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Gateway to Europe or Gateway in Europe? Attitudes to Europe and the European Union in the Danish–Swedish Øresund Border Region Before, During and After the COVID-19 Crisis

Sara Svensson and Oriana Miraka

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Abstract: This article analyzes media in the Danish–Swedish Øresund region between 2019 and 2024. Based on an analysis of five local newspapers, the article argues that COVID-19 intensified processes of rebordering between Denmark and southern Sweden. Paradoxically, the process rendered opposition to bordering, in general, more visible. National governments were blamed for the situation, while local and regional actors were not. These developments coincided with similar events at other European border sites and formed part of the broader dynamics of the European integration process. The European Union's rule-making authority provides a basis for questioning the legality of border controls and closures as well as contesting bordering processes. Furthermore, rules of European origin in other policy areas and sectors occasionally appear in borderland coverage, but they are rarely integrated into a coherent border-related context. Overall, the prevailing attitude toward Europe seems to be one of Euro-absence.

Keywords: Euro-skepticism; Euro-absence; Sjælland; Skåne (Scania); Greater Copenhagen; Scandinavia.

Introduction

Contemporary borderlands studies emphasize the constructed nature of borders and the tangible effects of how borders are understood and discursively

manifested (Newman 2006; Brambilla 2015). This is particularly important in Europe given the scope of the European integration project and the centrality of

Sara Svensson, PhD, is Associate Professor in Political Science at the School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences at Halmstad University, Sweden. Contact: sara.svensson@hh.se ORCID ID 0000-0003-4759-7505

Oriana Miraka, MA, is a Research Assistant at the School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences at Halmstad University, Sweden. Contact: oriana.miraka@hh.se ORCID ID 0009-0006-7215-4801



borders to many of the European Union's key policies (e.g., the four freedoms of movement, the securitization of external borders, and the internationalization of the internal market (for the latter see Ullestad 2020)). The perception of borders and border-crossing in Europe has ramifications for the cohesion and political viability of this unique political system (Wasserberg 2020; Klatt & Wasserberg 2018; Ramji-Nogales & Lang 2023).

Debates and critiques have always accompanied the European integration process. The last decade has brought severe shocks, such as the UK's Brexit referendum in June 2016. The Brexit vote followed the migration crisis of the previous year. Both events led to intense criticism of the European Union's values and policies from across society and politics. These issues continue to resonate (Bürkner 2020; Orlando 2025). For a long time, critics of the EU have been described as "Eurosceptics." Euroscepticism does not always mean skepticism of the broader idea of Europe or cooperation beyond the EU's institutions. Among critics, scholars distinguish between hard and soft Eurosceptics. The distinction is not always straightforward (Havlík & Hloušek 2025), but it helps to differentiate those seeking to leave the EU (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008; Vasilopoulou 2009) from those who are ambivalent, neutral, or indifferent towards it (Hobolt & Tilley 2014; Lubbers & Scheepers 2005).

Another shock for Europe came with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and led to the securitization of external borders (Laine 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic was also a shock, resulting in an almost instant shutdown of most of Europe's internal borders. There is already a significant body of scholarship on the effects of COVID-19 (e.g., Medeiros et al. 2021; Böhm et al. 2024; Opiłowska & Weber 2025; Berrod & Bruyas 2020).

This work differs from previous studies and contributes to borderlands research in several ways. First, it examines both representations of borders and representations of Europe. This allows for the theorization of the relationship between both perceptions of the border and attitudes toward Europe. Second, it focuses on Euroscepticism. Third, it analyzes previously unstudied media narratives from borderlands. Fourth, it highlights Northern Europe, a region less studied than continental Europe. The Øresund region has shifted from a model of integration to one of rebordering, driven by both local factors and external political events (e.g., Sohn 2025; Svensson 2020). The study also includes perspectives from borderlanders.

The article presents findings from a media analysis of five local newspapers in the Danish-Swedish Øresund region (Øresund/Öresund in Danish and Swedish). It examines how the border was portrayed before, during, and after the COVID-19 crisis, and how these changes relate to the region's place in European integration. The first section provides background on the Øresund

region and its media landscape. The next section outlines the analysis methodology. The analytic section covers border perspectives and attitudes toward the European Union. The conclusion argues that COVID-19 intensified border tensions between Denmark and southern Sweden, but that this occurred amid a general indifference toward the broader European integration debate. EU rules and cross-border issues were rarely presented within a cohesive European framework.

Context: The Øresund Region

Øresund refers to the narrow strait that separates the Danish island of Sjælland from Region Skåne (Scania), the most southern region of Sweden and the Scandinavian Peninsula. The distance between Copenhagen, the Danish capital, and Malmö, Sweden's third-largest city, is easily travelled via a fifteen-kilometre-long combined bridge and tunnel. The bridge was inaugurated in 2000, and while some criticized the project on environmental grounds, it was widely seen both as a symbol of Nordic friendship and as a reinvigorating force in cross-border cooperation (Olesen and Metzger 2016). Scandinavian cross-border cooperation is sometimes seen as distinct from that in continental Europe, given that it emerged from pre-existing Nordic transnational cooperation patterns (Perkmann 2003, 160; Medeiros 2011, 142). The extra momentum provided by the bridge between Copenhagen and Malmö led to the promotion of Øresund cross-border cooperation as a positive example for the rest of Europe. The Øresund region became something of a "poster child" for cross-border cooperation, with the area recognized by the European Commission as a "best practice" in the field (Hospers 2006, 1019). The assessment has been challenged in recent years, as research has shown that the region has come under enormous strain due to social and geopolitical processes and events, particularly migration and COVID-19 (e.g., Sohn 2025; Svensson 2023). That said, we still do not know how these social and geopolitical processes relate to narratives about the border, and whether and how they further relate to the European integration project (EU).

The Øresund region can be defined in different ways. Generally, it consists of the territories of Sjælland and Scania (OECD 2003), but in everyday speech, newspaper articles, television, and academic texts, different geographical configurations also appear (Baldersheim 2019, 29). Since 2015, territorial cooperation in the Øresund region has operated under the institutional auspices of Greater Copenhagen, which expanded from an initial focus on Copenhagen/Malmö and Helsingborg/Helsingør municipalities to include a larger area comprising Sjælland (Region Hovedstaden and Region Sjælland), the Swedish county of Scania (Region Skåne) and the county of Halland (Region Halland) (Greater Copenhagen 2023). Islands such as Bornholm in the Baltic Sea and the northern part of the

peninsula Jutland are sometimes also considered part of a broader border landscape.

Bilateral relations between Denmark and Sweden are excellent but also difficult due to divergent policy stances on a few salient issues. On the one hand, Denmark and Sweden are Nordic countries that coexist within a Scandinavian context that is characterized by long-term collaboration, mutual understanding, and a shared historical heritage. In 1954, for instance, the Nordic Passport Union enabled citizens of the Nordic countries to cross internal borders within the Nordic region without passports or ID cards. The Nordic Passport Union, along with labour policy agreements, both simplified mobility and promoted integration. Integration accelerated after the bridge-and-tunnel project connecting Copenhagen and Malmö opened in 2000.

On the other hand, cooperation between Denmark and Sweden has been strained by rivalry at the local and regional levels and by policy differences on nuclear power, drug legislation, immigration, and COVID-19. Policymaking has also been characterized as fragmented due to the presence of different cross-border institutions operating in parallel (Jerneck 2007, 228–229). At the local level, the Greater Copenhagen Committee was created in 2016 as a revamped version of the earlier Øresund Committee, illustrating the importance of local power asymmetries and how policy issues can spill over into local cross-border integration efforts. Greater Copenhagen was a metropolitan initiative mainly pushed by Danish actors, at least, that was how it was perceived on the Swedish side (Svensson 2020; Berg 2018). Modern values around "place branding" also played an important role, and it was deemed necessary to include Copenhagen's brand name in the title. The organizational transformation of the Øresund Committee into the Greater Copenhagen Committee was also in keeping with a strategy for the development and growth of the Danish capital. The Greater Copenhagen Committee's status as a Danish-registered association and its reliance on Copenhagen branding reinforce the perception that the organization is Danish-led.

The timing of the establishment of Greater Copenhagen was unfortunate, as it began operating in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Sweden maintained a more welcoming asylum policy, while Denmark's policy became increasingly strict. These differences in policy approaches heightened tensions during the refugee crisis and prompted Denmark to introduce border controls, later in addition citing concerns that crime would spill over from Sweden (Svensson 2023). During the COVID-19 crisis, Danish policy was generally more interventionist than Swedish policy, which in turn affected their respective border policies. In 2020, for instance, Swedes were prohibited from travelling to Denmark while Danes

could enter Sweden freely. Paradoxically, however, in recent years, support for a common regional identity among policy actors has strengthened, despite the border also being recognized as a potential source of conflict (Sohn 2025).

From a European comparative perspective (Svensson 2023), Greater Copenhagen was proactive as a political organization. Its members were critical of some national government decisions and called for swift mitigation measures. As in many border regions, territorial dynamics differ on both sides. Scania sees itself as far removed from the Swedish national government in Stockholm, where key actors may not fully appreciate the importance of cross-border ties. Thus, Scania finds itself in the paradoxical position of being part of a dynamic and growing metropolitan region centred around Copenhagen, while remaining somewhat peripheral to national power dynamics. In Denmark, by contrast, local and regional actors involved in cross-border cooperation are territorially located near the center of national power in Copenhagen and therefore do not feel the same level of abandonment.

Notably, the linguistic situation in Øresund creates advantages and disadvantages. In the twenty-first century, inhabitants of the Øresund region can still understand one another (if they concentrate) since Danish and Swedish are closely related languages. However, a 2005 study of intra-Scandinavian linguistic skills showed that immigrants and young people have a markedly lower capacity to understand the "other language" than adults and older people. Moreover, overall Scandinavian-language capacity has probably declined over the long term (Delsing & Lundin 2005).

The media is the primary source material for this article. In the Øresund region, media can in theory be read and understood by people in both countries. In practice the effort is considered too much for most people. Hence, the Øresund borderland region has media that are separated by nationality and language, even though they share similar characteristics and cover similar issues. The media in both Sweden and Denmark follow the Nordic media model, which is characterized by freedom of the press, public-service broadcasting, and regionally anchored newspapers with high levels of professionalization (Harrie 2013; Nord et al. 2021). Nordvision exemplifies regional media cooperation, a collaboration launched in 1959 among Nordic public broadcasters (DR, NRK, RÚV, SVT, and YLE) that aimed to co-produce and exchange content across culturally and linguistically connected countries (Søndergaard & Helles 2010; Nordvision 2024).

Newspapers play an important role in shaping public debate, even in a highly digitalized media environment. In the Øresund region, the media operate within closely connected linguistic and cultural contexts, yet cross-border reporting has historically depended on

institutional initiatives and available editorial resources (Falkheimer et al. 2017). Over the past decade, both Danish and Swedish newspapers have experienced declining print circulation and increasing digital transformation. Revenue pressures and changing consumption patterns have affected the region's capacity to sustain cross-border coverage, including support for reporters on the other side of the Øresund Strait. Although attempts at collaboration have been made, economic constraints have led to limited, permanent transnational reporting structures. The context is relevant to understanding how border issues are primarily framed through national or local lenses rather than through stable cross-border journalistic practices.

Methodology

This article uses qualitative media analysis to examine how regional newspapers in the Øresund area construct narratives about borders, Europe, and regional cooperation. The analysis is informed by qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012; Mayring 2014; Krippendorf 2018) and incorporates elements of narrative analysis (Riessman 2008) by focusing on how border events are linked to evaluations of European integration, attribution of responsibility, and expectations of political action. In keeping with research on the mediated construction of Europe (Trenz 2004), newspapers are treated as sites where supranational developments are translated into regionally situated meanings.

The empirical material of this article consists of articles from *Helsingør Dagblad* (DK), *Helsingborgs Dagblad* (SE), *Berlingske* (DK), *Sydsvenskan* (SE), and *Bornholms Tidende* (DK). A purposive sampling strategy (Patton 2002) was used to select articles based on the research questions for this specific region and in collaboration with researchers working on the same questions within the framework of a larger European research project (B-SHAPES: Borders Shaping Perceptions of European Societies).

The intention was to include two newspapers from each country to enable cross-border comparison. *Helsingør Dagblad* and *Helsingborgs Dagblad* form a geographically proximate pair across the Øresund Strait. *Sydsvenskan* was chosen due to its regional prominence in southern Sweden. On the Danish side, *Berlingske* is a national outlet based in the capital, while *Bornholms Tidende* offers a more peripheral regional perspective. The selection of newspapers allows for comparisons across different territorial levels and media positions within the border region. The media outlets differ in scale, ownership, and political orientation, but together they capture local, regional, and national perspectives within the Danish-Swedish borderspace. The selection enables comparisons across media levels while remaining anchored in the regional context central to this study.

Articles were accessed through Retriever Research for Swedish newspapers and through subscription-based digital archives for the Danish outlets.

The study covers the period 2019–2024. This time-frame covers developments before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament election and subsequent pandemic-related border measures. A pilot search of the *Sydsvenskan* and *Helsingborgs Dagblad* newspapers showed that searches explicitly focused on attitudes toward the EU yielded few relevant results. In contrast, broader searches on borders and the Øresund region produced 2,606 results, many of which were not relevant to the research questions. This necessitated manual screening of the newspapers. The final corpus consists of five thematically relevant articles per newspaper and year, totalling 125 articles. The sample is strategic rather than representative. Articles were included if they addressed borders, cross-border relations, regional cooperation, or references to Europe in ways that engaged with the research questions. The aim was not statistical generalization but rather a qualitative exploration of recurring framing patterns and narrative constructions.

The articles were imported into NVivo for coding. The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, a deductive coding framework was developed based on the theoretical literature on bordering processes (Newman 2006; Brambilla 2015), European integration narratives (De Vries 2023), and Euroscepticism (De Wilde & Trenz 2012; Szczerbiak & Taggart 2017). The initial codes captured broader themes such as debordering and re-bordering, EU performance and responsibility, and contingent Euroscepticism.

Second, the material was reread iteratively, and the coding scheme was refined inductively to capture the specific storylines emerging in the region. In total, 47 thematic codes were developed, comprising substantive themes such as borders as connections, borders as filters, borders as walls, challenging versus supporting bordering, cross-border cooperation, enforced versus transgressed borders, EU funding, EU institutions, EU law, and Euroscepticism. Coding was used to identify patterns of meaning and narrative linkage rather than to measure theme frequency. In addition, metadata identified different elements in the article ("newspapers", "focus level", "publication date", "type of article" and "who speaks").

The material was not fully double-coded. However, coding categories and interpretations were discussed by the local research team and in cross-regional B-SHAPES meetings to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency. Hence, rather than applying statistical measures of intercoder reliability, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach that emphasizes procedural transparency and theoretical grounding

(Schreier 2012). The absence of formal intercoder testing is nevertheless acknowledged as a limitation.

Attention was also paid to the actors who were given a voice in the articles, including politicians, public officials, experts, and citizens. This part of the study was analyzed interpretively. The predominance of institutional and political actors, particularly male politicians, was evident across media outlets. Rather than considering this as a separate quantitative exercise, it is integrated into the broader discussion of authority and discursive positioning in regional border reporting. All material was analyzed in Swedish or Danish. Translations into English were produced using Google Translate and manually checked for accuracy.

The Border: Continental Divide or Gateway?

Border checks and border controls have been the dominant theme in Danish–Swedish Øresund relations for the better part of a decade. The code for border checks and controls was used several times more often than most other codes during the 2019–2024 period (168 times, followed by 80 times for the overlapping code “bordering” and 60 times for the code “crime”). COVID-19 intensified interest in border checks and controls, although they predated the pandemic and remained a topic of discussion afterward. In fact, there does not appear to be a clear quantitative pattern in these terms. Swedish newspapers had even more instances of this code in 2022 and 2023 than in the COVID years of 2020 and 2021. The watershed moment, however, was the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. The refugee crisis occurred at the same time as the previously discussed organizational transformation of the key institution for borderlands relations, from Øresundskommitten to Greater Copenhagen (see Svensson 2023).

The organizational transformation was already underway during the summer and fall of 2015 when more than one million refugees entered Europe under what was perceived as unordered conditions. Many of the refugees had Sweden as their preferred destination. At first, the Swedish government maintained a relatively generous asylum system. However, in November 2015, it did a policy U-turn and introduced stricter border controls, along with other measures to deter the refugees (Scarpa & Schierup 2018). In the months after the introduction of the border controls, the travel time between Malmö and Copenhagen doubled. The media published images of police in fenced-off areas at Copenhagen airport, where people had to show passports and IDs. The images shocked residents, as the region had a Nordic agreement that had allowed passport-free travel since the 1950s, and both Sweden and Denmark had been part of the European Schengen open-border zone since 2001. In 2017, Denmark invoked the right that still remains for countries within the Schengen area to

conduct internal border control checks, citing crime as the reason. This timeline is underlined in several accounts as in these Danish and Swedish newspaper articles:

The most visible imprint of the EU on Denmark's biggest crisis year is probably the border control introduced in January 2016 as a temporary measure during the refugee and migrant crisis. Over the following three years, it has been consistently extended every six months, and a change of government is unlikely to alter that. "I think in principle that we in Denmark should decide the extent, layout and length of our controls at the borders ourselves," says Jeppe Kofod (Ahrenkilde Holm, 2019).

Border regions where labour markets, business, research, culture, and trade converge constitute a winning concept. However, around the (Øresund) Strait, integration has stalled, not least because of the border chaos in 2016 and the subsequent mistrust. Why establish your business here? The government has shown that the flow can be stopped overnight. It is boring to have additional controls, but whining about the Danes is wasted as long as Sweden does not stop serious crime and regularly applies to the EU for an extension of border controls that delay traffic, with train stops at Hyllie (Avellan 2019).

By November 2019, border control checks had become routine, prompting extensive media coverage on both sides of the border. News articles focused on how long the border checks would take (and whether they would be seen as little or much) and whether they could be expected to have any effect. On the opinion pages, the tone grew increasingly emotional and often critical of border control measures.

Øresund. Border controls. The word oozes chaos. Remember the situation of the commuters in 2016 when the double checks created pure roulette. Get to work on time or an hour late? Pick up at daycare before the staff stand, keys in hand, and sigh? The timetables were then mostly regarded as a proposal. When Denmark introduced new border controls on Tuesday—to keep gang crime out of Sweden—commuters' concerns returned. However, most things indicate that the Danish plan does not allow for that. Random checks are carried out on trains en route to Denmark, and ferry traffic is not affected. On the bridge, the speed is reduced to 50 kilometres per hour, and one of two lanes is closed during the checks (Avellan 2019)

Politics that are merely symbolic means we continue to have border controls on the Swedish side of the (Øresund) strait. Border checks that, in one year, led to 10 million checks, but only 2 found weapons. It is probably the least effective police effort in Sweden when it comes to finding weapons. Nevertheless, the Danish government now wants to introduce border

controls towards Sweden. Because, according to the Danish government, criminals come from Sweden to Denmark. And they do. Like the motorcycle gangs and Black Cobras that came from Denmark to Sweden. Like the weapons and drugs that continue to come to Malmö and Sweden from the continent despite border controls. Because people move in our region, some want it, and some don't. The problem with border controls is that they negatively affect ordinary citizens, whereas they do not affect organized gangs (Paarup-Petersen, 2019).

The border controls were a particularly pressing issue for residents of the Danish island of Bornholm. Because of its location, Bornholm's inhabitants and visitors travel through Sweden to reach the Danish mainland.

A few years ago, it sparked an outcry when Swedish customs officers thoroughly searched a member of Bornholm's local government as he passed through Sweden. It was the feeling itself that was problematic. It has now been decided politically that the ferry journey to and from the rest of the country should pass through Sweden. It was, therefore, insulting to the Bornholmers that they should be subjected to that treatment. It was about equality with the rest of the country.

Now the debate about border control has flared up again. It turns out that a largely ineffective effort at the Danish border has cost one billion kroner—1,000,000,000 kroner. And when we are repeatedly told that some people have been rejected at the border because they were missing their papers or had a stick in their luggage, you have to ask yourself: Is it really worth it? (Pind 2019)

However, the media coverage also included positive perspectives and counterarguments from policymakers, such as references to the crime-reducing effects of border controls.

On Wednesday evening, Minister of the Interior Mikael Damberg (S) gave a written comment to HD and South Sweden: "I respect that the Danish government wants to review its border controls in order to keep criminals, both in Denmark and those on the way, out of the country." Mikael Damberg points out that after the border controls with Denmark were implemented, residential burglaries decreased in southern Sweden (Lönnaeus, 2019)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, border controls intensified. Decisions were made regarding border checks and the limits on who could enter. It was an emotional time, particularly for families that were separated and for children who had parents living on the other side of the border.

My son and I live 35 kilometres apart. It is a 35-minute journey. There is no good reason we cannot meet. When

children are denied access to their parents, it is a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, says Maria Frantzén Sanko. According to the ninth paragraph of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to live with their parents—and to maintain contact with both. It is a convention that Sweden violates daily (Magnusson 2021).

The government is aware of the pointed finger from the EU Commission over border control, but chooses to ignore it. This is what Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen (S) said on Thursday at a short press conference after a speech on Europe at the House of Industry in Copenhagen: "My position on border control is the same as it has been throughout. During the pandemic, when we need border control, we must, of course, have border control." A total of six countries have been warned that their border controls conflict with free movement, a core area of the European Union's cooperation (Ritzau/Helsingør Dagblad, 2021).

There had previously been cooperation and connections between Danish and Swedish criminals, but what is interesting, new, and worrying is the direct Swedish connection to several of the murder cases. Customs officers and passport control cannot resolve the current conflicts, and the Swedish connection points to organized crime. And when a bridge is built over the Øresund, the criminals see it as a business opportunity so they can expand the market and send weapons, drugs and personnel over the bridge or by boat (Krogh, 2022)

The end of COVID-19 did not end the topic. Border control remained politically salient as the new Swedish government elected in 2022 suggested it should examine the legal means to make border controls permanent. The Swedish government focused on the effects of border control measures and often cited arguments that they were inefficient. It is, however, noticeable that many more references are made to the legality (or otherwise) of the border controls under EU law. A court case by the South Sweden Chamber of Commerce helped move the issue up the agenda.

The government has been in a hurry to find an alternative to the border police's constant presence at the Øresund. The reason is that the Supreme Administrative Court may soon label the border controls as illegal. - They violate Swedish law and EU law. That is why we requested a legal review, says Stephan Mühler, CEO of the South Swedish Chamber of Commerce. When HD and Sydsvenskan take the car over the Bridge, it already starts at Pepparholmen. The speed is reduced from 110 to 50 a bit before the tunnel. At the same time, we learn that the left lane must not be used; all traffic must use the right lane. When we come out of the tunnel, the speed is further reduced by two fixed obstacles, and a Danish motorcycle policeman waves us in at a checkpoint just before the exit to Kastrup airport. Here we are waved

into one of four queues where police officers check the driver's license and look into the car. Some cars are waved on to the next tent, where vehicles are checked more carefully, but most are released directly back onto the highway. It is all over in a minute—total delay in off-peak hours: two to three minutes. (Magnusson 2023)

The lack of dialogue hits Bornholm disproportionately hard and the decision has major consequences across the board. And it's not just about families not being able to spend Christmas with their loved ones. "It also affects our healthcare system, as Bornholm residents, as part of the Capital Region, use the connection via Ystad", writes Peter Juel-Jensen and adds that he has been pushing for a Bornholm scheme since he became aware of the closure. It could, for example, be a transit journey for individuals who have tested negative (Nielsen 2020)

The reported reasons for the border control measures are closely related to three policy areas: migration, crime and security, and health (COVID-19). There were a few references to other areas of concern, such as the environment, landscape, agriculture, and fisheries. This, however, does not mean they are not important topics for cross-border collaboration and borderland regional integration. The green transition is one of Greater Copenhagen's prioritized areas. Environmental policy is considered of utmost importance by local and regional politicians in the Greater Copenhagen association. Likewise, agriculture and fisheries are both key sectors, reflecting the maritime location and the importance of food production in Denmark as a whole and in Scania relative to the rest of Sweden. However, these policy areas do not appear to be discussed in media narratives that also include the Øresund borderland region or the border itself.

Some codes were generated iteratively with the cross-country research team, but they were not used at all or were used only sparingly. This includes terms such as "Fortress Europe", which is not used in either country. There were some references to external borders, but mostly in the context of ensuring that internal borders do not require border checks. Mobility for shopping was also an issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Danish shoppers could travel to Sweden but not vice versa. Nonetheless, this topic did not appear frequently in the media coverage.

Attitudes toward Europe

Finding media texts that related to Europe and/or the European Union was not easy. Targeted searches for words related to EU attitudes yielded few results. This was in keeping with preliminary expectations, as previous research on cross-border cooperation and relations in the Øresund region and across Scandinavia

has shown that key actors mention Europe and the European Union less frequently compared to actors in other regions (Svensson 2013). Instead, they often refer to Nordic cooperation and Nordic traditions (Svensson 2020). European history also seems to be used less for memory politics than Nordic and Scandinavian reference points (Svensson and Nilson 2023). The pattern persisted during the 2019–2024 period covered by this media analysis, which began with the European elections and was soon followed by a pandemic that prompted a strong European-wide response. Overall, we argue that the Øresund region is characterized by a certain degree of *euro-distance*, in which European-level decisions are not perceived as central to everyday life, and European history is not seen as a fundamental driver of the region's development.

When Europe and the European Union do feature in media reports, they appear mainly as the rule-giver. This implies that there are technical limits to what can be done at the local level, a situation that is often reported in a depoliticized way. The following quote illustrates what such a news item might look like.

In July 2019, the European Commission banned cod fishing in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea until the end of the year (only by-catches are allowed). In October 2019, the European Commission adopted a proposal to amend the regulation on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EFFM) to allow support for the permanent cessation of cod fishing in the eastern Baltic Sea (Krogh 2020).

In accordance with what could be called a *Euro-absent* and depoliticized logic, the European Parliament is mentioned less often than the European Commission. Euro-absence could be considered a subtype of Euroscepticism, often referred to as Euro-indifference (Delmotte et al 2017; Rozenberg 2009).

The European Court of Justice was not coded in the material, as it appears only indirectly, for example, when discussing the legality of continuous border checks. That said, the politics of the European Union appear in the media reports when they are related to (1) the European election period and (2) events or developments related to Eurosceptic parties in Denmark. Even though Danish Eurosceptic parties lost the 2019 elections, they continue to play a role in Danish political discourse, especially at the national level. In Sweden, there is a relative lack of Eurosceptic parties (even though the Left Party and the Swedish Democrats might be characterized as such), which leads to fewer media stories about Europe and the European Union. In one speech, for instance, a representative of a new party in Sweden shows how the lack of media coverage of the EU can be linked to local conditions. By contrast, Danish media has more material related to EU attitudes overall, which

is probably a consequence of having more outspoken Eurosceptic parties. There is also a greater variety in attitudes in Denmark, ranging from Eurosceptic to strongly Euro-positive.

Hopefully, the upcoming European Parliament elections will strengthen pro-EU forces in Denmark. We need the centre to rally around the defence of Europe, which is our only answer to the irrational behaviour of the great powers, be it a Trump or a Putin. In that context, the discussion about border control becomes symbolic—do we, or do we not, believe in Europe?

In my opinion, we must never lose hope in what Europe represents, with its history of freedom and popular government (Pind 2019).

Notably, this kind of media discourse rarely connects to the local and regional level. Instead, it appears primarily in relation to national-level politics. Nevertheless, the following quote taken from the context of creating a new Danish party captures one way in which Eurosceptic argumentation is constructed around notions of centre versus periphery and of rural versus urban dominance.

He cannot yet reveal much about the new party, which is still in the making. However, he can well lift the veil on some of the core values that the party will fight for, which, among other things, concern the EU, Nordic cooperation, and the idea that 'the whole of Denmark—including Bornholm—must live'.

No one should feel like they live in a fringe area. Among other things, I am thinking about the communication between Bornholm and the rest of the country. How does it work? This also applies to other parts of Denmark that have not fared as well with centralization (Søndergaard Hansen 2022).

Another point addressed by Danish Eurosceptic parties concerns international relations and cooperation. This new party, for example, would like stronger Nordic cooperation. In this way, the Nordic is used to differentiate Europe from the North, even though the distinction is conceptually problematic.

I would like for us to look at how the Nordics can stand more together in the world. The more uncertain the world is, the more important it is to have a compass that does not create more uncertainty. The Nordic countries have important values [...] I think that closer Nordic cooperation, preferably a Nordic state confederation, in which the Nordics undertake to stand together both internationally and in relation to our welfare societies and the important values we share, is a good idea. Globally, the Nordic welfare society is unique, and we have to consider how to defend Nordic values in a globalized world (Søndergaard Hansen 2022).

Concluding Discussion

This article engaged with bordering processes in the European Union, focusing on local media discourse in the Danish–Swedish Øresund region during the years 2019–2024. The analysis highlighted how COVID-19 intensified the ongoing process of bordering between Denmark and southern Sweden. The border became more visible and more of an obstacle than before the pandemic. Some media discourse attributed responsibility for the bordering process to national governments, rather than to local and regional actors. In media accounts, the bordering events in the Øresund region were only partially connected with parallel events at other European borders and with the broader process of European integration. Referring to the European Union's rule-making powers, the legality of border controls and closures were questioned, posing a challenge to bordering processes. Moreover, media discourse mentioning European regulations in other policy areas and sectors sometimes appeared in borderland coverage, but rarely in a cohesive borderland and border-related context.

Perhaps unconventionally, we would like to end this article with a reflection on why it is titled as it is. Is the Øresund Strait, with its iconic bridge and symbolic ferries, a gateway to Europe or a gateway in Europe? The standard definition of a gateway in telecommunications is a network node that connects two networks with entirely different transmission protocols. In daily use, however, the word refers to a place through which you must go to get to another area (Cambridge Dictionary 2025). Starting with the first meaning, many would not want to see the Øresund Strait as connecting two entities with entirely different wiring. After all, Sweden and Denmark have much in common and are parts of the same political entity, the European Union. At the same time, events over the past decade suggest that differences still matter. As for the second meaning of the term "gateway," it relates to the perennial debate over where Europe begins and ends. The discussion of Europe's spatial extent tends to focus on its southern and Eastern parts. However, bivalence can also be found in the North, as was made clear through Brexit. The fuzziness concerning Øresund stems from Scandinavia being both part of and separate from the rest of the continent. Scandinavia is also divided, as Denmark is part of Scandinavia but not the Scandinavian Peninsula.

Thus, if we want to understand the Øresund region in relation to Euroscepticism, media discourses demonstrate that the prevailing attitude to Europe in the region is Euro-absence, a very soft form of Euroscepticism. To conclude, the borderlands of Sweden and Denmark are connected by physical infrastructure, including a bridge and a ferry across the shared national border, and by culture through history and language. Øresund

is a gateway *in* Europe, but "Europe" and the European Union's institutions are remarkably absent from daily discourse.

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