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Europeanization of citizens vis-à-vis regional politicians: the case of the German-speaking Community of Belgium in the Euregio Maas-Rhine

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border regions are often deemed laboratories for initiatives to increase Europeanization. Our paper examines the German-speaking Community of Belgium in the Euregio Maas-Rhine to assess the relevance of everyday cross-border activities to the perception that living in a border region presents a unique opportunity to feel and think as a European. Departing from the assumptions of both Deutsch's transaction theory and Allport's contact hypothesis, we analyze Eurobarometer data (population-level surveys) and use data from focus groups with regional MPs. Results from quantitative data analysis suggest that perceptions of life in cross-border regions are positively influenced by frequent cross-border movement (functional dimension) as well as general trust in other people (emotional dimension). Our qualitative data from focus groups support the findings from the quantitative analysis and demonstrate further that it is not merely the quantity but the *quality* of contacts that contribute to a gradual 'growing together'.

KEYWORDS

Cross-border regions; Europeanization; mixed methods; public-elite gap; attitudes

1. Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has underscored the fragility of a borderless Europe. Border controls had become daily business once again, with particularly significant implications for cross-border regions (Opilowska 2021). Indeed, the pandemic has made clear that a borderless Europe is far more than the frictionless exchange of goods and services, but also has profound emotional, cultural and historical impacts on European citizens. Even more, the virus' ability to move across borders reinforced the importance of (cross-border) cooperation within the EU (Opioła and Böhm 2022). Although the relationship between Europeanization and cross-border activity is far from straightforward, the current crisis has thrown into relief some of the progresses that EU cross-border cooperation has already achieved.

A particularly active cross-border region in recent years has been the Euregio Maas-Rhine. In contrast to many other regions, Euregio Maas-Rhine was extremely active in pandemic-related crisis management. It was constantly involved in the exchange of health services, public information, and legal advice to citizens across national borders (Peyrony, Rubio, and Viaggio 2021). What is more, there is evidence that initiatives derived from long-lasting cross-border cooperation were particularly effective during the acute stages of the crisis, as demonstrated by the enhanced flexibility of regional governments who were trained in cross-border cooperation before the virus hit the region.

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Cross-border regimes have a positive influence on horizontal and vertical crisis-handling by providing additional organizational capacities (Gschrey 2022).¹ In addition, greater attention to the special features of border regions in national decision-making processes is desired at the regional level (Horstmann et al. 2021). Given this enhanced ability to adequately address the COVID-19 crisis at the subnational level, it is little wonder that citizens reported high levels of trust in the regional government's handling of the pandemic (CoR 2020). Survey data from the German-speaking Community of Belgium (a constituent region of the Euregio Maas-Rhine) found that some (72%) of the population was (very) satisfied with the work of the regional government during the crisis through November 2020.² In an open-ended question only 3% of the respondents in this survey reported concerns about border closures.

Our paper aims to analyse determinants *for* and components *of* horizontal Europeanization among citizens in a cross-border region inspired by the above described intense relations in cross-border regions during the Corona crisis and before. The main research focus on horizontal Europeanization up to now has been on networks and everyday activities (Büttner and Mau 2010; Worschech, Eigmüller, and Büttner 2022; Trenz 2022). Less is known about the importance of attitudes and emotional aspects as components of horizontal Europeanization. We aim to discuss the multi-faceted nature of horizontal Europeanization by referring to the interplay of attitudes and behaviour. We use quantitative Eurobarometer data as well as qualitative focus group material from a specific cross-border region as a case study since we expect citizens to be actively engaged in cross-border relations in this region. Our research contributes to the understanding of horizontal Europeanization and provides relevant ideas for refinements in further (large-scale) research in this field.

The structure of this paper will proceed as follows: Section 2 will introduce the state of the art on cross-border regions and their potential for Europeanization and provide an introduction of our research case, the German-speaking Community in the Belgian part of the Euregio Rhine-Maas. Next, we are going to introduce our methodological approach (section 3). Using the Eurobarometer survey, section 4 will analyze cross-border activities as a common measure of the Europeanization of everyday life. Next, we supplement these findings with data from a focus group with regional politicians in the German-speaking Community of Belgium. In the last section, we examine the similarities and differences in the perceptions of citizens and regional politicians when it comes to issues of cross-border cooperation. We then use this analysis to discuss the implications of our results on questions of Europeanization.

2. Cross-border regions and Europeanization: a story of success?

Borders can be understood from different perspectives, and citizens are 'increasingly active in constructing, shifting, or even erasing borders' (Rumford 2012, 897). Borders as spatial and temporal delimitations of societies are not only conceived of as political delimitations between nation states but have cultural, social, political and symbolic meanings that are produced and reproduced by societies. This means that border regions represent complex social processes in which different regional and national narratives create certain meanings of territoriality (Paasi 1999; Paasi and Prokkola 2008). Since borders touch on questions of self-identity, they are all but rational constructs, which can be 'overcome' by simply engaging in cross-border activities or developing cross-border contacts (Immerfall 2016). This hypothesis was initially elaborated in Karl Deutsch's 'transaction theory' (Deutsch et al. 1957 & 1967), which emphasized the importance of such cross-border activities in a transnational context. Similarly, Allport (1954) examines social attitudes to argue that it is the *quality* (instead of merely the quantity) of contacts in intergroup contexts that are particularly important. Context as well as shared goals and experiences exert major influence on the perceived quality of the contact (Sherif 1966; Tajfel and Turner 2004; Taylor, Peplau and Sears 1994). Hence, contact per se is not a guarantee of the reduction of prejudice or a 'growing-together' in terms of Europeanization, but rather it is also the quality of such interactions that should be emphasized.

Whatever the case, only a minority of the European population is engaged in significant transnational interaction. Furthermore, a large portion of this minority hail from upper social classes (Kuhn 2011; Heidenreich 2019), a dynamic which further fuels the perception of the EU as an elitist project (Haller 2009; Weske 2011).

The concept of Europeanization was first used when describing the influence of EU policies on national legislation and was used to better understand how national political institutions might adapt to supranational pressures (Börzel and Risse 2003). Since then, the Europeanization literature has distinguished between *top-down* and *bottom-up* processes of Europeanization. Some have taken this a step further to argue that it is not always possible to separate the two processes from each other, asserting that the influence of the EU is not only exerted from the supranational (EU) level to lower territorial levels (national, subnational) but also the other way around (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008).

Beyond *top-down* and *bottom-up*, processes of Europeanization can also be distinguished in a *vertical* and *horizontal* direction. Vertical Europeanization takes place via links between supranational institutions of the EU and national or subnational levels. In contrast, horizontal Europeanization refers to a variety of individual cross-border activities between EU member states and their regions that are performed within a European reference frame. Citizen's life-worlds, collective identifications, solidarities, self-understandings and frames of perception are main elements when analyzing this *horizontal* Europeanization (Heidenreich 2019). Indeed, Europeanizing practices are part of the everyday lives of many Europeans, for example, in the form of intermarriage, business networks, travelling, consumer habits and leisure-time activities (Buttler et al. 2014; Kuhn 2011; Medrano 2008). The performative construction of social identities (and borders) is then embedded in a European frame of reference. Without determining the positive or negative effects of such activities beforehand, it can be assumed that increased Europeanization will at least increase *awareness* concerning state affairs, living conditions and cultural conventions across borders.

This definition of horizontal Europeanization is especially useful when observing the Europeanization of *everyday life*. Everyday activities of whatever kind constitute a so-called Europeanized "borderwork" (Favell and Recchi 2009; Rumford 2009). Recently, scholars have begun focusing on this kind of "trivial" Europeanization (Favell and Guiraudon 2009) to measure the influence of the EU on the everyday lives of its citizens. Furthermore, indices have been developed to measure the degree of Europeanization at the individual level, such as the Europeanization Index of Everyday Life (Delhey et al. 2014).

Corresponding to this horizontalist view of Europeanization, our research examines the behavioral and an attitudinal component of the Europeanization of everyday life by asking

- (1) Which patterns of cross-border activities can be found among the citizens in the Euregio Maas-Rhine and how do these patterns influence the evaluation of living in a cross-border region?
- (2) What, if any, congruence can be found among citizens' and politicians' perceptions on living in a cross-border region?

The following influence factors on cross-border activities can be assumed from the literature:

- Age and education (Favell 2008; Fligstein 2008; Gerhards, Hans, and Carlson 2014; Mitchell 2015): younger respondents and respondents with higher educational attainment perceive living in a cross-border region more positively, due to their relatively greater ability to benefit from transnational mobility.
- Trust (Decoville and Durand 2019; Kaina 2009; Roose 2010): respondents reporting high levels of general trust in other people have a higher probability of rating living in a border region as an asset; this variable has four answer choices: strongly agree/somewhat agree/somewhat disagree/strongly disagree and is coded binary for logistic regression.

- Perceived barriers in cross-border region cooperation (Capello, Caragliu, and Fratesi 2018; Medeiros 2018; Svensson and Balogh 2018): Flash EB 422 offers five variables addressing this issue, each of them allowing for three answer choices: major problem/minor problem/not a problem at all; we expect respondents reporting such barriers to have a lower probability to rate life in a border region as a risk.
- Cross-border activities (Favell and Recchi 2009; Roose 2010): most relevant to our study of everyday life Europeanization of citizens are cross-border activities; Flash Eurobarometer 422 asks about work/business-related activities, leisure activities, consumer behavior, friend visits and the use of public services. We did not include family visits since we are primarily interested contacts with foreigners. Since few respondents reported frequent cross-border trips, we recoded these items in a binary manner, differentiating between either performing cross-border activity (once a month or more often + several times a year + once a year or less often) or never performing such activities.

After introducing our assumptions, we will shortly describe the role of Euroregions in EU cross-border regimes. The focus of our study lies on the Euregio Maas-Rhine. Since the 1990s, EU policies and funds have supported the emergence of cross-border cooperation, resulting in the formation of new institutions and governance forms, such as cross-border regions, Euroregions and Interreg programs (Decoville and Durand 2016). Euroregions are regarded as special institutions for cross-border cooperation and are increasingly funded by the EU as part of its 'Interreg A' policy that aims to encourage subnational territorial actors. These subnational actors' motivations for promoting cross-border cooperation are diverse. Economically, Euroregions are seen as an effective means of increasing joint competitiveness in an international environment. Politically, these regions are seen to increase access to EU funding, help to inculcate a transnational regional identity, or increase international visibility (Noferini et al. 2020). The scholarship on cross-border cooperation is dominated by social and economic geographers (Greib 2012; Schöne 2006; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012; Popescu 2011) which study the emergence, institutionalization and institutional development of cross-border cooperation. Beyond this, the political science scholarship studies cross-border institutions from a governance perspective and embed cross-border cooperation institutions in debates on regionalism, European integration and multi-level governance. Euroregions are understood as political actors involved in policymaking in border regions (Deppisch 2007; Kohlisch 2008; Böttger 2006; Schramek 2014; Svensson 2013).

Beyond this scholarship, which looks at the meso (Euroregions) and macro level (Interreg policies; Regional development), the research project EUCROSS (2011–2014) provides fundamental insights into the topic of the Europeanization of everyday life in the context of cross-border activity at the micro-level. The project collects quantitative and qualitative data to examine the extent to which cross-border activity contributes to horizontal Europeanization (Recchi et al. 2014). The project finds that two opposing types of people exist who have divergent experiences in European mobility: transnationals, who have a high degree of mobility, and natives, who have less transnational experience.

Cross-border cooperation is defined as institutionalized collaboration between subnational actors in a borderland region. In such 'Euroregion' or 'Euregio', voluntary associations of municipalities and regional institutions come to form 'a special area of fluxes and exchanges of a social, cultural, economic and political nature, a space where the development of multiple activities takes place and where the type and intensity of transactions have evolved in time' (Sousa 2013, 671). This definition points to the importance of everyday life activities in cross-border-regions, existing as they do in various societal fields. Thus, an examination of everyday life activities in German-speaking Euregio Maas-Rhine can help elucidate how Europeanization can be facilitated via a process of 'growing together'.

Particularly relevant for this study are the Europeanized practices of German-speaking Belgians in Euregio Maas-Rhine. This can be justified by two reasons: Firstly, this region is an interesting case for

observing processes of Europeanization because of the region's turbulent history, during which it has seen a variety of rulers and usurpations. This led to changing political affiliations and, therefore, to various border shifts, which could have an impact on the region's collective identity.

Moreover, the second reason is the availability of empirical data for making a comparison between political elites (focus group interviews with regional MPs) and the population (population-level survey) (cf. section four).

2.1. Case description: the German-speaking Community of Belgium

Before laying out our methodology, it is first necessary to develop a brief case description of the German-speaking Community of Belgium.³ Belgium is constituted of three communities (French-speaking Community, Dutch-speaking Community and German-speaking Community) and three regions (Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels). Historically, territories of East Belgium were parts of different states, and border shifts have occurred several times in the history of East Belgium. With the Congress of Vienna in 1815, these territories were assigned to Prussia and the German Empire, respectively, until 1919. The Treaty of Versailles (1919) redrew the border between Belgium and Germany. After the end of World War I, the territory of East Belgium was placed under provisional Belgian administration and incorporated into the Belgian state in 1925. However, during World War II, East Belgium was occupied by the Nazis in 1940 and reintegrated into the German Empire. With the end of World War II, territories of what is now East Belgium were handed back to Belgium. A final correction of the German-Belgian border took place with the border treaty of 1956, which had as its object the inviolability of the state borders.

After the end of the Second World War, the first contours emerged that recognized the German-speaking territories in the Belgian state as a linguistic community and political territory. It should not be overlooked that the decades-long process of political recognition of East Belgium must also be seen in the context of the conflict between Flemings and Walloons. This conflict has long seemed to threaten Belgium's state unity. Federalism reforms and decentralization measures were seen as instruments for preserving territorial unity of Belgium (Niessen 2021). The German-speaking Community benefited from these reforms as the following overview illustrates.

In the last decades, several state reforms empowered the German-speaking Community of Belgium by more political autonomy. In 1963, the German language community was founded, which also determined the territory of the later German-speaking Community. It was the first state reform in 1968–1971 that called the former German language community “German cultural community” (in German: “deutsche Kulturgemeinschaft”) and enabled the foundation of a council, which was the precursor of today's parliament. This council began its work in 1973 and marks the starting point for the institutional empowerment of the German-speaking Community (Lambertz and Förster 2009). Following state reforms (1980–1983, 1988–1990, 2001) significantly empowered the German-speaking Community by a transfer of further competences in the fields of cultural, financial and educational matters as well as in inter-community and international relations. Since 2004, the previous councils in the Belgian regions and communities are officially called parliaments. In conclusion, the institutional empowerment led to the assessment that the German-speaking Community belongs to “one of the smallest federal entities in the world” (Niessen 2021, 1026) with extensive competences.

The establishment of the European Community and the further steps in EU-integration stabilized the role and the territory of the German-speaking Community, which had been subject to various border changes and affiliations by then. The high relevance of European politics in this region can be deduced by the power of the German-speaking community to sign international treaties and agreements as well as from the right to form its own constituency for the election to the EU Parliament on basis of its territory. Furthermore, the German-speaking Community is engaged in long-standing mechanisms of cross-border cooperation within the Euregio Mass-Rhine⁴ and the Saar-Lor-Lux Region.⁵ Klatt and Wassenberg (2017) introduced the term of ‘secondary foreign policy’

to describe the growing engagement of subnational political actors in international affairs like the German-speaking Community's involvement in cross-border politics. Traditionally, international relations and foreign policy have been a competence of the nation state. It is highlighted that international relations by subnational actors are 'not situated on the same level as those of the national state: they may be conducted in parallel but are clearly subordinated to the "primary" foreign policy, either in support or in opposition to the latter' (Klatt and Wassenberg 2017, 207). Both authors agree that cross-border cooperation in the EU can be seen as part of secondary foreign policy since subnational authorities are strongly involved in cross-border policymaking via the EU multi-level governance system.

The changing political affiliation in the history of today's East Belgium does of course not remain without effect on the inhabitants in this region. Following Martinez (1994), we classify the border region with special consideration of East Belgium and the German-speaking Community in our case study as 'integrated borderlands'. Characteristic for this type of border region is the high stability within this region, interrelated (regional) economies and the unrestricted movement of people and goods (as in the entire EU). On the societal level, Martinez (1994) differentiates two types of how a 'borderlands society' can evolve: 'National borderlanders' are people with less frequent contacts to the opposite side of the border because of their indifference or inability to their neighbors. In contrast, 'transnational borderlanders' are people with frequent transnational contacts and deeper ties to their neighbors. Those people seek to overcome cross-border obstacles and like to take advantage of opportunities for education, work and leisure-time activities in the neighboring countries (Martinez 1994).

The geographic location of the German-speaking community makes it easy to reach various centers, both in the border area and within Belgium. The closeness to various economic centers in the border regions between Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg is also evident in commuter movements, which is illustrated by official statistics.⁶ East Belgium seems to be very active in cross-border activities compared to other regions in the Euregio Maas-Rhine when looking at the number of commuters. Overall, the active population in gainful employment consists of approximately 34.000 people. Of these, 5.888 people commuted to Germany in 2019, although this number was higher in the period between 2005 and 2010. 4.360 people commuted to Luxembourg in the same year, a figure that has been slowly increasing since 2015. In aggregate, we calculate that some 30% of the workforce in the German-Speaking Community undertakes a cross-border commute for work. Besides occupational mobility, cross-border movement in pursuit of training or study is also significant. In 2019, 40% of outgoing students intend to study at a German university, an increase from roughly 12% in 2005.⁷

3. Methodology and data

Methodologically, our analysis proceeds in a two-step process. First, we use data from the 2015 flash Eurobarometer 422 survey to scrutinize our primary research question. Then, we expand on these findings with focus group data derived from a focus group consisting of 12 regional politicians.

The European Commission (2015) conducted Flash Eurobarometer 422 on 'Interreg cross-border cooperation' in 2015 in 30 European countries. The sample includes populations in cross-border regions in all 28 member states as well as Norway and Switzerland. The survey relies on CATI interviews with inhabitants aged 15 years and older, who were chosen by multi-level random sample. In all, the survey focuses on 54 cross-border regions participating in the Interreg-Program. This flash Eurobarometer includes questions on perceptions of cross-border regions and their cooperation, cross-border activities of the citizens themselves and measures of social distance towards other citizens of various national backgrounds.

As noted above, for the purposes of this study we are particularly interested in the Euregio Maas-Rhine, a region which, at various points since its foundation in 1976, has spanned parts of Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. The German-speaking Community of Belgium from which

Table 1. Belgian Sample, Euregio Maas-Rhine, Flash EB 422.

Age	%
15–24 years	8.2
25–39 years	12.9
40–54 years	22.6
55 years and older	56.2
Gender	
Male	38.8
Female	61.2
Age finished full-time education	
Up to 15 years	12.3
16–19 years	30.7
20 years and older	50.8
Still studying	6.3

we draw our focus group data joined in 1992.⁸ Unfortunately, Flash Eurobarometer 422 does not include NUTS-2 regions, which would have allowed us to filter inhabitants from the German-speaking Community exclusively. Due to this limitation, we have to analyze the data set for all Belgian regions participating in the Euregio Maas-Rhine but will add results especially for the German-speaking Community when it comes to present our qualitative data. This portion of the Flash Eurobarometer 422 includes 402 respondents, the majority of which are over the age of 55. Respondents are also more likely to be female than male and tend to be relatively well educated (Table 1).

Our qualitative material is taken from a focus group discussion with members of the regional parliament of the Belgian community. The focus group was held in March 2020 and included 12 members of the parliament with each party represented plus the parliamentary president. Since members of this regional parliament are ‘part-time’, MPs (with the exception of the president and the senator) all have full-time occupations outside the parliament. As such, they provide a perspective that is both of a politician and of a citizen. The focus group was organized as part of the REGIOPARL research project,⁹ which aims to research the role of regional parliaments within the EU's multilevel system. The REGIOPARL workshops primarily focus on regional parliaments' attitudes towards the future of the EU's multilevel system via three main domains: the institutional architecture of a prospective EU; the preferred distribution of competences within a prospective EU; and questions of identity and the organization of political representation. The latter is especially interesting for our purposes as it provides interesting insights into regional politicians' perceptions about the region itself and the needs and desires of its citizens concerning the region's development.

4. Results

1. Being citizen in a cross-border region

Based on reported levels of cross-border activities, we recognize a significant amount of cross-border traffic in the Euregio Maas-Rhine relative to other European Regions (Decoville and Durand 2019). Respondents report a mean of 7.18 cross-border activities per year with a standard deviation of 2.33. Closer examination reveals that these activities most often include leisure and tourist outings, followed by economic activities such as shopping for goods or services (Figure 1). Crossing the border for work or business purposes is reported comparatively seldom by the respondents in the Belgium part of the Euregio Maas Rhine compared to the figures for the German-speaking Community only in section 2.1. Even more, we have to assume that cross-border commuters are a hard-to-reach population in terms of survey research. Many of the respondents indicate that they never partake in cross-border trips, and only a minority appear to be frequent border-crossers. It seems to be that crossing the borders is still more a kind of an elitist phenomenon of a small group of

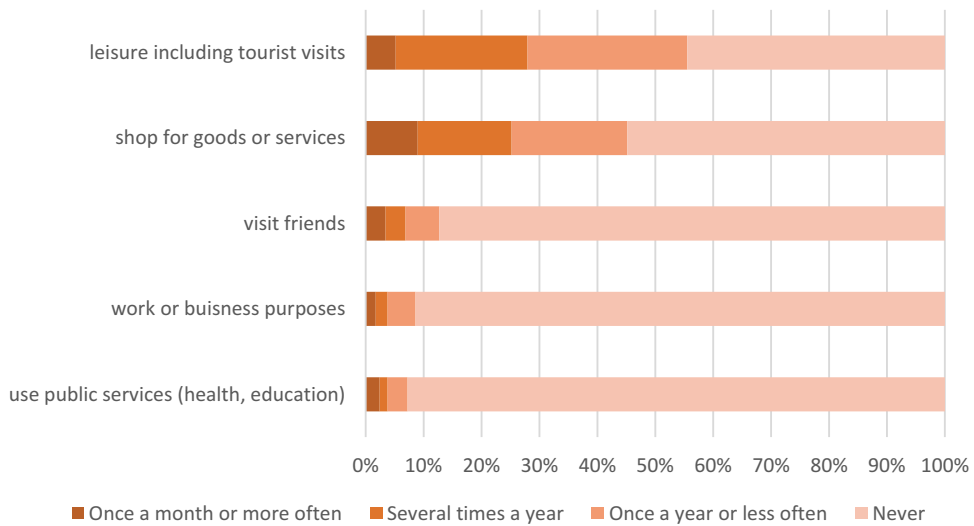


Figure 1. Cross-border activities of Belgium respondents in the Euregio Maas-Rhine in 2015, $N = 290$ (share of respondents).

people (Weske 2011). Tourist visits, i.e. for vacation or shopping, are particularly popular, while activities such as work or visiting friends are very seldom.

Beyond these lifestyle habits, we also examine the extent to which respondents report feeling that living in a cross-border region represents an opportunity or a hindrance to their life chances. Flash Eurobarometer 422 includes 40,619 respondents all over Europe, all living in a cross-border region. Of these, 37% of the respondents see living in a cross-border region as an opportunity, 55% report no impact on their lives and 4% perceive this affiliation as a hindrance. Two-thirds of the respondents in Belgium reported neutrally, saying living in a cross-border region has little impact on their lives. This compares with nearly one-third of respondents who reported feeling that belonging to the Euregio was an opportunity, and only 2.3% who reported that it was an obstacle. Eurobarometer 422 also reveals significant variations across regions.¹⁰ In Portugal and Ireland, for instance, respondents frequently report that they see living in a 'cross-border region as an opportunity' and are far more likely than our Belgian respondents to positively assess their close border proximity despite the latter's greater incidence of cross-border travel.

We computed a logistic regression to compare various influence factors on the probability of positively assessing life in a cross-border region. Since only a few respondents reported that living in a cross-border region has no impact on their lives, we recoded the dependent variable in a binary way (0 = has no impact on my life, 1 = is more of an opportunity).

The specified model yields satisfying coefficients concerning the probability of the estimated model relative to the 0-Model as well as a pseudo $R^2 = 0.300$. Examining the independent variables more closely (Table 2), we find three coefficients that yield a significant and relevant influence on the dependent variable ('living in a cross-border region', coded '0' for 'has no impact on my life' and '1' for 'is more of an opportunity'). The highest coefficient (Exp(B)) is found for those who strongly agree to the statement 'generally speaking, most people can be trusted'. Respondents strongly agreeing to this statement are 4.64 times more likely to perceive living in a cross-border region as an opportunity relative to the reference group of those who strongly disagree that most people can be trusted. This result is in line with our theoretical considerations on intergroup relations (Sherif 1966; Henri and Turner 2004) pointing to the importance of the *quality* of contacts in which trust is an important precondition for positive relationships to develop. With only low social trust 'integrated borderlands' (Martinez 1994) can hardly evolve. Moreover, low levels of social trust in cross-border regions in the EU can be a risk for the deepening EU integration process, as Durand, Decoville, and Knippschild

Table 2. Logistic regression on ‘living in a cross-border region’ (0 = has no impact, 1 = is more of an opportunity $N = 240$).

	Regression coefficient		
	<i>b</i>	Sig.	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Age (reference group ‘55 years and older’)			
Age		0.202	
15–24 years	–0.895	0.337	0.409
25–39 years	0.571	0.206	1.771
40–54 years	0.556	0.163	1.743
Age finished education (reference group ‘still studying’)			
Age education		0.189	
Up to 15 years	–1.635	0.170	0.195
16–19 years	–1.691	0.109	0.184
20+ years	–0.983	0.330	0.374
Trust (reference group ‘strongly disagree’)			
Trust in most people		0.112	
Strongly agree	1.535	0.020**	4.640**
Somewhat agree	0.831	0.131	2.297
Somewhat disagree	0.549	0.353	1.731
Barriers in cross-border cooperation			
<i>Legal or administrative differences</i>		0.567	
Major	0.036	0.954	1.036
Minor	0.368	0.321	1.445
Accessibility (for example, geographical barriers or transport infrastructure)		0.069	
Major	–1.976	0.037**	0.139**
Minor	–0.702	0.199	0.496
<i>Language differences</i>		0.020	
Major	–0.654	0.128	0.520
Minor	0.434	0.283	1.543
<i>Social and economic differences</i>		0.037	
Major	1.051543206	0.057	2.862
Minor	–0.512	0.238	0.599
<i>Cultural differences</i>		0.211	
Major	–1.257	0.198	0.285
Minor	0.448	0.314	1.566
Go abroad to partner countries (reference group ‘never’)			
Visit friends	0.335	0.470	1.398
Public services (health education)	–0.311	0.597	0.732
To shop for goods or services	0.805	0.019**	2.237**
For work or business purposes	1.257	0.029**	3.516**
For leisure activities including tourist visits	0.472	0.189	1.602
constant	–1.155	0.348	0.315
Pseudo $R^2 = 0.300$			

** $p = 0.01$

(2020) show. Crossing the border for professional reasons has the second largest (significant) impact on the dependent variable. Commuters have a 3.516 higher probability to perceive cross-border regions as an opportunity compared to those who never commute across borders. This result is in line with scholarship studying cross-border commuting flows in the EU (Broersma, Edzes, and van Dijk 2022; Chilla and Heugel 2022; Klatt 2014). After professional travel, we find ‘crossing the border for shopping for goods and/or services’ the third strongest predictor of positive affinity towards living in a border region. Respondents who cross the border at least occasionally for shopping have a 3.516 higher likelihood to report on ‘living in a cross-border region’ in a positive way. Such activities obviously contribute to ‘trivial Europeanization’ (Favell and Guiraudon 2009) as mentioned in the theoretical section above. The final significant variable relates to obstacles in cross-border cooperation (variable ‘accessibility’), although this has little impact (since its absolute value ranges below ‘1’, no relevant effect at all can be assumed). Obstacles in a border region (Medeiros 2018; Svensson and Balogh 2018) like language differences, socioeconomic differences or cultural differences appear to be lower in this sample than one might have thought. Several variables yield no significant and relevant influences in this multivariate model. Effects of age and duration of education show no

effect in this model. Our assumptions following the concept of Favell's 'Eurostars' (2008) that especially younger, well-educated people profit from European Integration via cross-border activities cannot be confirmed for this sample.

In sum, we can report some interesting results from this analysis. We must reject our hypothesis on the influence of age and duration of education for the multivariate model. On the other hand, we can identify two important dimensions that influence positive perceptions of life in cross-border regions: (1) a more emotional factor which can be described as general trust in people and (2) a more functional factor including concrete interactions and everyday life practices. Both dimensions seem to be important for facilitating awareness of the potential benefits that cross-border regions can provide, findings that mirror a similar approach from Durand and Decoville (2020). It has to be emphasized that attitudes towards life in cross-border regions are not merely a function of rational experience of direct advantages (e.g. more opportunities in cross-border markets) but also significantly relate to emotional issues like open-mindedness towards others. Studies dealing with rational choice approaches should bear this in mind when operationalizing Europeanization as a mere calculation of 'pros' and 'cons'. Given this, we appreciate the operationalization in Flash Eurobarometer 422 as 'opportunity' instead of 'advantage' since it widens the choice for evaluation beyond mere rational calculation.

Nevertheless, still only a minority of our sample engage in cross-border activities, some 30% as demonstrated above. Hence, raising the attractiveness of cross-border activities for a larger community can be a starting point for increasing Europeanization and pro-European attitudes. Ideally, such activities are related to positive intercultural experiences as the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) elaborates.

II. Being a politician in a cross-border region: politicians' perceptions of citizens' attitudes and needs

The foregoing analysis on citizen's perceptions of, and activities in, cross-border regions using Eurobarometer data reveal a mixture of influence factors on positive evaluations of cross-border regions. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that only approximately one-third of respondents report that living in cross-border regions has a positive effect on their life chances with only a few reporting regular cross-border travel. In this section, we build on our regression analysis with data on regional politicians' perceptions of the region and their beliefs on citizen's attitudes and practices. From the onset, it should be noted that interpretations from this data must be made cautiously as the Eurobarometer 422 survey included all Belgian regions in the Euregio Maas-Rhine, whereas the focus group has been conducted only in the regional parliament of the German-speaking Community.

Our discussants vividly described the dense interrelations the German-speaking Community has towards other (cross-border) regions, nations and the EU. Terms like 'networks', 'amalgamation' and 'entanglement' were used to describe connections in all cardinal directions from the region. Indeed, building synergies with other regions, nations and the EU more generally was a frequently cited focus of the MPs we interviewed. Beyond this, the border itself is central in the discussions and is (still) highly relevant to the personal lives of many politicians. Participants recounted anecdotes of when border controls were daily routine before the Schengen-Convention was implemented, and the border still seems to play a major role in the prevalent regional identity. Indeed, the focus group frequently discussed the border as an important anchor point in developing narratives of regional identity.

Our discussants elaborated the emergence of cross-border identities exactly by means of the example of the Euregio Maas-Rhine – but did so as a negative example. The group clearly agreed on the notion that identity must evolve as something 'natural' and as a process that takes some time. Identity cannot be imposed from 'above' but is subject to tiny, concrete interactions and includes 'gentle' steps of all involved parties. The discussants further hypothesized that the closer such

activities are to everyday life, the more they lead to an internalization of attitudes and perceptions and the politicians in this group reported a sense of responsibility to actively engage in this process: 'A region is present when people identify themselves with it and when it (authors' comment: "the region") identifies the life situation of its inhabitants' (transcript Eupen, line number 91–92). This quote reveals an appreciation of how deeply interwoven everyday life practices are to the formation of (regional) identities. Identity becomes 'alive' and meaningful through concrete (inter)action. 'Trivial Europeanization' (Favell and Guiraudon 2009) addresses exactly such kinds of experiences, as well as the notion of horizontal Europeanization (Heidenreich 2019), especially referring to those lifeworld experiences.

However, when speaking about the Euregio Maas-Rhine, discussants conversely described this cross-border region as something very artificial, institutional and far away from everyday life. Our discussants named the absence of concrete results and language barriers as the main points of critique. However, this does *not* imply a general skepticism on cross-border projects among this focus group if certain conditions are met. For example, small-scale initiatives were cited as positive: one of the participants reported from his full-time job as a manager of the regional labor administration and described the satisfaction that can arise from performing unbureaucratic, small-scale programs of cross-border cooperation. Such experiences were seen to be important for helping citizens to develop positive attitudes towards cross-border regions. Beyond this, discussants argued for legal harmonization across cross-border regions as an important step to foster European integration.

Despite the fact that our focus group discussion took place with regional politicians, we are of the opinion that this workshop was anything but an elitist discussion given that the participants were not full-time MPs but also held 'normal' jobs. For instance, the representatives expressed real concerns about barriers and hurdles for citizens living in a cross-border region:

And many young people ... "today I am staying here ... in ten years I will live at another place and feel there at home as well ...". But there are many obstacles from them. If I am interested to work in Germany today, it is not that easy but imposed with several administrative hurdles. (transcript Eupen, line number 756–760)

With this said, the opportunities afforded by the border-region were underscored repeatedly:

We have three, three or four universities within 30, 40 kilometers. It is possible to study in Maastricht, Cologne, Trier ((T14: Belgium itself)) for our young cohorts. Of course, in Belgium as well, Luxemburg. Where else can you find such opportunities? (transcript Eupen, line number 1113–1116)

Although functional aspects like commuting for business or education were quite dominant in the discussion, cultural concerns also frequently appear in the focus group data, as evidenced by discussions on geoblocking. Many programs from Germany, Austria and Switzerland are of interest to the German-speaking Belgians as well, and respondents underscored the importance of addressing the practice for strengthening cultural ties and inculcating a sense of European belonging:

Last week we have approved a resolution on geoblocking, which (laughing, 1 Sec.) deprives us on a cultural dimension, cause we have no access to German media libraries and so on, because of the geoblocking: This program is not available in your country. (transcript Eupen, line number 1071–1076)

In summary, politician's perceptions are generally similar to those of citizens. MPs seem aware that developing a 'true' cross-border region will only happen gradually. However, as opposed to the population-level data, politicians were keen to emphasize the opportunities a cross-border region can provide to the young and highly educated. This result from the focus group is in line with several contributions in scholarship (Favell 2008; Fligstein 2008; Gerhards, Hans, and Carlson 2014) which confirm that especially younger, well-educated people profit from Europeanization of their everyday life via transnational activities. The politicians addressed the importance of both functional and cultural/emotional aspects of cross-border life in a very pragmatic, down-to-earth way, as it is also discussed in Durand and Decoville (2020). There was general awareness that identity is something to be developed gradually and, in many instances, is a generational project. Politicians frequently

expressed their *own* doubts and struggles when performing their *own* cross-border activities. Nevertheless, the focus group was not entirely homogenous on these points, as a minority of the participants argued for the reimposition of hard borders and expressed a general skepticism about European integration.

5. Discussion

This paper examined cross-border activity as a means of measuring horizontal Europeanization among EU citizens. It accomplished this first by using regression analysis on various cross-border activities reported in Eurobarometer data to examine how different activities relate to satisfaction with living in a cross-border region. Results point to the influence of some activities on the positive evaluation of cross-border regions and further suggest that it is not only the *quantity* but also the *quality* of cross-border contacts that facilitates positive sentiment towards cross-border life (Allport 1954). Indeed, we find evidence that cross-border relations are not just merely functional calculations of ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ but relate to emotional, historical and cultural dynamics which can be described as trust in people. Since respondents report little perception of having their cross-border activity restricted by barriers, the importance of ‘mental barriers’ should not be underestimated. Both dimensions, the functional and emotional dimension, seem to be important for facilitating awareness of potential benefits that cross-border regions can provide (Durand and Decoville 2020). Concerning the issue of horizontal Europeanization (Büttner and Mau 2010; Heidenreich 2019), we find evidence to suggest that the combination of cross-border activities and mutual trust makes it more likely that an individual will internalize their membership in a European community as a central aspect of their social identity (Kaina 2018). Further, we believe it likely that such vanguardist behavior and attitudes can motivate others and encourage attitude change. With this said, our study suggests that this is unlikely to happen overnight: patience is needed when we think of the Europeanization of broader social strata.

These findings were generally supported by our focus group, which highlighted the importance of functional and emotional factors of cross-border life in the European Union, as it is discussed in Durand and Decoville (2020). The regional politicians reported an awareness of the importance of horizontal Europeanization to increasing the acceptance of European Integration amongst citizens in border-regions. Moreover, the focus group emphasized that the formation of a European identity is to be developed gradually across generations. This suggests that a reliance on solely or primarily vertical Europeanization will be unlikely to convince citizens to accept the importance of European identity. In this sense, our analysis nuances the findings of Olsen’s (2002) examination of ‘Europeanization’, which finds that different conceptions of Europeanization (vertical ‘versus’ horizontal) complement each other.

Notes

1. The Euregio Maas-Rhine has set up several tools to provide information on the coronavirus to citizens and businesses: For example, the ‘Crossing Borders Tool’. This tool made it possible to answer questions from citizens when crossing the border in relation to the various national COVID-19 measures (https://crossing-borders.euregio-mr.info/de/layout/default_de/). Additionally, a ‘border info point’ (‘Grenzinfopunkt’ in German) advised cross-border commuters.
2. http://www.ostbelgienstatistik.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-6895/11278_read-62109/
3. Detailed information about the institutional development of the German-speaking Community of Belgium can be found on the following website: https://ostbelgienlive.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-72/186_read-448/
4. The Euregio Maas-Rhine consists of following regions: North Rine-Westphalia, the Belgian province Limburg, province Liège/Luik, German-Speaking Community of Belgium and the Dutch province Limburg (<https://www.euregio-mr.info/>).
5. The Saar-Lor-Lux Region consists of following entities: Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, Wallonia, Luxembourg and Lorraine.

6. Data from the statistical portal of the German-speaking community in Belgium: <https://www.ostbelgienstatistik.be/>
7. Arbeitsamt der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens (2019)
8. <https://euregio-mr.info/de/ueber-uns/geschichte/>
9. <https://www.regioparl.com/?lang=en>
10. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/eurobarometer/422/cbc_coop_pres_en.pdf

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