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Contested Integration in the Borderlands: Narrating the EU in German Regional Newspapers

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Abstract: European integration is not only a political and economic process but also one of communication and contestation. This is especially visible in border regions, where the effects of European integration on borders are experienced most directly. This article examines how regional German newspapers on the border with Poland and Czechia construct narratives of Europe and bordering. Using qualitative media analysis, it shows that re-bordering is framed differently depending on the target of these measures, while regularly invoking the European Union (EU) as a key frame of reference. The EU is narrated both positively as benefactor and protector, and critically through four 'soft' Eurosceptic narratives: two generic ones of EU distance and bureaucracy, and two highly localised ones centred on disappointment when the EU is seen not to live up to its own ideals, and on perceptions of European integration working less well in a Central European border region than in Western Europe. Rooted in controversies such as the Turów coal mine dispute or the disruptions of cross-border commuting during Covid-19, these narratives show that regional media not only replicate common criticisms but also produce place-specific ones. Taken together, the findings theorise border regions as sites where bordering events become narrative touchstones for evaluating EU performance and legitimacy.

Keywords: Narratives; debordering; re-bordering; European Union; regional media; border regions; Euroscepticism

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Introduction

European integration is not only a political and economic process but also a process of communication and contestation. The European Union (EU) becomes visible in national and regional public spheres through the media, which play a crucial role in narrating Europe to different publics (Trenz 2004; de Beus 2010). This is particularly important in geographically and structurally peripheral border regions, where the EU's presence (or perceived absence) is experienced most directly (Paasi 1999; Newman 2006). While the EU has promoted cross-border mobility and cooperation through initiatives such as the Schengen Agreement and INTERREG funding, member states have often reinstated border controls in response to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or to concerns about migration from outside the EU (Wassenberg 2020; Weber & Wille 2020). These developments have resulted in complex narratives that reflect tensions between European integration and national sovereignty, as well as between open and closed borders. In border regions where the openness of the border shapes everyday life, local concerns are further linked to supranational dynamics, with regional media that frame European integration not as a distant polity but as a lived and contested process.

The article contributes to this special section by examining how Europe¹ is narrated and contested "from below" (Schmidt 2009) and presents a case study of regional media in the German section of the Polish-Czech-German border region. Drawing on qualitative media analysis, the article examines narratives of bordering, the European Union and Euroscepticism as presented in regional newspapers. The focus is specifically on German-language media on the German side of the border. This is consistent with the insight that, due to the lack of a genuinely European or even transnational media, the media landscape and its narratives are organized along national and linguistic lines (Koopmans & Statham 2010).

This analysis focuses on three interrelated themes: bordering, the EU as either a benefactor or a source of disappointment, and Euroscepticism. The first section of the article outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on the literature of the narrative construction of Europe, Euroscepticism, and the relevance of border regions to both. The next section presents the data and methods. The analysis then shows that the regional media narratives frequently invoke Europe when recounting stories involving local crises or grievances, such as the Turów coal mine dispute or the disruption of cross-border commuting during COVID-19. The EU is cast alternately as a benefactor, protector, or failing guardian. Even when the local narratives are critical or filled with disappointment, the EU remains a key reference point. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications these findings have for understanding the narrative construction of Europe in structurally peripheral border regions.

Narratives of Europe in Border Regions

The idea of Europe is contested and dynamic, shaped by norms, ideas, and narratives (Christiansen et al. 1999, 532). Drawing on Anderson's (1991) seminal work on "imagined communities", Delanty (1995) argues that Europe is an idea that was "invented" and subsequently sustained by narratives that emphasize its unity and common heritage. By invoking a sense of shared destiny, these narratives can legitimize the political project of the European Union. However, narratives are contested (De Vries 2023, 876) and vary significantly across different countries and regions. While some narratives legitimize European integration, more critical narratives do the opposite, voicing disappointment or assigning blame (Bürkner 2020; Bijsmans 2021).

Indeed, some critiques echo highly Eurosceptic narrative repertoires (Pfetsch & Heft 2015). Euroscepticism has been conceptualized as a broad set of critical stances toward the EU, ranging from principled rejection to more issue-specific, "soft" critiques that point to disillusionment with the effects of European integration (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2009). As noted in the introduction to this special section, Euroscepticism is not static: its manifestations are heterogeneous, and its intensity can vary across contexts and over time, particularly in response to crisis events (see also Leconte 2010; De Wilde & Trenz 2012). In its "soft" form, Euroscepticism often takes on a contingent character. It surfaces in response to concrete situations on the ground linked to EU-related rules and processes and emerges from the perceived gaps between European promises and local realities (De Wilde & Trenz 2012; Bijsmans 2021).

Because Euroscepticism is dynamic and sensitive to events, moments of crisis such as the Eurozone crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic are fertile grounds for accounts that allocate blame or highlight policy failures (Weber & Wille 2020; Bijsmans 2021; Copeland and Maccaferri 2023). The media play a central role in shaping such narratives. Newspapers in particular are seen as producing meanings of Europe and providing accounts that can either legitimize or challenge the European Union (Trenz 2004). Given that the EU lacks a single, unified media space, national and regional media are key intermediaries that translate EU-level developments into narratives that resonate with domestic publics in linguistically and politically structured public spheres (de Beus 2010; Risse 2010).

Narratives of Europe do not unfold in a vacuum but are shaped by specific places. This is especially true in structurally and geographically peripheral border regions, where the EU's presence (or perceived absence) is experienced as a practical manifestation of border openness and cross-border linkages, rather than as an abstract political project (Newman 2006; Wassenberg 2020). In these spaces, the interaction between local, transnational and European developments is fertile

ground for narratives that are often contradictory, shaped by both routine cross-border practices and moments of conflict.

Thus, in border regions, border openness serves as a touchstone for broader evaluations of the EU, given that European integration is experienced directly on the ground (Bürkner 2020). Instances of debordering and re-bordering are easily narrated by the media as evidence that integration is either delivering tangible benefits or failing to do so. *Debordering* means overcoming or softening borders, as exemplified by the Schengen Agreement that largely abolished border controls. In contrast, *re-bordering* means hardening previously soft borders, such as when reassertions of national sovereignty occur during security crises (Popescu 2012; cf. Andreas 2003). Both are processes that can easily become objects of public narration, including in media coverage (Brambilla 2015; Newman 2006; van Houtum 2000). This is because they are not merely policy decisions on border management but rather discursive triggers: the media construct the meaning of borders in ways that link to European narratives (Balibar 2002; Brambilla 2015). Importantly, treating the openness of borders as a touchstone does not mean that these narratives will be uniformly positive: border openness can be regarded as an opportunity or a threat, while border closures may be presented as disruptive or protective, depending on the situation.

On this basis, border regions emerge as sites where European integration can be evaluated through its practical consequences. Because the EU is associated with facilitating cross-border mobility and cooperation, borderland narratives can cast the EU as a benefactor when border openness is desired or as a disappointment when the border is associated with undesirable externalities (Durand et al. 2020; cf. Nasr & Rieger 2024). These evaluations feed into Eurosceptic narratives that take on "soft" and contingent forms, expressed less as a rejection of integration per se than as a criticism of EU rules and their failure to protect border regions from negative outcomes (Szczurbiak & Taggart 2009; Leconte 2010).

This article examines how bordering, EU performance, and contingent Euroscepticism are narrated in regional German media in the Polish-Czech-German border region. The German border region with Poland and Czechia is a useful setting for investigating how Europe and bordering processes are constructed in regional media narratives. As a structurally and geographically peripheral region, it offers valuable insight into how European integration is presented in local media narratives and also shaped by place-specific histories and experiences (Newman 2006; Risse 2010; Kroll & Koschatzky 2020). The border coincides with

significant linguistic and institutional barriers, but it has also been the object of sustained EU-sponsored and bottom-up efforts at cross-border cooperation (Böhm et al. 2023). Local issues, such as the dispute over the Polish Turów coal mine or cross-border crime, as well as global disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, make the border region a useful case through which broader tensions between debordering and re-bordering and between supranational promise and perceived neglect become visible. The analysis in this article shows how regional media negotiate the meanings of Europe through the actual experiences of on-the-ground bordering practices.

Methods

This article employs qualitative media analysis to examine how German regional newspapers on the border with Poland and Czechia construct both narratives of Europe and narratives of bordering. Regional media offer a useful lens through which to trace these dynamics as they articulate locally situated meanings of supranational processes and also highlight the everyday implications of European integration. Drawing on theories of the narrative construction of the idea of Europe as well as the concept of Euroscepticism, the analysis focuses on how the EU is represented and contested within the structurally and geographically peripheral space of the German side of the Polish-Czech-German border region.

In practical terms, a narrative is defined as a recurring way of linking events to evaluations and expectations of the EU, including attributions of responsibility, expectations of EU action, and judgements of outcomes as beneficial or disappointing. The empirical scope of the article is confined to the regional newspapers from the German side of the Polish-Czech-German border region. Throughout this paper, any references to this region are to the broader geographical context in which the German-language regional media are embedded. The two newspapers that cover Germany's southeastern border region with both Poland and Czechia were selected for their regional character and reporting, namely the *Sächsische Zeitung* (*Saxon Newspaper*) and the *Lausitzer Rundschau* (*Lusatian Review*). Both cover parts of the border region, with the *Lausitzer Rundschau* more focused on the Polish-German border and the *Sächsische Zeitung* covering the Saxon part of the Polish-Czech-German border region.

The *Lausitzer Rundschau* covers parts of Brandenburg and Saxony and is based in Cottbus. It has left-wing roots in the German Democratic Republic. Post-German unification, the *Lausitzer Rundschau* won prizes for its critical reporting on right-wing radicalism in the region.

Its circulation was approximately 50,000 in the fourth quarter of 2023 (IVW 2024a). The *Sächsische Zeitung*, based in Dresden, covers mostly eastern Saxony and had a circulation of about 163,000 in the same period (IVW 2024b).

The timeframe covers the period between the 2019 and 2024 European elections. This period includes several significant events that featured prominently in regional and broader European media: the COVID-19 pandemic, the European election campaigns, the European Court of Justice’s involvement in the Turów coal mine controversy, and other localized events. These events were salient moments that triggered media narratives about debordering and re-bordering, as well as their links to European integration.

Newspaper articles were accessed through the online archive on the Genios platform using a purposive sampling strategy. A set of keywords guided the search process, namely eurosceptic*,² border + Poland, border + Polish, border + Czech*, Brussels, EU.³ In total, 140 articles met these criteria. 45 articles were selected from the *Lausitzer Rundschau* and 95 from the *Sächsische Zeitung*.⁴ Most of the articles are editorial reviews, opinion pieces, and original articles.

The coding proceeded in two steps. First, the articles were imported into NVivo and coded using a small set of theoretically informed start codes that were aligned with the three analytical themes (debordering/re-bordering, EU performance, and Euroscepticism). Second, the coded material was re-read comparatively and supplemented with inductive codes that captured recurring case-specific storylines (e.g. COVID-19 border closures and commuting, Turów mine, crime/trafficking, and an East-West contrast). The coding was conducted on the German-language originals, and the author undertook the translations. As the approach was qualitative rather than quantitative, coding primarily served to flag themes rather than measure their frequency. Accordingly, no code counts are reported. The NVivo references should not be interpreted as comparable “occurrences” across the dataset. Instead, the analysis distinguishes between recurrent and more occasional narrative patterns and substantiates each with multiple illustrations across outlets and years.

The analytical categories correspond to the three higher-order narrative frames that were discussed in the theoretical section and used as start codes (bordering, EU performance, and Euroscepticism). With these frames, the coding captured recurring, smaller themes such as the EU as benefactor, guardian of legal norms, distant or overly bureaucratic, and disappointing in moments of crisis. The analysis also traced shifts between debordering and re-bordering narratives within a given context

(e.g., health crises versus environmental concerns) and examined how media representations link European themes to local experiences on the ground.

Analysis

Contested meanings of bordering and debordering

The first theme is re-bordering, as it occurs in a region where open borders have become the norm since Poland and Czechia joined the Schengen Area in 2007. The regional media do not portray border openness or closure through a fixed perspective that centres on debordering and re-bordering; rather, their narratives frame the border situationally and pragmatically in response to specific triggers. Events such as the COVID-related border closures or the increase in irregular migration from third countries result in different narrative framings, including one that sees border closures as an exceptional (and unacceptable) departure from the norm. In contrast, another sees border controls as necessary to enhance security. While some narratives are clustered around specific crises (e.g., COVID-19 closures in 2020–21, migration in 2023), others recur intermittently over the period covered (e.g., crime and policing), and all repeatedly raise the question of how the border should be governed.

In the Polish-Czech-German border region, as elsewhere, cross-border flows were disrupted in 2020 by COVID-related border closures, as noted in numerous newspaper articles at this time. One narrative portrayed Czech, and particularly Polish, border enforcement as excessive, notably in cases involving soldiers in preventing border crossings (*Lausitzer Rundschau* 2020a, 10). Opposition to the border closure went beyond enforcement methods and, in response to COVID-19, extended to the very principle of re-bordering. This was even though Germany had closed its borders with other neighbouring states, and avoided doing so with Poland and Czechia only because these countries had moved to close their borders with Germany first. In what follows, it must be borne in mind that the German decision to close the borders was taken at the national level.

The media coverage of the border closures focused greatly on commuting. The media narrative in question was almost entirely devoted to the downsides of bordering. Cross-border commuters faced quarantine rules and, in Saxony, mandatory COVID-19 testing at their own expense. Demonstrations calling for the reopening of the border were reported (*Lausitzer Rundschau* 2021a, 17), and employers highlighted how much they depended on commuting workers (*Lausitzer Rundschau* 2021a, 17). One article noted that “the Corona crisis ... shows how strongly the border regions have grown

together” (Sächsische Zeitung 2020a, 27). The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, linked the border closures to the EU and reportedly criticized them on the grounds that they undermined the single market and European unity (Sächsische Zeitung 2020b, 18). A local company director was quoted as saying, “I would not have imagined that such incalculable measures would happen within the EU”, and he concluded that the crisis had revealed “how dependent we all are on each other” (Lausitzer Rundschau 2020b, 7). The media narrative surrounding border closures in response to COVID-19 was overwhelmingly opposed to the closures as a form of re-bordering. This is because re-bordering undermined the open borders that had hitherto been taken for granted as a key aspect of European integration, as references to “European unity” and the single market show. More than this, references to mutual dependence and to border regions that have grown together imply that open borders were treated as an implicit baseline against which border closures were compared unfavourably. In this sense, COVID-related re-bordering was treated as a failure at the European level in protecting open borders, even though specific re-bordering decisions were taken at the national level.

Narratives linking open borders to crime, particularly car theft, were more ambivalent. While careful to avoid stereotypes by using the passive voice and neutral terms such as “the perpetrators”, news reporting established a connection between the end of border controls and crime: “After the abolition of border controls at the [border rivers] Oder and Neisse, the number of car thefts had shot up. This is because criminals, unlike police and prosecutors, who are bound by judicial constraints, can exploit open borders to the fullest for their own ends. Berlin and Brandenburg were like self-service shops for them” (Lausitzer Rundschau 2019c, 16). Some politicians demanded night-time controls and a stronger police presence (Lausitzer Rundschau 2019e, 12). However, calls for re-bordering in response to theft were limited and muted, and there was as much emphasis on other crime-fighting mechanisms, such as cross-border police cooperation, and on technological solutions, such as more cameras (Lausitzer Rundschau 2020d, 8). Openness, in other words, remained the reference point, and the narrative focused on concerns about how to govern its perceived risks.

Bordering returned as a major political theme in 2023 in response to a rise in irregular migration. Regional newspaper reporting relied heavily on citing politicians’ positions. Saxony’s Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer and other figures from his centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party called for stronger border controls at Germany’s borders with Poland and Czechia. Kretschmer, who used the term “avalanche” to describe the rise in illicit migration, said that border controls were long overdue, given that more refugees crossed the Polish and Czech borders than at any of Germany’s other borders: “At the moment, migration is

not steered by the EU or Germany but rather by criminal structures such as people smuggling organizations.” In Kretschmer’s view, the government and Federal Police should carry out border controls (Sächsische Zeitung 2023a, 13). The new Görlitz district administrator, Stephan Meyer (CDU), also cited the particular exposure of border districts to migration (Sächsische Zeitung 2022c, 2).

By contrast, the German government, specifically the Interior Minister Nancy Faeser from the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), stressed her desire to “expand possibilities of domestic and cross-border cooperation”. To this end, she reached an agreement with the Czech interior minister and representatives of the Polish Interior Ministry (Sächsische Zeitung 2023b, 15). As Faeser later said, “We need to fight irregular migration more strongly. But we need a lasting solution. That can only be achieved in Europe” (Sächsische Zeitung 2023c, 2). Thus, while both regional and local politicians disagreed with the national government’s position, politicians at all levels used the EU as a key reference point.

The examples of the COVID-19 border closures, border crime, and illicit migration show how support for bordering is shaped not by consistent ideology but by context and risk perception (cf. Côté-Boucher et al. 2014). Support also varies depending on the target of re-bordering. While COVID-19 affected all residents and the border closures mostly affected commuters, the idea of strengthening borders in response to crime or illegal immigration was presented more as a targeted action that aimed at people who were cast as outsiders. At the same time, debates about bordering and rebordering are entangled with the idea of Europe, as openness is treated as the normal condition for internal EU borders. Media narratives frequently reference the EU, implicitly or explicitly, as an institutional frame of reference for local expectations. Whether calling for open borders or an effective migration policy, the stories reflect the belief that European integration should deliver tangible results for border regions. Debordering and re-bordering, therefore, function as a recurring test of the EU’s performance and responsiveness in the borderlands. The next section examines how local and regional expectations of the EU as a benefactor and protector coexist with narratives that are more skeptical and disillusioned.

The EU as a benefactor and protector

As previously discussed, questions of bordering in the regional media were repeatedly framed with reference to the EU. This implies certain expectations for the EU. Indeed, the benefits of EU membership were featured sporadically in the regional media, but especially on the 20th anniversary of Poland and Czechia’s EU accession in 2024. There is also a related narrative that envisions the EU as a protector. This narrative was

most evident in the Turów coal mine dispute, which saw evaluations of the EU performance centre on law enforcement. The narrative left room for disappointment, for example, when the EU was seen to fail in its duty as a protector.

Faeser’s comments that the solution to the migration crisis is possible only “in Europe” make it clear that “Europe” and “the EU” are used almost synonymously in German media. Since the EU has some competence in migration policy (Kriesi et al. 2021), Faeser’s comment frames Germany’s EU membership not merely as a potential solution but as the only possible framework for addressing cross-border migration challenges. Such statements frame the EU as a solution to domestic problems within an overarching narrative that casts it as a benefactor and protector.

One recurring narrative presents EU membership as beneficial for the border region. Local and regional politicians from Poland, Czechia and Germany were reported as praising the EU’s support for cross-border cooperation: “Without the EU, we would not have many of the things we do today,” said the mayor of the Czech border town Hrádek, a sentiment echoed by then Görlitz district administrator Bernd Lange, who argued that the EU had moved the region “from the periphery back to the centre of Europe” (Sächsische Zeitung 2019c, 15). This aligns with the position of Zittau’s mayor Thomas Zenker, who, in the context of the Turów coal mine dispute, underscored the importance of upholding European law in border regions: “I hope that we in the middle of Europe do not now have to watch how European law is no longer taken seriously thanks to bilateral negotiations and financial transfers. That would be the wrong signal for Europe and above all for the border regions” (Lausitzer Rundschau 2022c, 2).

The controversy over the Turów coal mine illustrates how the EU is sometimes invoked as a protector. The open-cast mine near the Polish town of Bogatynia, close to the German and Czech borders, was framed as a source of pollution and subsidence by German media, although also recognised as vital for Polish employment (Lausitzer Rundschau 2020e, 13; 2022c, 16; Sächsische Zeitung 2020c, 15; 2020d, 13; 2020e, 17; 2021b, 18; 2021c, 10). After Poland unilaterally extended its mining licence in 2020, the Czech government lodged a complaint with the European Commission, and later escalated it to the European Court of Justice. The Court imposed a temporary halt and daily fines for non-compliance. However, in 2022, the Czech and Polish governments bypassed EU mechanisms and reached a bilateral agreement in which Poland agreed to pay compensation and implement safeguards.

The sidelining of EU institutions in the bilateral deal prompted criticism on the German side. Zenker warned of a dangerous precedent in which European law is “no longer taken seriously” (Lausitzer Rundschau 2022c,

16). Media coverage often expressed more sympathy for Czech motives than for Saxony’s or Berlin’s passivity (Sächsische Zeitung 2021a, 13). The Turów coal mine dispute thus crystallized broader narratives about the EU’s role as a legal and environmental safeguard. However, it also exposed the fragility of that role when institutions are circumvented or enforcement fails. The German media reports focused almost entirely on stories that criticized Turów and the exclusion of European institutions in the Turów case: the German MEP Anna Cavazzini was reported as highlighting the EU’s responsibility to protect citizens from cross-border harm, calling on the Commission to intervene in the Turów dispute (Sächsische Zeitung 2020c, 15), a view echoed by Greenpeace and other civil society actors (Sächsische Zeitung 2020d, 13). As also reported, a petition with 13,000 signatures demanded EU protection (Sächsische Zeitung 2020e, 17). A broader declaration to European and national bodies further condemned the mine’s environmental impact (Lausitzer Rundschau 2020e, 13). Thus, as the context evolved, narratives of the EU shifted from presenting it as a protector capable of delivering to one in which the EU is easily undermined and ineffectual. In other words, despite the positive expectations the media had of the EU, there were also seeds of more skeptical narratives.

Finally, narratives that extolled the benefits of the EU in more celebratory tones surfaced. Articles marking the twentieth anniversary of Poland and Czechia’s accession to the EU emphasized the practical and symbolic gains of joint membership (Sächsische Zeitung 2024a, 23). A Polish photographer in Görlitz recalled the disappearance of queues and bureaucratic hurdles (Sächsische Zeitung 2024b, 19), while the unfreezing of EU funds that followed a change of government in Warsaw was presented as an opportunity for regional renewal (Lausitzer Rundschau 2024a, 10).

To summarise, the three countries’ EU membership is narrated periodically as both a viable solution to policy problems and as having everyday benefits at the border. This is the narrative of the EU as a benefactor. A related narrative of the EU as a protector can be seen in the Turów coal mine controversy, where it is further linked to the EU’s enforcement of environmental law. At the same time, the protector narrative is inherently fragile and can easily turn into one of a “failed protector”. This leads to the next section, which outlines Eurosceptic narratives.

Eurosceptic narratives

Euroscepticism is a recurrent theme in Germany’s border region with Czechia and Poland. This is visible in party politics. For example, the Swiss journalist Peter Voegeli asked why the city of Zittau, despite having benefited from EU membership, funding and open borders, remained a stronghold of the Eurosceptic, right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party (Sächsische

Zeitung 2020f, 16). The AfD gained electoral support across the border region and beyond, drawing sharp criticism from other German politicians (Sächsische Zeitung 2023d, 2). More broadly, there was concern about anti-EU, nativist voices. For example, the governor of the Czech Liberec Region, Martin Puta, warned that past traumas—such as war, border changes, and forced population movements—could be repeated if Eurosceptic alternatives gained ground: "The fact that we are now experiencing better times again is thanks to the EU" (Sächsische Zeitung 2019c, 15).

Alongside concerns about party-political Euroscepticism, the regional press reveals four broad narratives of disenchantment with the EU. Two of the four narratives are fairly typical of Euroscepticism in that they problematize the perceived distance of the EU from local concerns as well as the EU's bureaucratic nature. The other two narratives are also Eurosceptic, but they are bottom-up regional narratives. They hold that the EU is falling short of its own ideals in the region and that European integration is working less well in this Central European border region than elsewhere in Western Europe.

The first Eurosceptic narrative is one of distance from the EU. The journalist Voegeli answered his own question as to why the Eurosceptic AfD was so successful in Zittau, which had benefited from EU membership: "Everyone in Zittau thinks Europe is good, but not the EU. And [Voegeli] also thinks he knows why this is so: because they feel forgotten and neglected here in the far east" (Sächsische Zeitung 2020f, 16). The narrative of EU distance was exemplified in an article that highlighted the EU's physical distance from decision makers, but also distance in terms of comprehension: "Almost exactly 868 kilometres lie between Cottbus and the administrative centre of the European Union in the Belgian capital Brussels. However, it is not only these 868 kilometres of motorway that the people of Lusatia have to overcome if they want to achieve something for themselves at the EU headquarters and attract attention to their concerns" (Lausitzer Rundschau 2019a, 6). The article continued to develop the EU-distance narrative, which reported on the EU's deputy director-general for energy, Klaus-Dieter Borchardt, gaining a better understanding of local conditions during a visit and, in doing so, recognizing that his perception of Lusatia needs updating.

The second narrative is a prevalent one that critiques EU bureaucracy. Frustration with EU funding rules is part of this narrative, reflecting both support and skepticism towards the EU. For example, Borchardt was quoted as admitting that funding calls were too bureaucratic (Lausitzer Rundschau 2019a, 6). Other gripes included the fact that projects can be funded

between two countries but not three, as shown by the example of an unsuccessful bridge project between the three countries. The project was first floated when Poland and Czechia joined the EU in 2004: "We tried to bring in a pilot project with three equal partners. But the forms do not provide for that" (Sächsische Zeitung 2022b, 9).

Another example was the successful police cooperation project, "Limes", which was running out of funds until a new EU budget was approved. This was called a "scandal" in regional reporting: "The car thieves will quickly realize when the pressure on them eases off" (Lausitzer Rundschau 2019c, 16). This narrative implies that EU funds fostered police cooperation that, in turn, put pressure on thieves, which was highlighted as a positive impact. However, it is also implied that the cooperation must be made permanent rather than subject to European budget cycles.

One article covered Polish farmers' protests against the EU's agricultural policy, which involved blocking border crossings. One farmer was quoted as saying: "It is a catastrophe with the EU" (Lausitzer Rundschau 2024b, 13), but the article did not elaborate in any greater depth. There was also a related narrative about German farmers who were said to feel pressure from EU regulations (Sächsische Zeitung 2024e, 14). In response, the EU representative Barbara Gessler noted the need for "strategic dialogue" to balance farmers' financial security with environmental and global competitiveness concerns. She defended regulations but also admitted: "We are aware of the problems and have now presented a whole package of proposals to reduce the administrative burden on farms, especially smaller businesses, which may be burdened disproportionately. We want to maintain more flexibility and reduce reporting requirements." (Sächsische Zeitung 2024e, 14). These examples show how media narratives link EU bureaucracy to local issues.

A third, periodically recurring narrative is that of Europe as an elusive ideal that is not being realized or that is being undermined. To some extent, this taps into the "EU as benefactor" narrative, a pro-European conviction that EU membership will bring progress to many policy areas. When the ideal is juxtaposed against the reality on the ground, disappointment results. As noted above, a local company director commented on COVID border closures: "I could not have imagined that such incalculable measures would happen within the EU" (Lausitzer Rundschau 2020b, 7). Another example is Martin Puta, who implicitly equates EU membership with progress and is disappointed with the local cross-border rail infrastructure. He was quoted as saying: "It just cannot be that 15 years after joining the EU, the tracks here are still so bad" (Sächsische Zeitung 2019a, 14).

In 2022, a Czech teacher applied for a teaching job in Saxony but faced considerable bureaucratic hurdles. The teacher was quoted as saying: "After 20 years of EU membership, do civil servants not know what the Polish and Czech certificates mean? We are not talking about Third World countries; we are talking about neighbours in the border triangle." The narrative stipulates that not only should the state of Saxony be aware of the teacher training systems in neighbouring countries, but that it should do so because of joint EU membership. This failure, accordingly, came with penalties to Saxony, which urgently needed to recruit more teachers: "I know another colleague who came to Germany full of anticipation. But he did not bother with all these administrative procedures for too long and is now working in Czechia again" (Sächsische Zeitung 2022d, 17). Underpinning this narrative is the idea that joint EU membership should have led to easy free movement of workers, but failed to do so. The disappointment with a European ideal that has not been realized is palpable here.

The fourth and final narrative draws an unflattering comparison between the perception of cross-border cooperation in Western Europe and its lived reality in Central Europe. For example, the effects of the border closures at the Polish-German border were unfavourably compared to the experience at the Belgian-German-Dutch border, which involved a governmental task force, police cooperation and health cooperation: "At the German-Polish border, similar consultations were almost unthinkable. The direct contacts between Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony with the neighbouring [Polish regions] proved not very resilient." (Lausitzer Rundschau 2021a, 17). This is not necessarily attributed to a failure on the part of the EU but rather to the weakness of regional cooperative structures at the Polish-German border, compared to those observed at Germany's western borders:

Wherever there were agreements on cross-border health care and emergency services before Corona, and stable regional coordination bodies, they have also stood the test in the pandemic, says one scientist. For Brandenburg's border region with Poland, many such agreements are still missing. However, at least the offices of the Euroregions and the Frankfurt-Stubice Cooperation Centre, which runs a bilingual information hotline, have proved to be cooperative and citizen-oriented (Lausitzer Rundschau 2021a, 17).

In a 2021 article, a journalist described feelings of humiliation among Eastern Europeans that resulted from the actions of big powers in the EU, such as France and Germany: "They have the impression, not always wrongly, that they have been treated for decades as stubborn and economically and politically second-rate

junior partners. As nations that have yet to learn democracy, civic community and the rule of law. Their unwillingness to adopt the Western value system in a way that they feel would make them mere clones of the West is growing louder" (Sächsische Zeitung 2021d, 3).

It is worth quoting the subsequent analysis at some length:

In East Germany, too, in 1990, the principles and convictions of the West were transferred to a society that perceives itself as colonized and devalued to a significant extent. ...

The fact that some in East Germany are still – perhaps again – embracing values that sometimes differ from traditionally Western ones has been demonstrated by countless studies. The acceptance of authoritarian ideas, the advocacy of a strong and maximally autonomous nation state, the rejection of the EU and liberalism, the desire for more isolation and dominant cultural homogeneity are more pronounced between the Baltic Sea and the Ore Mountains than between the North Sea and the Allgäu – Germany and our people first! Accordingly, the party that has these values on its blue flags could become strong here. It is no coincidence that Pegida⁵ emerged in the East, a movement whose content largely resembles an alternative to the Western canon of values, symbolized, among other things, by the copious use of the Russian flag (Sächsische Zeitung 2021d, 3).

In this narrative, East Germany is grouped with other Central and Eastern European countries, which are presented as feeling misunderstood by patronizing Western Europeans. Along with examples of functioning Western cross-border cooperation that are lacking at the Polish-Czech-German border, contrasts between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe are bound to be perceived unfavourably, thereby linking this theme clearly to the Eurosceptic position that European integration works less well in the East.

Taken together, the narratives show that Euroscepticism in the regional media is "soft" and does not reject European integration as such but rather contests its effects on the ground. This Eurosceptic narrative takes its general form through criticism of the EU's distance and bureaucracy, as well as through more contingent, local forms linked to the specific context of the Polish-German-Czech border region. The narratives may therefore go some way towards answering Voegeli's question about the region being a stronghold for Eurosceptic parties such as the AfD. One reason may be the gap between the local lived realities of European integration and the hopes and expectations pinned on the EU.

Conclusion

This article examined the construction of narratives of Europe and bordering "from below" by regional German media on the German side of the Polish-Czech-German border. By drawing on the literature on the narrative construction of Europe, the article has shown how "Europe" has become a frame of reference in the German borderland setting. Bordering events often lead the media to attribute responsibility for the event, evaluate EU performance, and, at times, advance contingent Eurosceptic narratives. Taken together, the article points to a situational and locally grounded pattern of EU contestation.

The analysis first revealed that narratives about bordering are not fixed but issue-dependent. For example, instances of rebordering during the COVID-19 pandemic were covered by highly critical media narratives that focused largely on the plight of commuters and the disruptions to everyday life in the border region. By contrast, re-bordering was presented more favourably when the issues at stake were low-level crime and especially irregular migration. This supports the argument that border controls are context-dependent practices framed by narratives of varying perceptions of risk (Côté-Boucher et al. 2014). The narratives shift depending on the issue, but they also differ depending on who the target of re-bordering is. When everybody is affected, such as during COVID-19, media narratives are highly critical of rebordering. When bordering is aimed at perceived "others", such as criminals or immigrants, the media narratives are more supportive.

Second, the investigation shows that the EU regularly appears as a point of reference across diverse issue areas and is variously framed as a protector, a benefactor, or a distant and inadequate institution. Positive media narratives highlight European support for cross-border cooperation, the general progress achieved through European integration, and the EU's legal authority in environmental disputes, such as the Turów coal mine. However, because the narratives raise people's expectations of the EU, they are also potentially disillusioning. When EU institutions are not seen as able to enforce rules effectively, the narrative frame of the EU as a protector flips to that of the EU as a failed protector. Regional media thus present the EU as simultaneously capable and ineffectual. This implies that the EU's legitimacy is conditional on performance and perceived responsiveness, but that it does not always live up to expectations.

A third theme that emerged was that location is central to the development of the media narratives. European integration is especially tangible in border regions. It is where cross-border commuting is a daily reality, where environmental harms transcend national boundaries, and where policy failures of coordination are felt most

acutely. Border regions function as places where the promises and limits of integration are especially visible. The media reports analyzed here show that German regional media often link place-specific concerns, such as commuting, policing, and the Turów coal mine dispute, to the EU's supranational responsibilities. While this analytical focus does not make any claims about how the border-region community receives these narratives, it does show how media in a peripheral borderland setting provide recurring storylines that render Europe as both a concrete and contested entity.

Finally, the analysis shows that Euroscepticism in the region emerged as a set of contingent narratives that are shaped by the EU's perceived shortcomings. Regional media narratives of EU distance, bureaucracy, the EU's failure to live up to expectations, and the inequalities in integration processes between East and West combine generic Eurosceptic themes with borderland-specific frustrations. The narratives did not, however, amount to a wholesale rejection of European integration. Underlying the soft Euroscepticism of the media narratives is the more integrationist expectation that EU membership will bring unqualified progress, even if this expectation is sometimes disappointed. This aligns with De Wilde and Trenz's (2012) argument that contestation is intrinsic to the evolving European polity. Moreover, in a borderland setting, contestation is frequently anchored in concrete experiences of mobility and governance, as well as in what is perceived as neglect.

This analysis contributes to work that theorizes border regions as sites where bordering events serve as narrative touchstones for evaluating EU performance. The analysis is limited to media content and does not include audience reception. Future research could combine an analysis of how narratives are *constructed* with an analysis of how they are *received*, using media and audience research. One could also extend the design to Polish and Czech media to examine if their bordering experiences generate either converging or competing narratives.

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that Europe is not merely a distant polity in regional media. It is negotiated through stories of bordering, cooperation, crisis, and conflict. The media narratives analysed here reflect an ongoing struggle to reconcile the ideals of European integration with the complex realities of its implementation. They offer insights into how European integration is experienced and narrated, showing that structurally peripheral border regions do not simply absorb EU narratives from the top down but also interpret and reframe them, sometimes in support, sometimes in criticism, from the bottom up. Recognising this bottom-up narrative work is crucial for understanding how Europe is imagined and contested in the everyday politics of border regions.

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Endnotes

- 1 The term "Europe" here refers to the European Union more generally, while "EU" refers to EU institutions, legal instruments, and competences.
- 2 The asterisk means that any word starting with eurosceptic would be included among the results, including Euroscepticism, Eurosceptics and eurosceptical.
- 3 In the original German, these are: Euroskept*, Grenz* + Polen, Grenz + polnisch*, Grenz* + tschech*, Brüssel, EU.
- 4 The Sächsische Zeitung is overrepresented in this selection because it covered the Turów controversy more and thus fit many of the search criteria (which was consistent with the purposive sampling).
- 5 Pegida (short for the German name "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident") was a far-right movement that originated in Saxony. Active from 2014 until its dissolution in 2024, the movement was known for organizing demonstrations against Islam and against immigration.