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# INTRODUCTION: Narrating Europe from the Borders: A Media Analysis of European Integration

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**Abstract.** This is the introduction to a special section “Narrating Europe from the Borders” in which we examine how European integration is discursively constructed in regional media located in internal EU borderlands. Drawing on research from the Horizon Europe project B-SHAPES, it compares four regions—the Franco-German Upper Rhine, the German-Polish-Czech triangle, the Danish-Swedish Øresund region, and the Slovak-Hungarian borderlands—through media analysis covering 2019–2022. The special section argues that borders are not merely territorial facts but also narrative and symbolic constructions, continuously produced through public discourse. By focusing on local and regional media rather than elite or national arenas, it highlights how Europe is narrated “from below” through everyday experiences of mobility, crisis, cooperation, and disruption. Particular attention is paid to the tension between bordering and debordering during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section shows that regional media reveal both common patterns and region-specific variations in how the EU, European integration, and Euroscepticism are framed at the Union’s internal frontiers.

## Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long been defined by its borders—physical, legal, and symbolic—and by how the institution has tried to transcend them. Article 26 of the current Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2009) explicitly states that “the internal market shall comprise an area without internal frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured in accordance with the provisions of the Treaties”. From the abolition of internal border

checks under Schengen to the rise of cross-border governance frameworks like Euroregions or Eurodistricts (Ulrich 2021, 1–10), integration has been as much about managing frontiers as about erasing them (Wassenberg 2024). Yet borders have never vanished entirely. They remain sites of friction and cooperation, anxiety and aspiration, places where Europe is made real, and where its limits are tested (Wassenberg 2019; Berrod 2020; Berrod 2023).

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This Special Section of the *Borders in Globalization (BIG) Review* explores how European integration is narrated in and through the borderlands of the European Union (EU). It focuses on the role of local and regional media in shaping the public imagination of the European neighbour and of Europe as a whole. The focus is on four internal EU frontiers among the ten border regions studied by the B-Shapes consortium: the Franco-German Upper Rhine, the German-Polish-Czech triangle, the Danish-Swedish Øresund region, and the Slovak-Hungarian borderlands (see map 1). The results stem from research conducted by the Horizon Europe project B-SHAPES (Borders Shaping Perceptions of Europe, 2023–2026), which explores how physical, symbolic, and institutional borders affect citizens' perceptions of the EU across different regions. The authors who participated in this Special Section were members of Working Package 3 (WP3) in B-SHAPES, which had a twofold objective: to assess how borders affect citizens' perceptions of Europe and to relate these perceptions to the development of Euroscepticism in the borderlands. For this purpose, they analyzed Euroscepticism through various lenses, including citizen focus groups, political interviews, and regional media analysis.

The Special Section presents the results of the regional media analysis of the four EU border regions between 2019 and 2022, exploring both the representations of borders and Europe and the extent of Euroscepticism. The articles reflect the empirical and conceptual findings developed as part of this collaborative work. Through close analysis of regional newspapers and

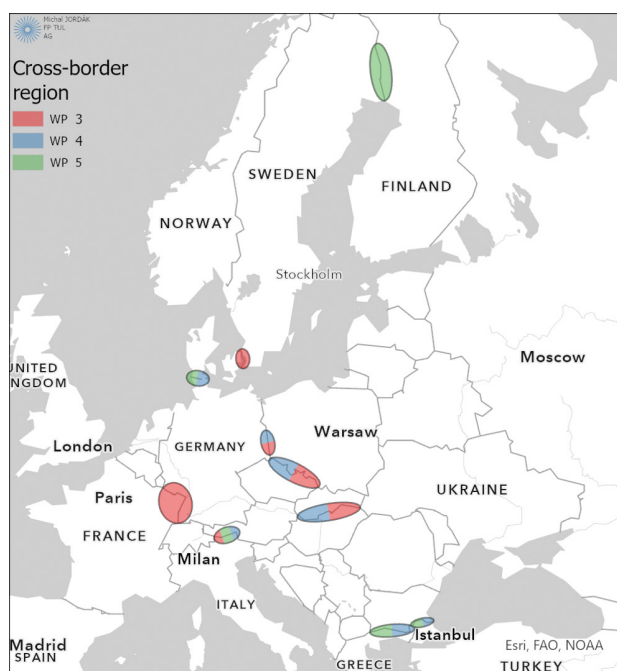
digital outlets, the contributions examine how Europe and its borders are framed, negotiated, and contested in everyday public discourse, particularly during moments of crisis, disruption, and political salience.

The authors seek to shift the scholarly gaze away from elite actors, formal institutions, and high politics. Instead, they foreground the discursive production of Europe "from below" (Schmidt 2009)—as lived, narrated, and contested in peripheral yet symbolically-charged spaces. The contributors argue that borders are not only regulated, but that European integration does not exist independently of how it is made intelligible and meaningful to those who live on its edges (Schmidtke & Wassenberg 2023).

### Analyzing Euroscepticism in Border Regions

Euroscepticism is a large field of research. When political scientists first identified Euroscepticism in the 1980s, they were referring to a phenomenon that had originated in British party politics, notably when Margaret Thatcher rejected the European Economic Community (EEC) (Spiering 2004). Euroscepticism then spread to the rest of Europe, largely driven by the gradual erosion of the so-called "permissive consensus" among the European public (Manigand & Dulphy 2004; Brack & Costa 2014). The concept of Euroscepticism had been primarily developed in relation to party politics. Indeed, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2003) provided a scale that allowed for the classification of political parties as soft or hard Eurosceptics. In light of the history of European integration, however, this assumption has been put into question. Opposition to Europe can indeed be traced back to the very beginning of the European integration process in the 1950s, if not to the beginning of the debates on the European idea in the 1920s (Wassenberg 2020a). Thus, Euroscepticism is better understood as a complex phenomenon: it is not limited to party politics, is not homogeneous, is not equally strong in all European countries, and is neither static nor unmovable. On the contrary, Euroscepticism is a dynamic process that evolves and develops alongside the history of European integration (Leconte 2010).

Analyzing Euroscepticism in border regions further complicates the picture. First, borders are symbolically and practically intertwined with the European integration process and the idea of a "Europe without borders" (Wassenberg 2020b). In border regions, idealistic thinking about border opening coexists with local forms of Euroscepticism (Bürkner 2020; Durand et al. 2020; Parker 2013). In some regions, the negative effects of EU-related processes of debordering and re-bordering (e.g., border closures) were highly localized and strengthened Euroscepticism among the public (Durand et al. 2020, 588–589). Second, assessing Euroscepticism in border regions means determining whether people living in border regions are more or less



**Map 1. The Border Regions studied by B-Shapes.** Source: Michal Jordák (TUL).

Eurosceptic than those farther from the border. There is some controversy in this field of research. Some studies show that the closer one lives to a border, the greater the support for European integration (Schmidberger 1997; Gabel 1998a; Díez Medrano 2003; Kuhn 2012). In contrast, other studies suggest either globally negative or differential effects depending on which side of the border is considered (Decoville & Durand 2019; Kuhn 2012; Durand et al. 2020, 590–591; Sohn & Scott 2020; Lauener & Bernhard 2023; Nasr & Rieger 2023; Parker 2013). Finally, there is the fact that “opposition to the EU is sensitive to, and situated within, national cultural contexts” (Dutceac Segesten & Bossetta 2014, 2). The question thus arises as to whether there may be locally grown variants of Euroscepticism. People are rooted in geographical and social contexts that shape their experiences and perceptions, including the very local level of the border region.

This Special Section, therefore, not only analyzes the geographical distribution of Euroscepticism across different border regions but also seeks to identify the localized reasons for the Euroscepticism of people living in borderland regions.

## Rethinking Borders Through Discourse

The conceptual premise of this special section is that borders are not only a geographical reality, but also a social and discursive construct: invoked, performed, and transformed through narrative. As border studies have increasingly emphasized (Newman 2006; Brambilla 2015), the work of bordering involves not only institutional practices but also symbolic and narrative operations. The media play a crucial role in this process. The media selects which border events to cover, which voices to amplify, and which meanings to attribute, while journalists and editors participate in the continuous making and unmaking of borders.

This dynamic is particularly significant in the context of the EU, as Katja Sarmiento-Mirwaldt points out in her contribution, “Contested Integration in the Borderlands: Narrating the EU from the German Periphery”. The EU’s multi-level architecture, its ambiguous *demos*, and its contested legitimacy all contribute to a communicative deficit (Dacheux 2017). While efforts have been made to foster a European public sphere, most media systems remain stubbornly national or even regional in scope. As a result, European integration is often mediated through domestically embedded discourses, filtered by local experiences and cultural repertoires (Koopmans & Statham 2010; Trenz 2004).

Border regions are fertile ground for studying this phenomenon. They offer a point from which to observe how EU policies are grounded in everyday life, how national frames are both reproduced and blurred, and how regional identities interact with broader projects

of integration (Berezin et. al. 2003; Paasi 2009). They are also places where the tension between debordering and re-bordering is, by definition, most visible, whether in the form of cross-border labour markets and infrastructure, or in the resurgence of border controls during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2015 arrival of refugees (Wassenberg 2017; Freudlsperger et al. 2024).

## Methodological Convergences

Although the articles in this special section focus on different borderland regions and reference different sources, all share a common methodological orientation: the close reading of regional media as narrative producers. A concern unites the contributions: how Europe is discussed in local contexts and how such narratives reveal the tensions and ambivalences of integration as it unfolds on the ground. Importantly, the focus is not on national media or elite discourses, but on regional outlets, daily newspapers, digital portals (see Balogh’s contribution, “‘Now We Are Separate Again’: Attitudes toward Borders and EUrope in Hungarian-Language News Portals in Slovakia during COVID”), and local correspondents that articulate the concerns, routines, and symbolic economies of their readerships. In contrast to national media, which often follow metropolitan agendas, these sources are embedded in a local/regional territorial setting. Cross-border schooling, commuting, hospital cooperation (see Bruyas’ contribution, “*Debordering through Discourse: Friendship and European Integration in Regional Media of Franco-German Border Regions*”), environmental disputes (see Balogh’s contribution) and joint infrastructure (see Balogh’s contribution; Svensson and Miraka’s contribution, “*Gateway to Europe or Gateway in Europe? Attitudes to Europe and the European Union in the Danish-Swedish Oresund border Region Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Crisis*”) are not distant policies but recurring news items. As such, these media help reveal the spatialized meanings of European integration in both pragmatic and affective terms.

The studies are also attentive to narrative forms. Rather than coding articles for simple content categories (e.g., Euroscepticism vs. Europhilia), they explored how the EU is represented as an actor, a symbol, and a source of hope or frustration. They look at metaphors, editorial tones, repeated themes, and the implicit geographies that structure how “Europe” and “the border” are understood. Whether through the powerful “friendship narrative” of the Franco-German case (Bruyas’ contribution), the pragmatic disappointment with border closures in Øresund (Svensson and Miraka’s contribution), or the contested depictions of Brussels in Hungarian-language media in Slovakia (Balogh’s contribution), the articles approach discourse not merely as a reflection of borderland conditions but as a construction of them.

The four articles explore the same period of time (before and after the COVID-19 pandemic) in the same “kairotic” way (Opilowska et al. 2023, 8), where time is punctuated by meaningful events so that “complete stories (...) begin to emerge, as the actors and the observers connect separate events and actions into a plot leading to a point” (Czarniawska 2010, 61). Consequently, rather than following a purely chronological timeline, we have foregrounded discursive ruptures and narrative shifts that are linked to significant political or symbolic events. Among the key events examined, the COVID-19 pandemic was central. Not only did the COVID pandemic trigger a return to national border controls, but it also prompted intense debate about Europe’s role in crisis response (Berrod 2020). For instance, the Turów mine controversy raised questions about cross-border environmental justice and the authority of EU law (see Sarmiento-Mirwaldt’s contribution). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reintroduced questions of security, sovereignty, and solidarity to the European agenda and often in territorially uneven ways (Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig, 2022). More recently, the 2023 World Health Organization (WHO) declaration of the formal end of the COVID-19 crisis and the 2024 European Parliament elections offer an opportunity to assess the evolution of the border narratives in the wake of accumulated crises. Finally, some events, such as the Aachen Treaty (2019), were more salient in specific border regions (see Bruyas’ contribution), highlighting the spatial unevenness of European symbolic politics.

### Bordering and Debordering in Border Regions: Europe at Play

One of the central themes that cuts across all four contributions is the impact of the crisis, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, on bordering practices and narratives. The pandemic was a stress test for the EU’s border regime: it prompted sudden re-bordering measures,

disrupted established routines of cross-border mobility, and exposed the limits of solidarity (Brordowski et al. 2023). For many residents of the internal borderland regions, it was a moment of cognitive dissonance. The border returned, often with little warning, contradicting years of debordering efforts and symbolic rapprochement (Weber & Wille 2020). Border regions were no longer a model of European integration (Stoklosa 2015).

In the Øresund region, as depicted by Sara Svensson and Oriana Miraka, local and regional actors expressed deep frustration at the reintroduction of border controls. The controls disrupted a previously fluid labour market and re-politicized territorial asymmetries, in which Danes have more border-crossing rights than Swedes. Media narratives also revealed a disconnect between national capitals and the border regions, with Copenhagen’s decisions seen as insensitive to the realities of everyday cross-border life. Yet the EU itself was largely absent from the public discourse—a pattern of *euro-absence* according to the two contributors—pointing to the persistent nationalization of responsibility even in highly integrated regions.

In the Slovak–Hungarian case, Peter Balogh explains that the border closures took on added emotional weight due to the historical and cultural ties linking ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia to their kin state. Here, Hungarian-language media in Slovakia oscillated between criticizing national governments and offering ambivalent references to the EU, sometimes framing the EU as having failed to live up to its promise of freedom of movement. The media also served as a space where cross-border grievances were articulated, especially by minority political actors, but were rarely translated into protest or broader mobilization.

The German–Polish–Czech triangle offers yet another perspective. Katja Sarmiento-Mirwaldt shows that regional newspapers in eastern Germany often portray

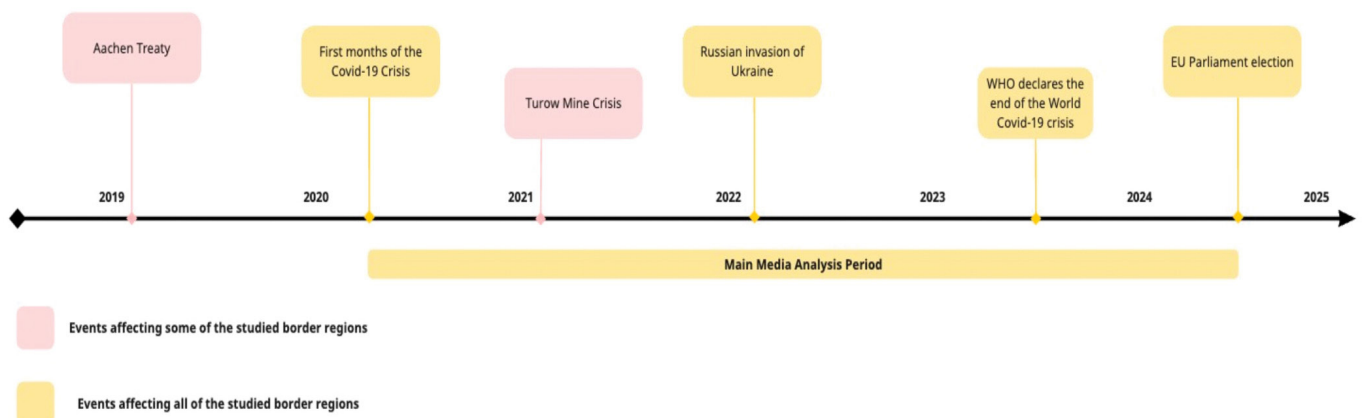


Figure 1. The “kairotic” timeline of the media analysis. Source: Timeline created by Pierrick Bruyas.

the EU as both a benefactor and a distant bureaucracy, valued for its support of cross-border projects but criticized for inaction during crises such as the Turów mine dispute. The pandemic border closures were widely disparaged, especially given their effects on cross-border workers, but they did not fundamentally displace the EU as a central point of reference. Instead, what emerged was a set of layered narratives: of pragmatic dependence, normative disappointment, and conditional loyalty.

In contrast to the aforementioned cases, the Franco-German Upper Rhine region provides a more emotionally resonant narrative of integration. As Pierrick Bruyas shows, the concept of “Franco-German friendship” permeates the media landscape, especially in Alsace and Baden. This framework persisted during the pandemic, colouring reports of disruption with a tone of regret rather than hostility. Regional media helped sustain the vision of the border as a connective space, inhabited by shared memory and future-oriented cooperation. But this positive effect should not obscure asymmetries. The French press tends to emphasize symbolic reconciliation, while German outlets adopt a more technocratic lens.

### **A Screenshot Analysis of Euroscepticism in Border Regions**

Let us not forget that the media analysis presented here is but a snapshot of a very short moment in history, a mere three-year period, spanning 2019 to 2022. When placed in a broader historical context, assessments of Euroscepticism in border regions may reveal a different picture, including the Franco-German cross-border areas, where resentment has frequently been a feature of cross-border cooperation (Wassenberg 2024).

Two issues could temper the results presented in this special section. First, the media analysis presented here does not account for the dynamism of Euroscepticism over time, nor does it consider the concept from a long-term historical perspective. The articles focus on a specific period of crisis in Europe, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, during which border closures were imposed on most EU member states, calling into question the idea of a “Europe without borders” (Wassenberg 2020b). The period of bordering and debordering during the pandemic lasted only a relatively short time (from Spring 2020 to the end of 2021). It often led to the unjustified imposition of internal border controls by the EU member states (European Court of Auditors 2022). After 2021, however, border controls were gradually lifted, and the Schengen Area functioned as before (Weber & Berner 2021). Therefore, the way Europe was perceived in the border regions from 2019-2022 must be viewed through the lens of a very specific type of Eurosceptic questioning, as the idea of “Europe without borders” was called into question (see

Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, Balogh, Svensson, and Miraka). By way of contrast, in the Franco-German border region, Europhile journalists were desperately trying to defend the European idea in times of crisis (see Bruyas). The snippets of understanding offered by the articles in this issue should be folded into a longer-term study that considers the history of European integration, marked by both crises and periods of progress.

Second, while the media analyses mirror the attitudes towards Europe in the four border regions at the time of COVID-19, they do not consider the variety of actors or their motivations, let alone their feelings toward the process of European integration. Historians claim that Euroscepticism is not a simple, objective process, but rather a manifestation of negative emotions: fear of globalization, fear of losing one’s job, fear of a socialist Europe, anger toward Brussels and its bureaucracy, with innumerable European directives that complicate the daily life and habits of the people of Europe. Euroscepticism is also indicative of a sense of disillusionment, as Europe had not yet become a reality for its citizens, despite the promises and political discourse (Frank 2004; Loth & Barthel 2007). Thus, the media analysis not only reflects the unique situation of European border regions but also expresses the political and social phenomenon known as “resistance to Europe” (Crespy & Verschueren 2010). Different expressions of Euroscepticism are further developed by considering the historical concept developed by Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle of the so-called *forces profondes* (deep forces) in the history of international relations (1964). In this approach, the motivations, social backgrounds, and portrayals of the actors opposing Europe are considered. This more expansive definition has already been used by historians who sought to trace opposition to Europe back to its origins in the beginning of the European project (Jean-Michel Guieu et al. 2006). The approach allows for the study of European oppositional movements over the long term. Renouvin and Duroselle considered these types of study necessary, and they were encouraged to follow through by political scientists such as Stefano Bartolini and Yves Déloye (Bartolini 2005; Déloye 2000). They recognized that opposition to Europe at any given point in time was insufficient to understand its long-term development and evolution.

This special section highlights the perceptions of Europe from a borderland perspective at the precise moment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The perspective recognizes that the analysis of Euroscepticism might change over time, or again in response to a new crisis or even due to increased progress in European integration (Varsori 2020). Therefore, opposition to Europe in border regions takes shape in response to specific representations of Europe. Actors do not normally reject the idea of European integration itself, but rather their self-constructed representations of Europe. They might also oppose certain aspects of the integration process

(Gilbert & Pasquinucci 2020). The self-constructed representations depend on the concept of European unification used, the actors' nationalities, and the time period or phase of integration. Thus, opposition to Europe is linked to an image of Europe. In other words, opposition to Europe is opposition to a specific understanding of the "European identity" (Bitsch 2010), an issue that the media articles under review could hardly cover in any detail.

Nevertheless, the approach adopted in this special section remains relevant. By focusing deliberately on a circumscribed temporal frame and a specific set of media sources, we do not claim to reconstruct the full long-term vision of border narratives. Rather, we show how these narratives operate under the pressure of crisis events, when political and symbolic meanings are actively contested. Historical analysis traces continuities and structural evolutions, but it can sometimes smooth over the ruptures, hesitations, and contradictions that emerge in moments of intense uncertainty. Our snapshot perspective allows us to identify the discursive inflections, the emotional tones, and the framing devices mobilized in real time by local and regional media—not only as narrative constructions but as crucial channels through which citizens' perceptions of Europe, the border, and European integration are shaped and negotiated in response to sudden shifts in the border regime. In border regions, such shifts are not abstract. They immediately affect daily mobility, economic exchanges, and the overall quality of cross-border cooperation. As a result, media narratives play a central role in shaping how these disruptions are interpreted, normalized, or politicized by local audiences, thereby directly influencing broader perceptions of European integration. Capturing these dynamics as they unfold provides a deeper understanding of how Europe is experienced "from below" in specific times and places, revealing how the interplay between bordering and debordering is narrated in ways that can either reinforce or challenge the broader project of European integration. The comparative scope of our work further enriches this approach by drawing on research conducted across different border regions with distinct historical trajectories, socio-political contexts, and patterns of cross-border cooperation, thereby highlighting both recurring mechanisms and region-specific dynamics. Taken together, the four contributions show how localized border narratives act as sensitive indicators of pro- or anti-European attitudes across the EU, revealing how trust, solidarity, and the legitimacy of cross-border cooperation are discursively either reinforced or dismantled in times of stress. Far from being methodologically incompatible with historical contextualization, this close, time-bound reading offers a necessary complement. It anchors the long-term vision in the lived and narrated present, illuminating the processes through which the EU's meaning is continuously reworked at its internal frontiers.

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