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The Swiss–French Border Closure During COVID-19: A Cross-border Worker’s View

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This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Swiss–French border in the Geneva region. This cross-border metropolitan area, which is structured by many cross-border flows, transcends the boundary line. The paper presents testimony of Clément Montcharmont, who works in Geneva and lives in France and was much impacted by the closing of the border.

Geneva, Center of a Cross-border Region

Defined as a “cross-border agglomeration” (Moullé 2002, 114), the Geneva region is one of the most integrated border regions in Europe. However, it was not until the 1970s that the City of Geneva and the French border regions around it started developing cross-border links (ibid). In recent years, the French–Swiss border has been crossed by hundreds of thousands of people annually. In the third quarter of 2019, there were 86,535 cross-border commuters.¹ Besides, the region is marked by some kind of “continuity of its urban fabric” (ibid 116) while also enjoying a cross-border institution—the “*Grand Genève*”—which is in



charge of governance of the region. The most recent cooperative mechanism came in December 2019 with the inauguration of the Lemman Express, a cross-border train that is part of a larger public transportation network aimed at encouraging links between France and Switzerland and transcending the border (Makim 2008). The Geneva region is therefore the site of both functional integration, which has to do with “socio-economic interactions”, and institutional integration, which is linked with cooperation between the different actors (Sohn 2007, 3). The result is a degree of cohesion across the border (Schultz 2002, 52). Until the COVID-19 pandemic, the border was highly defunctionalized, almost invisible, and could be crossed in a few seconds. Indeed, most border facilities had been removed. Controls were only partial at the major crossings. Not a lot of border officers were present, and no documentation was needed to enter either country.² For some residents with transnational lives, crossing the border every day, it was as if there were no border at all, as a binational student recently told *Le Temps*: “I had never realized that I lived France until now” (Scuderi 2020). This paper presents the shift that the border underwent with reference to the experience of Clément Montcharmont who, living in France and working in Switzerland, was caught in the middle of this territorial lockdown.³

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Lockdown Complicates Lives of Border Residents

The long-standing tradition of openness and cooperation abruptly came to an end with the 2020 pandemic that saw countries use their borders as tools to slow the spread of the disease. The territorial lockdown was at cross purposes with the ideal of freedom of circulation that the EU had built itself around through the Schengen Area of free movement between more than two dozen European countries. As a result of COVID-19, open, highly defunctionalized borders turned almost overnight into hardened borders. On March 18, all non-essential travel across the French-Swiss border was suspended. People could only enter Switzerland for professional reasons or in case of "absolute necessity" (Keystone-ATS 2020). Non-official ports of entry where customs building had been closed for many decades were barred with concrete barriers and metal fences. On top that, border agents were deployed at the nine official ports that remained open to ensure that people who crossed the border had proper documentation (ATS Keystone 2020). Every person was screened and required an "international derogatory authorization" in order to pass (MD 2020). At some crossings, such as the Thônex-Fossard port of entry, the closing of the border verged on militarization with the deployment of two Swiss soldiers wearing bulletproof vests and carrying assault rifles (Lecomte 2020). On the French side, it was revealed that 15,000 people were pushed back at the border during the three months of its closure (SC 2020). Given the tradition of friendship and cooperation that had prevailed between the two countries the change was unexpected and dramatic. It was the first time since World War 2 that the France-Switzerland border had been sealed (MD 2020).

The border did not reopen all at once. It was gradual. On May 11, when the lockdown loosened in France, France and Switzerland jointly decided to open up 17 border crossings in the Geneva region. Traffic was almost "back to normal": it was estimated that cross-border travel reached 90% of its pre-closure levels on that day (ATS Keystone 2020). Then, on June 15, it reopened entirely. Although people experienced free circulation again, the cross-border train, the *Leman Express*, reduced service until August 24 (MD 2020).

This shift was experienced firsthand by Clément Montcharmont, 27, who started working for and was missioned to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and *Radio Télévision Suisse* (RTS) during the lockdown. Living in Crozet, France, he crossed the border twelve times to go to work in Geneva during the French lockdown at the Saint Genis le Pouilly Port of Entry. He noted a shift in terms of border controls: every vehicle was stopped and every person had to present their work permit as well as an employer's document affirming the employment and location. If you did not comply, you were turned away. Since he

and his colleagues were subcontractors for RTS and CERN, they were not cross-border commuters⁴ *per se*—*frontaliers* as they put it in French—and they lacked a G work permit required by the Swiss government.⁵ Therefore, this sometimes created some problems at the border on the part of some "zealous officers" who opted not to let them in. He also noted that border controls were the same in both directions. However, no health inspectors were deployed at this border crossing and no one ever took his temperature when crossing into Switzerland or back to France.

Although he only started working in the region on March 16, at the beginning of the territorial lockdown, Clément Montcharmont was already a "borderlander" (Martinez 1994) in that he grew up in Alsace, near Mulhouse, and, for his whole life, he only experienced the free circulation of people, crossing into Germany for vacation and recreation. The hardening of border controls thus made him feel "irritated (...) and not as free as before".⁶ He argued that "you are hassled on your way to your work place (...) just to travel three kilometers", which created "a bit of frustration".

Since he was also missioned to CERN, which is a European cross-border organization that straddles the international line, he could circumvent the hassle of crossing the border by entering by the "French entry", given the fact that CERN had two entries, one for the employees of each country. This special configuration took on heightened significance under these circumstances, circumventing a national border apparatus that had been substantially hardened.

In Clément Montcharmont's experience, the impact of this new border apparatus was that even though fewer people were crossing, the lines at the border were longer and sometimes even "three kilometres long", especially at rush hours in the morning and in the evening. It could take as long as 20 minutes whereas usually it only took less than five minutes.

When the border "reopened" after May 11, when the French lockdown loosened, Montcharmont noted that controls were still very much present. It was only after June 15 that the situation was back to normal. But the spin effect was that when the border reopened completely, traffic jams increased. Indeed, although there were no longer any controls, the fact that more people were crossing into Switzerland entailed more border congestion: "paradoxically, now, it takes longer to cross the border".

Still, the reopening of the border allowed him to go to Geneva and to Lake Lemman for recreation and not just for work. He also noted that Swiss people are now also coming back to France for shopping⁷ or to go to apartments or houses they own. In other words, after a three-month closing of the border, which complicated the daily lives of border residents (Scuderi 2020),

people on both sides retrieved their crossing habits and resumed their transnational lives. The border became less associated with fear and control and has assumed its open nature again, linked with different activities not just limited to work.

What happened at the French–Swiss border is a sign of the “rebordering”⁸ phenomenon that has been emerging throughout the world in the last 30 years (Popescu 2012): as a response to terrorism, immigration and drug trafficking, governments have reinforced their borders with more controls as well as with the construction of walls and fences (Vallet 2014). The pandemic showed that Europe was not immune to this phenomenon. As the last decade has shown signs of a hardening of European borders especially in the context of the wave of terrorist attacks that flared up across Europe—especially in France in 2015–2016—and of the so-called migrant “crisis” that started in 2015 (Bartel, Delcroix, and Pape 2020; UNHCR 2020; Wassenberg 2020), this trend of chronic reinforcements of borders within the Schengen Area has persisted and expanded. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily put on hold the Schengen Area insofar as all countries closed their borders. Common wisdom has accepted that in times of crisis, protectionist and nationalist instincts prevail. Given the uniqueness of the situation, the EU gave in to such instincts, even if cooperation was still very much present in taking these closing decisions, thus eroding the ideal of open borders and free mobility—as elsewhere in the world. The questions that remain are the following: will the pandemic have a long-term impact on how we see (open) borders or will it reinforce in the long run the rebordering phenomenon and sound the death knell for the faltering Schengen Area?

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Notes

- 1 This number corresponds to the commuters living in France and working in the Geneva County. If Vaux County is added, which is a part of the Grand Genève, there are 32,206 additional commuters (https://www.pxweb.bfs.admin.ch/pxweb/fr/px-x-0302010000_104/px-x-0302010000_104/px-x-0302010000_104.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=d82d41ab-8197-419a-b85a-c0d6a5980987)
- 2 Even though Switzerland is not a part of the European Union, after entering the Free-Trade Area in 1972, it signed with the EU a series of Bilateral Agreements in 1999 and 2004, which granted the Helvetic Confederation a special status. It made Switzerland a part of the Schengen Area thus consecrating the principle of free mobility and

defunctionalizing the border between the country and its neighbors. Other topics such as the opening up of the labor market (Bilateral Agreements I) as well as security cooperation and the streamlining of fiscal policies (Bilateral Agreements II) further formalized the Switzerland/EU relationship as integrative and cooperative (for more information see Radio Télévision Suisse (2017).

- 3 A friend of the paper’s author, Clément Montcharmont was asked five open questions about his job, his crossing habits, the controls he had gone through while crossing the border and his perception of the changes that the border had experienced.
- 4 The workers are considered French citizens employed by a French company, who are missioned to work in Switzerland. It means that their wage is in Euros and they work under French law.
- 5 A G work permit is granted to European citizens living in the EU (most of the time in France, Germany, Austria and Italy) and working in Switzerland. This work permit is valid for five years and cross-border commuters are required to go back to their home country at least once a week.
- 6 The interview took place in French and the quotes were translated for the purpose of this article.
- 7 It is well known that Swiss people come to France to shop. But the border closure modified people’s shopping habits. Since Swiss people could no longer cross the border, French retailers saw a “significant impact” on their businesses whereas Swiss retailers experienced a 30% increase since Swiss people had to shop in Switzerland (Rutz 2020).
- 8 Popescu defines the rebordering phenomenon as process that has seen the “qualitative and quantitative transformation of borders” in the last 20 years. In other words, borders have been experiencing a change in nature, through their securitization, and a multiplication in number (Popescu 2012, 3).

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