



Debordering through Discourse: Friendship and European Integration in Regional Media of Franco-German Border Regions

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*This article examines how regional newspapers along the Franco–German Upper Rhine narrate the border and, in doing so, help produce everyday European integration. Drawing on a qualitative discourse analysis of local newspapers’ articles published between 2019 and early 2024 in *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, *Le Républicain Lorrain*, *the Saarbrücker Zeitung*, and *Die Oberbadische*, the study traces media framings across key moments of the study period (the COVID-19 closures, the Treaty of Aachen’s afterlife, the war in Ukraine, and the 2024 European elections). The corpus reveals a recurring “triangular narrative” of France, Germany, and friendship, through which the border is largely depicted as connective tissue rather than a line of friction. Debordering is performed via stories of cross-border work, services, mobility, and leisure, supported by dense institutional relays (Eurodistricts, the *Collectivité européenne d’Alsace*) and civic initiatives, thereby normalizing a form of “banal Europeanism”. Ultimately, the analysis raises the question of capitals: here, Europe’s heart is not “far-away Brussels” but “nearby Strasbourg”.*

Keywords: *European integration; Border narratives; Regional newspapers; Franco-German Upper Rhine; Cross-border cooperation.*

Introduction

Borders are spaces of encounter, negotiation, contestation, and increasingly, of storytelling. In the context of the European Union (EU), where integration often takes the form of functional pragmatism rather than narrative clarity, the question of how borders are spoken of becomes central to understanding how they are lived (De Sousa 2012, 4; Pfoser 2020, 566). This article explores how the Franco–German border is constructed, normalized, and occasionally problematized in local media discourses. Focusing on the French–German part of the Upper Rhine region, we analyze how regional newspapers portray the processes of bordering and debordering, and how they frame Europe—not only as an institutional reality but as a symbolic, emotional

(Engl, Mitterhofer and Nicolson 2025), and sometimes elusive presence (Tonkiss 2016, 291).

Beyond institutional accounts of integration, a substantial border-studies literature emphasizes borders as cultural and perceptual objects: they are made and remade through routines, affects, moral expectations, and ordinary narratives, which are often described as “border culture” and everyday “borderwork” (Wille and Nienaber 2020, 7, 41, 169). Borders are not only crossed; they are anticipated, commented upon, regretted, and normalized (Boesen 2020, 127). From this perspective, regional media are not merely mirrors of borderland life: they function as narrative infrastructures that

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stabilize categories (“us”, “the neighbour”, “Brussels”, “Strasbourg”), circulate repertoires of proximity and distance (Józwiak 2020, 41), and contribute to the social production of (de)bordering in everyday life.

The Franco-German border is often invoked as the paradigmatic space of European reconciliation (Peyrony, Sielker, and Perrin 2022, 191). It is where the post-war project of integration began, and where it is still most visibly enacted through daily cross-border exchanges, dense institutional networks, and the symbolic (Reitel 2010, 292) presence of European institutions such as the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the Council of Europe, or the European Court of Human Rights. However, does the region’s media sustain this idealized image? What role do newspapers play in maintaining—or challenging—narratives of friendship, cooperation, and European belonging?

To answer these questions, this article presents the findings of a media analysis conducted across four regional newspapers: *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* and *Le Républicain Lorrain* on the French side, and the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* and *Die Oberbadische* on the German side. The study spans the period from 2019 to 2024, covering key moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the signing and aftermath of the Treaty of Aachen, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the 2024 European elections. These events provide a lens for observing shifts in the visibility and significance of the border in public discourse.

The article’s originality lies in this shift of focus: rather than assessing integration primarily through institutional indicators (programs, funding, governance arrangements), it traces how integration becomes “self-evident” through recurring narrative forms. What the corpus reveals is not simply a predictable pro-cooperation discourse in an emblematic borderland, but a stabilized discursive grammar (France–Germany–friendship) through which cross-border interdependence is rendered normal, legitimate, and emotionally resonant, while being reactivated and recalibrated across crises (COVID-19 closures, Ukraine, European elections) and across (distinct) media cultures.

What emerges from this corpus is a “triangular narrative,” in which France, Germany, and the notion of *friendship* form a recurring frame of reference. This friendship is not only remembered or hoped for, but it is enacted in the very way cross-border stories are told. Far from being portrayed as a line of friction, the border is largely framed as a space of continuity, connection, and mutual reliance. This is particularly true in the Alsatian and Baden press, where cross-border cooperation is presented as both normal and desirable, and where local actors actively claim the European project as their own.

At the same time, this performative debordering does not imply the absence of borders, either materially, symbolically, or institutionally. Border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, technical obstacles to cross-border work or services, and ambivalence toward the EU’s institutional machinery all suggest a more complex reality. Notably, while the idea of Europe retains a strong affective and historical resonance in the French press, the German regional newspapers display a more pragmatic and sometimes critical approach to EU policies, especially in areas such as agriculture, regulation, and economic governance.

This article proposes that regional media not only reflect but shape border narratives by selecting which events to highlight, which actors to quote, and which meanings to attach to cross-border cooperation. In this sense, the press contributes to the construction of what some scholars call “banal Europeanism” (Cram 2009, 103)—a form of everyday Europeanness that operates below the radar of institutional grand narratives. However, this process is uneven and asymmetrical, revealing differing national sensibilities, institutional frameworks, and media cultures even within this border region and even more so in other border regions (e.g. the other contributions in this special section).

By approaching the border as a narration space, we seek to move beyond simplistic dichotomies between open and closed, integration and disintegration. Instead, we argue that the French–German border region under study constitutes a dynamic “third space”—neither wholly national nor supranational, but as a locally situated site of “Europeanisation in practice” (Brand, Niemann, and Weber 2024, 310; Neuman Stanivuković 2023, 57).

Methodology

This article is based on a systematic media analysis of four regional daily newspapers situated along the Franco–German border: *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* (DNA) and *Le Républicain Lorrain* in France, and the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* and *Die Oberbadische* in Germany. These sources were selected for their regional anchoring, regular coverage of cross-border affairs, and accessibility through digital archives and academic databases. Spanning the period from 2019 to early 2024, the analysis aimed to trace how regional media construct and reproduce narratives of cross-border cooperation, European integration, and border-related disruptions across key political and social events.

The decision to focus on regional press rather than national outlets was both methodological and epistemological. Unlike national newspapers, which—in some countries such as France—can be shaped by

metropolitan political logics or national discursive agendas, regional media tend to reflect local priorities, everyday experiences, and territorial attachments. It might be somewhat less true in the German context, where some major national and international outlets are also regional (e.g. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*), which is the reason for choosing to display both a strong, state-anchored, local newspaper (*Saarbrücker Zeitung*) and a less well-known outlet (*Die Oberbadische*). This makes them particularly relevant for studying bordering and debordering processes, especially in regions where daily cross-border interactions, whether for work, healthcare, education, or commerce, are to some extent routine. Furthermore, the selected newspapers are not characterized by strong partisan alignments (for the two French outlets, see Charon 2013, 234). This factor mitigates ideological bias and allows for a more grounded analysis of how cross-border dynamics are portrayed in everyday reporting. The corpus was constructed through a combination of keyword-based searches and manual archival review. For three of the four newspapers (*Le Républicain Lorrain*, *Die Oberbadische*, and *Saarbrücker Zeitung*), we used the Factiva database, applying keyword combinations in both French and German (e.g. “coopération transfrontalière / grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit”; “Commission européenne / Europäische Kommission”; “frontière / Grenze”; “Interreg”; “eurosceptique / euroskeptisch”; “Eurorégion / Euroregion”). We also applied filters to exclude wire-service articles originating from Agence France-Presse (AFP), Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), or Reuters, which are often reprinted verbatim and reflect national or international perspectives rather than regional voices. Articles signed by staff journalists or local correspondents were prioritized, which was in keeping with our focus on discursively meaningful regional storytelling. The fourth newspaper, *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, presented a specific methodological challenge as its archives were not indexed on Factiva during the relevant period. To compensate, we conducted a full manual sweep of its online daily editions, using edition-by-edition headline screening and reading of first paragraphs to identify relevant content. This was a labour-intensive process due to the multiplicity of local editions (for example, Strasbourg, Mulhouse, Saverne, Haguenau), each featuring tailored content and distinct editorial focuses. To ensure representativeness, we prioritized articles from the general Alsace-wide edition (“L’actu en Alsace”). Still, we complemented it with issue-specific content from other local editions where relevant (e.g. hospital cooperation, border controls, or infrastructure projects tied to specific towns). Altogether, the final dataset included 316 articles specifically addressing the border (31%), European integration (33%), or cross-border relations (36%). The selected articles were coded thematically, with particular attention paid to the framing

of “Europe” (as a symbol, policy actor, or institutional structure), depictions of the neighbour (France or Germany), and affective language tied to crisis events (e.g. the COVID-19 border closures, the 2019 Treaty of Aachen, the war in Ukraine, or debates around the relocation of the European Parliament). Rather than coding each article for rigid categories, we adopted a qualitative-interpretative approach rooted in discourse analysis, attentive to tone, metaphor, repetition, and the performative power of recurring narrative frames.

Three key methodological principles informed our approach. First, following the media discourse tradition (de Beus 2010, 27), we view journalistic narratives as shaped by editorial decisions, cultural expectations, and the material constraints of publishing, rather than merely by factual reporting. Second, we prioritized regional articles authored or contextualized by journalists embedded in the region, on the basis that these texts are more likely to reflect territorial sensitivities and everyday cross-border life (as opposed to national press agency articles or national articles hosted by local outlets). Third, we operated with a “kairotic” rather than purely chronological timeline, meaning that we foregrounded discursive ruptures and narrative shifts linked to significant political or symbolic events rather than reflecting on themes that came up in the news chronologically (Czarniawska 2010, 61; Opilowska et al. 2023, 8). This allowed us to trace how crisis moments such as the pandemic, the temporary re-erection of border controls, and the Aachen Treaty polemics serve as discursive catalysts, bringing latent tensions or solidarities to the surface.

Notably, the typology of the newspapers themselves contributed to the variation in tone and depth across the corpus. The *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, for instance, offers longer and more analytical coverage than *Die Oberbadische*, which publishes shorter, often event-driven pieces. In the French context, *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* consistently foregrounds cultural memory and historical ties with Germany. At the same time, *Le Républicain Lorrain* tends to frame Germany more distantly, with a greater emphasis on administrative and infrastructural cooperation. These internal contrasts enriched our comparative analysis, enabling us to identify not only national differences but also intra-national regional sensibilities.

The result is a multi-layered media portrait of a border that is neither invisible nor unproblematic but consistently negotiated in narrative terms. By centring local newspapers as both discursive and territorial actors, this methodological approach allows us to explore the subtle interplay between bordering practices, institutional framing, and the symbolic capital of the European project in one of its most emblematic spaces.

An Overall Positive Depiction of the Neighbours Fueled by a Powerful "Friendship Narrative"

One of the most consistent findings of the media analysis conducted in the Upper Rhine region is the overwhelmingly positive depiction of the neighbour, structured around the enduring and powerful narrative of Franco-German friendship. Rather than presenting France and Germany as merely adjacent or strategically aligned entities, the regional press tends to portray the borderlands as socially and emotionally interwoven, emphasizing shared values, familiarity, and trust. In this context, "friendship" is not simply a political slogan or commemorative image; it is a living discursive frame that shapes how cooperation is understood and experienced at the local level.

This observation stands in contrast to traditional border discourses, which often frame frontiers as sites of division, suspicion, or contestation (Schönwald 2013, 118). In the Franco-German case, regional newspapers overwhelmingly highlight gestures of cooperation, mutual aid, and symbolic alignment. The border becomes a place not of friction, but of resonance and relational continuity (Wassenberg 2020). Nowhere is this clearer than in the frequent invocation of the *amitié franco-allemande* or *Französisch-Deutsche Freundschaft* (French-German friendship), which surfaces regularly in headlines, editorials, and interviews. This friendship is not presented as a static diplomatic achievement but as an evolving reality grounded in institutional collaboration, civil society initiatives, and interpersonal exchanges. Editorial structures and journalistic choices reinforce this friendship narrative. For example, *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* hosts a dedicated section titled "Amitié transfrontalière" (cross-border friendship), which regularly features stories about binational student projects, twin town partnerships, cultural festivals, and bilingual educational programs. This is even the case in times of crisis, such as that of COVID-19, a topic to which we shall return, among the articles: "Posters for Franco-German Friendship" (Jolain 2020); "Kehl: A Fresco for Cross-Border Lovers" (M.S.K. 2020); or "A Great Celebration for Franco-German Friendship" (Républicain Lorrain 2020).

On the German side, *Die Oberbadische* celebrates "lived friendship" (*gelebte Freundschaft*) by covering grassroots cooperation, symbolic gestures of reconciliation, and joint community events.

For the first time since the coronavirus-related interruption, exchange students from Nîmes were once again guests at the Oberrhein-Gymnasium. [...] Weil am Rhein Cross-border cooperation, especially with French partner schools, is a top priority at the Oberrhein-Gymnasium in Weil am Rhein. This is particularly evident in the numerous exchange activities at the grammar school, which, in 2017, was one of the few schools in

Baden-Württemberg to be awarded the title "Partner School for Europe". (Die Oberbadische 2023)

These stories are not marginal; they are central to the region's self-narration as a cross-border space defined by cooperation rather than confrontation. Importantly, the use of "friendship" in this context is probably to some extent performative as well as descriptive. Even during moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 border closures, the vocabulary of friendship persists. For instance, articles covering the plight of cross-border workers or separated binational couples often adopt a tone of regret and solidarity, emphasizing the exceptional nature of the disruptions and calling for a return to open, trust-based relations. A revealing example appeared in *DNA*, where the fine imposed on a French resident for a minor infraction on German soil was not instrumentalized as a nationalist grievance, but instead presented within a broader critique of bureaucratic overreach on both sides of the border (Vigneron 2020), an approach that underscores shared vulnerabilities rather than reinforcing stereotypes.

In Alsace, the emotional and historical dimensions of Franco-German relations are strongly emphasized, with frequent references to shared memory, reconciliation, and bilingualism (Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace 2020). In Lorraine, by contrast, the coverage tends to be more pragmatic, focusing on cross-border governance, infrastructure, and public services, with less recourse to symbolic language. On the German side, the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* often adopts a more technocratic tone, emphasizing the legal and policy frameworks that enable cross-border cooperation (Mayntz 2022; Maillason 2022). By contrast, *Die Oberbadische* foregrounds interpersonal and cultural aspects, often profiling citizens who embody Franco-German rapprochement in their daily lives, yet might have a less Europhile overall tone (Milankovic 2023; Die Oberbadische 2023).

Despite these nuances, the overall discursive orientation remains positive. The neighbour is rarely portrayed as a source of danger or competition. Rather, the figure of "the other" is normalized, familiarized, and integrated into a shared regional identity. Institutional infrastructures such as the Eurodistricts (*Strasbourg-Ortenau, Pamina*) and the *Collectivité européenne d'Alsace* (CEA) are presented not merely as bureaucratic frameworks but as tangible facilitators of proximity and cooperation. The "Rheinblick" ("seen from the Rhine"—written in German in the French newspaper) section launched by *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* in 2023 exemplifies this editorial choice. By offering regular coverage of German local news for French readers, it reflects and promotes a shared informational space across the border.

Significantly, this discursive positivity does not imply the erasure of difference. Linguistic, legal, and administrative divergences are acknowledged (Saarbrücker

Zeitung 2020), but rarely dramatized. Instead, they are framed as manageable frictions within a fundamentally cooperative relationship. The normalization of these differences is perhaps one of the most powerful effects of the friendship narrative: it allows divergence and proximity to coexist without triggering antagonism. All in all, the regional press constructs the Franco-German border not as a threshold but as a connective tissue, animated by a persistent narrative of friendship. Through both editorial decisions and narrative framing, newspapers foster a climate of mutual recognition, institutional familiarity, and emotional proximity. This consistent positivity in the portrayal of the neighbour not only shapes perceptions of the border but also contributes to the everyday construction of Europe as a shared and habitable project.

Debordering

If borders once defined the limits of the nation-state, the Franco-German border in the Upper Rhine region increasingly functions as a space of negotiation and permeability. The analysis of regional media reveals a strong and recurrent preference for debordering—the dismantling, symbolically and materially, of the border as a site of separation. In contrast to many border regions across Europe where the presence of the European Union may be contested or ignored, here the desire for openness is deeply rooted in everyday life, extending well beyond the confines of elite or institutional discourse.

This section explores how the process of debordering is narrated and mediated through regional newspapers in the Upper Rhine. We begin by analyzing how the European Union itself is represented. Is it seen as a meaningful actor, a distant abstraction, or simply a symbolic backdrop for cross-border relations? We then examine how everyday practices, particularly work, commuting, and service infrastructures, are framed as drivers of European integration. Then the role of tourism and consumption in producing a shared cross-border space is put forth. At the same time, the final part of the analysis addresses the role of local and regional institutions as concrete relays of Europeanization. Taken together, these subsections demonstrate that debordering in the French-German Upper Rhine borderland is not merely the erosion of borders but the active construction of a territorially embedded and emotionally resonant European space.

Everyday Integration Beyond Symbolism: Cross-Border Workers, Commuters, and Infrastructures

One key dimension that emerges strongly from the regional media is the repeated framing of cross-border cooperation as a matter of practical necessity rather than merely symbolic value, which we shall explore

later. Articles across all four newspapers frequently emphasize the concrete needs and daily routines of cross-border workers, students, and service users. Particularly in the French press, the border is rarely presented as a fixed limit; instead, it is portrayed as an artificial constraint interrupting the flow of everyday life. For instance, *Le Républicain Lorrain* reports on a German family living in Forbach (Lorraine), whose children attend a bilingual school in Saarland and who face logistical challenges due to COVID-era test requirements and transit disruptions: “It’s up to us to find our own transport for our children... but when you’re working, how do you free yourself? It’s totally unacceptable. The German mother concludes, tellingly, “People in Berlin know nothing about our cross-border region... I’m ashamed to be German” (Briot 2021). The strength of such testimonies lies not in grand ideological claims but in the lived contradictions of borderland life, where regional integration is normalized. However, national policy remains blind to local realities.

Similarly, *Saarbrücker Zeitung* regularly covers the economic constraints imposed by border-related asymmetries, including divergent tax policies, work permits, or environmental standards. A 2022 piece by Gregor Mayntz underlines the difficulties that small and medium-sized companies face when navigating European regulatory complexity: “Brussels wants more integration but gives us very little help in overcoming the practical hurdles of export licensing and labour mobility” (Mayntz 2022). These critiques are not anti-European *per se* but demand a better-aligned Europeanization that is responsive to the socio-economic interdependencies of border regions.

Debordering Through Consumption and Leisure: Tourism as a Vector of Everyday Europe

Another recurring theme in the regional media is the portrayal of tourism and consumer mobility as key expressions of debordering. Articles from both sides of the Rhine consistently frame cross-border shopping, spa visits, cycling, and leisure travel not only as economic activities but as indicators of mutual accessibility and shared living spaces. This is particularly visible in *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, which documents the reopening of the Kehl-Strasbourg border after COVID-related closures with an almost celebratory tone: “As soon as I read in the paper that the border would reopen this Monday morning, I got ready! I’m going to buy tobacco and my favorite herbal teas at the Rühle drugstore” (Meyer 2020). However, the same article includes a reflective voice, lamenting the materialist framing of this renewed mobility: “Sometimes we’re a long way from symbols, from Europe”. This ambivalence captures a tension central to media discourse: Europe as a daily routine versus Europe as an ideal.

Tourism infrastructure also serves as a practical driver of integration, especially in the Eurodistricts.

In *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, for instance, spa managers in Baden and Alsace are portrayed as competitors turned partners, agreeing to coordinate their services to attract both German "wellness tourists" and French patients eligible for medical reimbursement: "The coronavirus put plans on hold, but as soon as restrictions are lifted, meetings between French and German spa managers will resume—the goal: to specialize and attract spa-goers from across the border" (Schneider 2020). Here, economic pragmatism reinforces territorial cooperation, supported implicitly by EU mobility frameworks and regional branding strategies.

In both countries, local media highlight the expansion of cross-border cycling paths, greenways, and eco-tourism corridors as success stories of EU-funded cooperation (Bruyas 2025, 2186). These are often framed not as exceptional projects but as natural extensions of shared space. For example, the completion of a new pedestrian bridge linking Weil am Rhein and Huningue is enthusiastically reported: "More than a bridge, it is a promise of connection, one that neither the pandemic nor politics could interrupt" (Meyer 2020). Such reporting reaffirms the symbolic and functional importance of "soft borders" in the regional imaginary. Far from being marginal, leisure and consumption appear as quiet engines of Europeanization, giving shape to an everyday cross-border Europe that is less about treaties than about trains, trails and, apparently, "teabags" (Meyer 2020).

Europe Between Symbol and Structure: Uneven Media Representations

One of the most paradoxical findings of the media analysis is the ambiguous role of the European Union in regional press narratives. On one hand, Europe is quite omnipresent as it is invoked through vocabulary, institutional references, and symbolic gestures. On the other hand, the European Union, as an institutional reality, often appears distant, ill-defined, or even absent. This tension is especially evident in the French regional press, where the idea of Europe is frequently mobilized as a moral or civilizational reference point, yet rarely examined in its technical or legal specificity. In *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, for instance, Europe is often treated as a community of values—peace, reconciliation, openness—rather than as a polity governed by legal instruments and administrative competences. The European Parliament's presence in Strasbourg is a powerful symbol of this idealism, and fear of its relocation to Brussels during the COVID-19 crisis triggered a wave of commentary, editorials, and local mobilizations (Claudon 2020). However, these expressions were less concerned with the Parliament's legislative functions than with its symbolic anchoring in the region. The emotional attachment to Strasbourg as a European capital often eclipsed any detailed discussion of EU procedural dynamics.

This symbolic mode of engaging with Europe is reinforced by the prevalence of what we might call "semantic inflation": a proliferation of the adjective "European" in the names of associations, cultural centers, and events. Terms such as *Centre européen du résistant déporté* or *Eurométropole de Strasbourg* populate headlines and articles, but often with minimal connection to the EU as an institutional actor. As a result, the keyword "Europe" can yield numerous false positives in media analysis, reflecting the depth of symbolic Europeanization without necessarily revealing strong institutional engagement. In contrast, the German regional press, particularly the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, tends to depict the EU in a more technical and policy-oriented register. Here, Brussels is not only a symbol but an actor whose regulations, funding programs, and administrative decisions have direct impacts on local economies and governance (e.g. Mayntz 2023). This includes critical reporting on EU directives related to agriculture, environmental protection, or industrial modernization. While not overtly hostile, this tone is often skeptical, portraying the EU as a complex bureaucracy that may be inattentive to local realities (Saarbrücker Zeitung 2023; Krohn 2023).

Nonetheless, this more pragmatic tone does not imply rejection. Rather, it reflects a differentiated understanding of the EU: as both a framework of opportunity and a site of contestation. Even in critical articles, the European Union is taken seriously as an actor capable of influencing local life, for better or worse. This dual posture—idealism on the French side, pragmatism on the German side—points to a deeper asymmetry in media cultures and in the way Europe is explained. However, in both contexts, what remains constant is the anchoring of Europe at the border: not as a foreign imposition, but as an embedded dimension of regional identity.

Ultimately, the EU appears in the regional press less as a central protagonist than as a structural background, an enabling environment whose successes or failures are interpreted through the lens of local needs and experiences. This does not diminish its importance; rather, it highlights the extent to which European integration has become normalized, even banal, in border regions like this one.

Institutional Relays and the Role of the Region

Local and regional institutions also emerge in local newspapers as tangible actors of integration, which we may call "institutional relays" of debordering (in this sense, Wassenberg and Reitel 2015). These are the bodies, often hybrid or multi-level, that translate European frameworks into concrete practices of cooperation: managing transport networks, facilitating bilingual education, coordinating healthcare, and promoting cultural events across the border. Their visibility in the regional press suggests that Europeanization in the Upper Rhine is not driven solely by Brussels, but also

by a dense web of actors operating at the subnational level (Durand, Decoville, and Knippschild 2017, 7).

One of the most prominent examples is the *Collectivité européenne d’Alsace* (CEA), established in 2021 as a response to the unpopular merger that had placed Alsace within the larger Grand Est region (EZFF 2020, 373). In both symbolic and functional terms, the CEA positions itself as a border-oriented institution, explicitly emphasizing its European character and cross-border mission (Wakote 2024). Articles in *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* routinely reference the CEA’s competences in transport, education, and territorial cooperation, and present it as a legitimate interlocutor with German Länder and EU institutions. Notably, the very use of the adjective “European” in the institution’s name, which is unusual in the French administrative lexicon, signals a deliberate narrative strategy to link territorial governance with European identity (de Saint Sernin 2022).

At an intermediate regional scale, *Eurodistricts* play a similar role. The *Eurodistrict Strasbourg–Ortenau* and *Eurodistrict Pamina* are frequently cited in both French and German newspapers as sites of experimentation in cross-border governance (Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace 2020b; Lorey 2020). Their initiatives range from integrated public transport systems to joint emergency services and educational exchanges. In the regional media, these entities are often presented not as exceptional or pilot projects, but as part of the everyday architecture of border life (Schneider 2020). This normalization reflects a broader trend, the reframing of what were once novel cross-border arrangements as ordinary features of regional governance.

Crucially, the media coverage of these institutions is not limited to formal agreements or policy announcements. Journalists frequently embed them in human-interest stories, interviews with local actors, and coverage of events that highlight their social and cultural impact. For example, articles on cross-border cultural events (Faber 2022), bilingual school programs (Kemmel 2023a), or healthcare cooperation (Kemmel 2023b; Ott 2020) often mention Eurodistricts as enablers, thus reinforcing their visibility and legitimacy. The effect is cumulative: these institutions become part of the cognitive landscape of regional Europeanization, shaping how citizens understand who does what, and why.

Beyond public bodies, the press also highlights the role of civil society organizations, private actors, and even religious institutions in sustaining cross-border ties. The *Centre européen des consommateurs* in Kehl (Dadillon 2020) or the Protestant churches of Alsace and Baden (Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace 2020c), and associations promoting Franco-German cultural dialogue are all framed as essential components of the border’s social infrastructure:

Shaking hands, no. Reach out, yes. This is what Axel Imhof, a pastor in Alsace, and Heiko Schwarz, a pastor in Berg (Palatinate), are doing across the Scheibenhard border, anxious to resume joint activities [...]. In a joint declaration, the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine, the Evangelical Church of Baden and the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate acknowledged the usefulness of the administrative measures taken at state level, but added the following warning: “the fear of the virus must not give new strength to nationalist clichés that are contrary to Franco-German reconciliation” (Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace 2020c).

Similarly, another revealing example of the interplay between civil society and cross-border institutional discourse is the so-called “Umbrella Movement” (*mouvement des parapluies*), which emerged in Alsace during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Initiated by a group of citizens and local activists, the movement called for maintaining cross-border openness and condemned the re-erection of border barriers. Its name was a reference to the iconic image of demonstrators gathering on either side of the Rhine with umbrellas as a gesture of peaceful protest and symbolic protection of European ideals:

On 9 May, they were outraged by this step backwards, 70 years after Robert Schuman’s founding speech on Europe. At the border, they opened their umbrellas in protest. On 14 June, they proclaimed their desire for a Europe without borders. All these demonstrations earned them the nickname of the “Umbrella Movement”.

The collective is worried about a new rupture in the Franco-German friendship, to which it is very attached. It fears a return to the situation before the 1957 common market, and to “protectionist measures of another age”. In a press release, its members are therefore calling for the end of these measures, which are not “in keeping with the spirit of the European Union” and which ignore the Schengen area (Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace 2020a).

Although relatively modest in scale, the umbrella movement received significant coverage in *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* and was echoed in editorials and photo reports highlighting its emotional resonance. By framing the border closures as both a practical inconvenience and a symbolic rupture, the movement gave voice to a broader unease about the fragility of European integration at the level of everyday life. In the press, this initiative was frequently linked to the narrative of Franco-German friendship but also served to articulate a grassroots Europeanism grounded in regional identity and civic mobilization. It exemplifies how the media not only relay official narratives but also amplify citizen-led efforts to shape what Europe means in borderland life.

The actions are often presented not as marginal or symbolic but as practical responses to everyday needs—whether resolving legal disputes, organizing cultural events, or providing moral leadership during times of crisis. These narratives serve to construct what we might call a *territorialized Europe*: a Europe not imagined from above, but built from below through institutional layering, pragmatic problem-solving, and affective identification. The press plays a critical role in this construction, both by giving visibility to local actors and by reinforcing the idea that integration is a shared, ongoing process. The message is clear: in the French-German Upper Rhine, Europe is not elsewhere. It is here—dispersed across municipal councils, cross-border consortia, and the pages of the regional press.

Conclusion: A Question of Capitals?

The Franco-German border in the Upper Rhine region is often held up as a symbol of European reconciliation and integration. However, the findings presented in this article suggest that it is more than a symbol; it is a discursive and institutional space where European ideals are interpreted, tested, and enacted at the local level. Through the lens of regional media, we have explored how the border is not only crossed materially but narrated as a space of friendship, cooperation, and pragmatic coexistence. This process of debordering, while grounded in everyday life, is deeply shaped by the narratives that circulate in local newspapers, which frame Europe as both an ideal and an infrastructure, both present and absent, both intimate and remote.

One of the central tensions emerging from the analysis is the asymmetry between Europe's symbolic and institutional capitals. Strasbourg, home to the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights, is consistently portrayed in the French regional press, especially in *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, as a tangible European capital, emotionally and territorially embedded in the region. In contrast, Brussels often appears as a distant administrative centre, associated more with bureaucracy than with belonging. In *Die Oberbadische*, the concept of "distant Brussels" ("fernen Brüssel") was found (Krohn 2023):

The European Parliament debated the issue of the time change and then - nothing happened! Because the European Commission concluded in 2019 that Member States are best placed to decide for themselves whether they wish to maintain summer or winter time permanently.

This spatial imaginary is not merely rhetorical. It reveals a politics of proximity, in which Europe is more strongly affirmed when it is seen to operate close to home, through visible institutions and familiar actors. However, the symbolic capital of Strasbourg does not

automatically translate into institutional trust or understanding. While the presence of European institutions is a source of pride and narrative energy, detailed engagement with EU policy or governance remains limited. The regional press frequently reproduces the values associated with European integration – solidarity, openness, reconciliation – without always anchoring them in the Union's concrete structures or procedures. Conversely, as we have explained, the German regional press, particularly the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, offers a more technical and sometimes skeptical portrayal of the EU, emphasizing regulatory impacts, economic calculations, and institutional constraints.

This divergence suggests that the question of European "capitals" is not merely geographical, but cognitive and emotional (Wassenberg 2020b, 119). Capitals, in the broadest sense, are centers of gravity, places from which meaning is radiated and legitimacy drawn. In this regard, Strasbourg functions as a capital of attachment, a site where Europe is made visible and emotionally resonant. Brussels, by contrast, appears as a capital of administration, shaping the rules but not always the affections of integration. The challenge, then, is to reconcile these two capitals, not to pit them against one another but to understand how they coexist in the media imaginaries and political experiences of border regions.

What the French-German border region reveals is that it can indeed serve as a laboratory for a territorialized and affective Europe, grounded not only in treaties and funding schemes but also in shared histories, institutions, and narratives (Elbel 2024). The role of regional media in this process is crucial. The media do not merely report on European integration; they construct it, one article at a time, by giving voice to the actors, values, and events that shape everyday Europeanness. The border in this sense is not a peripheral concern. It is a core site of meaning-making, where the contradictions and possibilities of Europe are made visible. In a time when debates about the future of Europe are often abstract or technocratic, the Franco-German border invites us to consider a different entry point: that of the region, the newspaper, the cross-border commuter, the student, the municipal councillor. It is from these spaces that Europe is not only governed but also imagined. Moreover, it is in these capitals, some symbolic, some institutional, some affective, that the promise of European integration can continue to exist.

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