clear illustration of the unresolved tensions that arise from demographic and economic expansion, accompanied by rapid growth in cross-border mobility, of which the Léman Express is the most visible incarnation. However, this openness is generating significant social and political costs. The canton of Geneva is facing major challenges: increased pressure on the housing market; saturation of public infrastructure, particularly schools; and an increase in the costs borne by local authorities. These tensions are fuelling a political discourse aimed at controlling the impact of cross-border flows, sometimes at the cost of restrictive measures.

This tension recently came to the fore with the decision by Geneva's Council of State to restrict access to Geneva's state schools for children domiciled in France. Officially justified by budgetary constraints and the need to maintain the quality of services, this decision has provoked strong reactions. It reveals a deep symbolic divide and reflects the explicit rejection of border populations, perceived as "undue" beneficiaries of Geneva's public services.

Greater Geneva thus reveals the dual tension that runs through the construction of the metropolitan area: on the one hand, the desire to integrate cross-border areas through enhanced infrastructure and cooperation, symbolized by the Léman Express; on the other, the persistence of protectionist reflexes, fueled by populist rhetoric, which hinder the emergence of genuine cross-border citizenship.

From an urban planning and environmental point of view, the Léman Express meets essential challenges and is part of an approach based on territorial and strategic intelligence, in which Franco–Swiss cooperation makes it possible to pool resources and structure a common metropolitan area.

However, this ambition is coming up against considerable resistance, particularly in terms of security and identity. The rhetoric of Swiss political parties such as the Democratic Union of the Center (UDC) and the Geneva Citizens' movement (MCG) feeds a perception of threat associated with the intensification of cross-border mobility: increased risk of crime, pressure on infrastructure, dilution of local identities. The political exploitation of these fears weakens social cohesion and complicates the implementation of metropolitan governance.

Conversely, the refusal to register children living in France is a concrete illustration of the way in which demographic, educational, and social issues are intertwined in a context of strong identity claims. This administrative decision is a response to the pressure of a political discourse that defends a protectionist vision of the canton, aimed at reserving priority access to public services for Geneva residents only, in the face of growing demand from neighbouring French territories. This choice is part of a rationale of security in the broad sense: security of resources and reception capacity, but also security of identity, by protecting a social cohesion perceived as threatened by cross-border mobility deemed excessive.

Conclusion

While the European Union is going through a pivotal period marked by geopolitical upheavals, transnational crises, and internal tensions, this context paradoxically offers Switzerland the opportunity to promote its vision of a Europe based on partnership and to experiment with its outlines in its border areas. In this respect, the Léman Express, a cross-border rail infrastructure, embodies a hybrid object: a non-human actor that reconfigures cooperation practices beyond traditional institutional frameworks. Its entry into service reveals the extent to which mobility can act as a catalyst for territorial recomposition, generating a "dormant space" whose reality is initially supported by a few public and professional players, without having a *demos* or consolidated political legitimacy. This dynamic exposes the limits of a strictly top-down and institutional approach: in the absence of coordinated bodies, governance remains fragmented and vulnerable (Clouzet 2022a).

Following Carbonnier's dictum that "between fact and law, it is the law that is wrong" (Barraud 2013, 47), the Léman Express illustrates the importance of pragmatic arrangements initiated by private or mixed players, capable of imposing a de facto normativity (Conseil

d'État 2017, 8). This development is part of a material mediology of the border: by connecting territories, the infrastructure produces a collective narrative that reconfigures the perception of Greater Geneva (Latour 1992). However, this dynamic also reveals a latent imbalance: Geneva is asserting a discreet power of influence over its French hinterland, contributing to a Gessian malaise and a fear of 'functional colonization'. More broadly, it raises questions about the ability of cross-border cooperation to overcome the tensions between metropolitan ambition and democratic deficit. The trajectory of the Léman Express thus leads us to envisage the creation of a new institutional level, with effective powers to respond to the climatic, social, and land issues of the Geneva basin. Without proclaiming itself to be political, the Léman Express inevitably contributes to the creation of a new territorial order, in which mobility becomes a discreet instrument of power and a matrix for the recomposition of cross-border space.

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Endnotes

1 Latour defines "landing" as the means of finding a common direction, knowing how to orientate oneself, and drawing a map of a space where the affects and issues of public life are redefined and political emotions are channelled (2017, 11).

2 The 4th railway package is a set of European Union texts adopted between 2016 and 2019 aimed at completing the Single European Railway Area by pursuing two main objectives: opening up national passenger transport services to competition; and harmonizing and simplifying technical and safety rules by strengthening the role of the EU Agency for Railways (ERA). It consists of a "market" section relating to the rules for opening up the passenger market and governance and a "technical" section relating to interoperability, safety, and common procedures at European level (TSI-SRT).

3 Namely, the signing of two Franco-Swiss agreements more than 100 years apart, implementation of a specific project relating to the safety of CEVA and the Léman Express, implementation of a specific project to provide legal security for the border crossing, implementation of a project specific to the implementation of the fourth European rail package, a strike by SNCF staff in December 2019 followed by the start of operations during the Covid-19 period.

4 Article 7 of the CEVA agreement relating to capacity allocation and traffic regulation: "(1) Traffic regulation on the Annemasse to Genève-Eaux-Vives railway line is entrusted to the Swiss infrastructure manager. It includes signalling, regulation, dispatching, as well as communication and the provision of information concerning train movements. [...] (2) In accordance with Swiss and French regulations, the Swiss Infrastructure Manager shall draw up the safety instructions and instructions applicable to the Annemasse - Genève-Eaux-Vives railway line. It shall ensure that these instructions and guidelines are coordinated with those defined by the French infrastructure manager for Annemasse station" (Switzerland & France 2014).

5 "The Swiss and French infrastructure managers agree to sign a specific agreement which will specify in particular: —where applicable, the terms and conditions under which the infrastructure managers are authorised to intervene across the border when carrying out work, in particular for work that must necessarily be carried out continuously; —where applicable, the terms and conditions for carrying out the maintenance and renewal of the railway line between Annemasse and Geneva Eaux-Vives provided for in Art. 6; —the terms and conditions under which the Swiss infrastructure manager will be responsible for regulating traffic as provided for in Article 7, paragraphs 1, 2 and 4, particularly with regard to the objective of coordinating capacity at Annemasse station. The agreement specifies in a transparent manner the methods for calculating and invoicing the services provided by the Swiss infrastructure manager. This agreement also specifies the terms and conditions for the supply of traction power; —the terms and conditions for finalising the safety instructions and guidelines referred to in art. 7; —local exceptions to the principle of territoriality concerning the ownership of works or equipment mainly located on the territory of the other Contracting Party" (Switzerland & France 2014, Article 15).

6 The interface zone is defined therein as "Part of the line located on either side of the boundary of the railway rights-of-way of each infrastructure manager, enabling them to maintain the section of line concerned and to exchange rail traffic in complete safety thanks to operating rules and a definition of the responsibilities of each of the actors agreed jointly". The section between the state border at SBB kilometer 74.390 and signals C815, C817, S11 and S12 at SBB kilometer 75.770 constitutes the border section. Swiss operating regulations apply in this area.

7 A joint Franco-Swiss consultative commission was set up to extend the powers initially assigned to the commission monitoring "the use of credits made available to the two departments". This commission entrusts the technical work of research, analysis and production to a committee that is as close as possible to the realities on the ground: the Comité Régional Franco-Genevois (CRFG) (Switzerland & France 1973).

8 The French Republic remains a member of the CRFG but an observer of the Conseil du Léman and an associate member of the GLCT du Grand Genève; the Auvergne Rhône Alpes Region is a member of the GLCT du Grand Genève and the CRFG; the Pôle métropolitain du Genevois Français is a member of the CRFG and the GLCT du Grand Genève but not of the Conseil du Léman. The associate member and observer statutes attempt to mitigate some of this problem of the multiplicity of bodies and participation arrangements.

9 On 21 June 1999, Bern and Brussels signed the seven bilateral sectoral agreements. Complementing the free trade agreement, they give the Swiss economy extended access to the EU's internal market.

10 Moine (2022) quotes Pierre-Jean Crastes opposing the Valleiry interchange project as a nuisance and of little interest to the region and Valérie Duby-Muller arguing that there is an unfavorable clash of mobility projects with the Viry interchange project.

11 Since 2007, the Franco-Vaud-Geneva conurbation, now known as Greater Geneva, has submitted five successive "agglomeration projects" to the Swiss Confederation: PA1 (2007), structuring the integrated urbanization–mobility approach; PA2 (2012), consolidating the planning of measures; PA3 (2016), accelerating transport investments; PA4 (2022), continuing the effort towards intermodality and modal shift; and PA5 (2025), a new generation of measures eligible for federal co-financing (Clouzet 2022a).