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Cross-Border Horizontal Europeanization From a Municipal Perspective: The Example of the German-French-Luxembourg Border Region Saarlorlux

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ABSTRACT

Border regions located on the periphery of nation states stand to benefit in many ways from the process of European integration; at the same time, however, they highlight and even magnify the persistent obstacles that hinder and retard cross-border cooperation. In the course of Europeanization debates, the subnational level has been seen as closer to citizens than abstract Brussels, but it finds itself in a sandwich position in the interplay between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. This article addresses this ambivalence and explores perspectives for cross-border horizontal Europeanization with a focus on the local level, which has not yet received sufficient attention. Against the background of the debate on horizontal Europeanization—closely linked to border studies—, the SaarLorLux (i.e. German-French-Luxembourg) border region is used here as a case study. On the basis of quantitative and qualitative surveys at the local level, it becomes clear that municipal decision-makers do indeed see the cross-border region as a laboratory of European integration. However, they demand more room of their own for manoeuvre to deepen cooperation. Even if municipalities in the border region are more positive about the future than those further away from the border, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed if they are to make a more successful contribution to Europeanization.

1 | Introduction

With the process of European integration, a specific multilevel governance structure has developed in Europe, resulting in a "reallocation of authority upward, downward, and sideways from central states" (Hooghe and Marks 2003, p. 233) and an increased importance of decentralization and regionalization (Abels and Battke 2019). With regard to the latter development, border regions are of particular importance in the EU. Varying degrees of interdependence have arisen across national borders in the fields of the economy, work, everyday life, and leisure (Medeiros 2018; Opiłowska and Roose 2015; Wassenberg et al. 2020; Wassenberg 2024). Exemplified in cross-border initiatives, the formation of new networks and institutions, and sometimes transnational identities (Heidenreich 2019a), these processes of horizontal Europeanization form the focus of our present research. Our key thesis is that regional and local actors play an important role in bringing Europeanization to life (Büttner et al. 2019; Gröbe et al. 2023; Guderjan and Verhelst 2021; Reiter et al. 2024). At the same time, involvement in decisions at higher levels must not be disregarded: regional and municipal decision-makers have to deal 'top-down'

with EU requirements, but they also experience 'bottom-up' the wishes and expectations of local citizens vis à vis the EU. How do municipal decision-makers in border regions assess their own role here? What opportunities do they perceive for action? And how do they position themselves in relation to Europe?

In pursuit of an answer to these questions, we focus on the SaarLorLux region in which the emblematic town of Schengen is located: the borderland constituted by the German Federal State of Saarland, the historical French region of Lorraine in today's region Grand Est, and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Close economic ties already existed in the industrial age with the mining triangle for the extraction of coal and iron ore. They laid the foundation for a far-reaching institutionalization process with the emergence of a large number of cross-border institutions and activities, as well as everyday inter-dependencies (Dörrenbächer 2006; Wille et al. 2016). Alongside the German-Dutch border region, or the German-French border region on the Upper Rhine, SaarLorLux is seen as a role model and forerunner in Europe. It belongs to the so-called Greater Region[1] and thus the largest cross-border labour market in the EU, with around 275,000 cross-border commuters. However, the Covid-19 pandemic made it clear that the border region is by no means consistently crisis-proof (Dittel and Weber 2024; Hippe et al. 2024; Sommarribas and Nienaber 2021; Weber 2022). To this day, in addition to diverse interrelations and networks, there remain complex challenges resulting from the clash of different nation states with their specific contexts and regulations (Crossey and Weber 2024).

In this light the European Commission's postulate (2021) of border regions as 'living labs of European integration' must be examined more closely. With quantitative and qualitative surveys of municipal decision-makers with a political mandate in the SaarLorLux region, we show that the laboratory concept of the EU is certainly shared, but that municipalities demand greater scope for action of their own within the multilevel network. Moreover, municipalities located directly at the border generally see opportunities more positively than those further away. At the same time, a set of challenges can be identified that needs to be addressed from a municipal perspective to promote Europeanization at a local and regional level.

In the following pages we connect ideas on horizontal Europeanization into considerations from border studies and present our methodological approach. After explaining key findings, we conclude, as a contribution to this special issue of Contemporary European Politics, with an outlook on Europeanization at the subnational level.

2 | Horizontal Europeanization in Border Regions

At the theoretical level, European integration has led to concepts and considerations of multilevel governance (Börzel 2019; Hooghe et al. 2020; Hooghe and Marks 2003, 2020; Zürn 2020). These initially bear on *vertical* Europeanization which has received and continues to receive most attention within our societies. Social life fundamentally takes place in nation states, but with steps towards European integration, opening processes

have taken place (Bartolini 2005; Urwin 2014): cross-border contacts have become more important and a transnationalization of contacts has emerged (Heidenreich 2019b, p. 1). In this respect, we can speak of "everyday cultural realities" (Wille and Nienaber 2020, p. 7) with "transnational social, political, administrative and economic relations" (Heidenreich 2019b, p. 1). To reflect these developments, the terminology of '*horizontal* Europeanization'—first used by Beck and Grande (2007, p. 97) with reference to the "lateral opening of the national container" (see also Mau and Verwiebe 2010)—has become established as a widening of vertical forms of interaction (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019). According to Heidenreich (2019c, p. 10), the "increasing role of transnational practices, social relationships, interactions, attitudes and inequalities, and an increasing transnationalization of social fields in Europe" is becoming decisive. Horizontal Europeanization processes must also be seen in light of the EU's efforts to strengthen its regions (Medeiros 2018; Medeiros et al. 2023; Trenz 2022). Vertical and horizontal Europeanization are, therefore, closely related.

Research on horizontal Europeanization involves an empirical approach that focuses on "cross-border interactions, practices and perceptions as a means of transnational 'community building'" (Heidenreich 2019c, p. 13; see also Worschech et al. 2022). The idea of the 'transnational' focuses on "relations, networks, and practices across nation-state borders" (Mau and Mewes 2012, p. 10). This can be empirically examined, for example, with regard to "undertaking trips to other EU countries and socializing with other EU citizens" (Mau and Mewes 2012, p. 28). Similarly, welfare state solidarity in the EU, the European migration network, and EU professionals are topics that have been highlighted in relation to horizontal Europeanization (contributions in Heidenreich 2019a), addressing both *opportunities* and *conflictual developments*. Subsequently, "horizontal and informal practices of cross-loading" play an important role as "mutual influence among Member States independent of mediation by EU actors" (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019, p. 515). Horizontal Europeanization also concerns the question of how much action takes place *sideways* and not only (vertically) in the direction of the EU level. Recent upheavals such as Russia's war against Ukraine have also brought into sharper focus how a "more horizontal, cooperative decision-making process" could be set in motion, whereby horizontal Europeanization can be conceptualized in light of crises with regard to state decisions in coordination (Juncos et al. 2025, p. 118). At the same time, existing analyses remain focused on the nation state level (see also Clark and Jones 2008), so that no specific regions are highlighted. From the perspective of border studies, however, it seems necessary as well as appropriate to turn in particular to border regions for an examination of Europeanization processes. These are, after all, the areas in which diverse bordering processes take place (Gualini 2003; Sohn 2018).

In the 1990s, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, discussions about a borderless world (Ohmae 1999 [1990]) intensified, but it quickly became apparent that borders and border security multiplied rather than decreased (Vallet 2019; Wille and Weber 2021). Against this backdrop, new approaches developed in interdisciplinary border studies that understood borders not simply as static lines (Brańka and Jańczak 2015; Newman and Paasi 1998): a new way of 'thinking about borders' emerged

(Rumford 2006, p. 155), focusing on (re)production aspects of diverse territorial, administrative, political, social, cultural, mental, etc. borders and interdependencies (Kolossov and Scott 2013). In this way, borders were dynamized into "multifaceted, multilevel and interdisciplinary institutions and processes" (Haselsberger 2014, p. 505). The free movement of goods, people, services and capital led to interdependences for border regions as 'borderlands' in the EU, based on debordering processes (Crossey and Weber 2024; Pavlakovich-Kochi et al. 2016; Wille et al. 2016). Accordingly, different forms of cross-border cooperation developed at the subnational level, i.e. decentralized between regions, with varying degrees of territorial and functional governance arrangements (Allmendinger et al. 2014; Beck 2022; Blatter 2004). At the same time, nation-state constraints sometimes persisted, or new restrictions arose, as in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (Dittel and Weber 2024; Jańczak 2011; Novotný and Böhm 2022). At this point, it should supplementary be noted that Euroscepticism can also be observed in border regions, which means that Europeanziation should by no means be understood as one-sidedly positive (Nasr and Rieger 2024).

To what extent, we can therefore ask, have different cross-border administrative, political, economic and social relations developed in this light, and what do they tell us about horizontal Europeanization? A focus on cross-border regions makes it possible to analyse horizontal processes at a subnational level. It follows from the previous explanations that we have to define horizontal Europeanization for border regions more narrowly in a political and geographical sense for the purposes of analysis. We define cross-border horizontal Europeanization to focus explicitly on the transnational area between nation states. It is about political, administrative, social relations and (spatial) practices—sideways— in border regions, embedded in the EU's multilevel governance. It is therefore in particular the regional and local levels that are to be examined with regard to Europeanization. A specific component here is the municipal level, which we will approach by concentrating on the SaarLorLux region.

3 | Methodological Approach

To examine cross-border horizontal Europeanization from a municipal perspective in the SaarLorLux region, we conducted qualitative and quantitative surveys of municipal representatives from the sub-regions in Germany, France and Luxembourg in 2024. Qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other in the sense of a mixed methods approach (see e.g. Timans et al. 2019) to illuminate the research questions as broadly and deeply as possible. The 'bottom-up' perspective allows us to shed light on municipal assessments of cross-border relations and European development processes. This is of particular value, because municipal actors are involved in political and administrative processes and responsibilities and, due to their proximity to citizens, are at the same time familiar with everyday issues of cross-border life.

The starting point was semi-structured guided interviews, which formed the basis for a quantitative survey and also served as in-depth illustration. In March and April 2024, interview requests were sent by post or email to mayors of several border municipalities. Six interviews with eight municipal representatives were conducted face-to-face and one online between 2 April and 3 May 2024, including two mayors each from Saarland, the French département Moselle, and Luxembourg, as well as two councillors from French municipalities entrusted with cross-border regional relations (see Annex A). The interviews (subsequently transcribed) lasted between 30 and 78 min. The language was not predetermined, but was chosen as appropriate during the interview, sometimes alternating between German and French. Topics included cross-border exchange relations, evaluation of challenges and opportunities, wishes and adaptation requirements for the future of the SaarLorLux region and the local cross-border context, experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic, and assessments of Europe and the EU. To protect their anonymity, the names and municipalities are not mentioned in this article. We use abbreviations consisting of Int=interview, DE/FR/LU for the sub-regions in the three countries, and a sequential number. The transcripts were coded using MaxQDA software and analysed in accordance with Mayring (2022).

In the subsequent quantitative survey of mayors in the SaarLorLux region, discussion focused on general assessments of Europe, the border regions, and municipal cross-border relations, evaluations of challenges, future fields of action, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and categorizations of the role of border regions in the EU. The questions asked were largely based on the interviews conducted in advance and an initial survey at municipal level in 2020. The questionnaire was created on the soscisurvey.de platform, with a questionnaire in German (Saarland), French (département Moselle) and bilingual German-French (Luxembourg) versions adapted in terms of content and language for each of the sub-regions. A full survey was conducted with 52 municipalities in Saarland and 100 municipalities in Luxembourg. The number of mayors to be surveyed in the département Moselle was reduced by means of selection and sampling due to the high number of 725 municipalities. In addition to the headquarters of the 22 municipal associations (EPCI; établissements publics de coopération intercommunale), a further six municipalities per municipal association were generated by random sampling, resulting in a total number of 151 municipalities to be considered in the département Moselle. As some municipal associations have fewer than seven municipalities, the total number of representatives contacted was 151 and not 154. The higher number on the French side was chosen because French municipalities are quite small and only staffed by honorary mayors, which (as shown by previous experience) meant that a lower response rate should be assumed than in Saarland and Luxembourg. After a postal approach on 10 May 2024, reminders were sent by email and again by post on 17 June 2024 and 26 June 2024. After around 2 months, we closed the survey period on 10 July 2024. With 56% in Saarland, 37% in the département Moselle, and 40% in Luxembourg, the response rate to the survey was good. However, no statement can be made at this point as to whether there are systematic failures for specific reasons, which could affect the representativeness of the results. The sample size (n) varies depending on the question and item, as no mandatory fields were defined. Open questions allowed for longer text responses, which were coded subsequently. They are included in the

results section, labelled with the abbreviation Surv=Survey, the country assignment and a consecutive number. The separate surveys of the three sub-regions make it possible to differentiate responses according to Saarland (DE)/Moselle (FR)/Luxembourg (LU). Based on the postcode (if specified), a distinction was subsequently made between municipalities with and without direct border contact to take into account the relevance of spatial proximity and distance to the border with regard to attitudes and assessments. The data interpretation is based on descriptive statistics via Microsoft Excel.

4 | Results

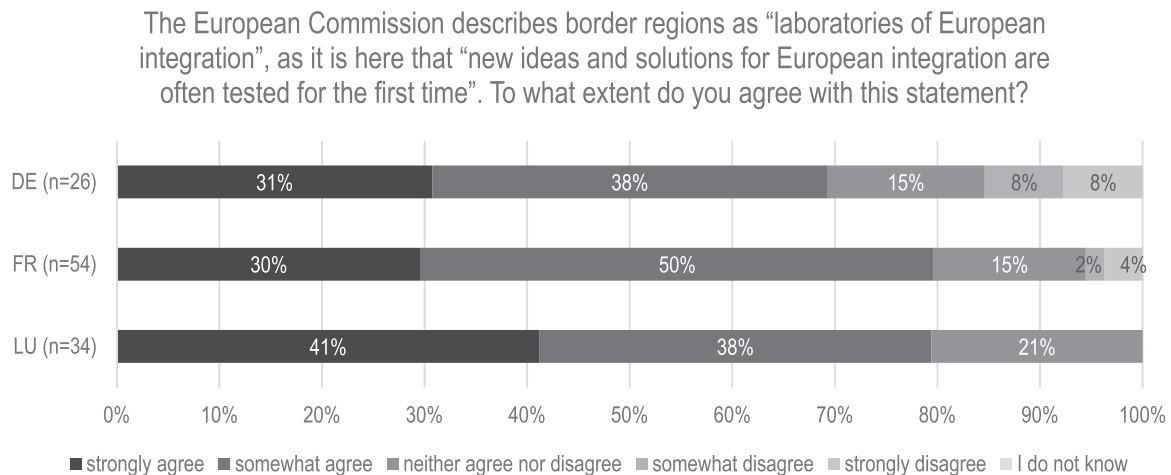### 4.1 | The Saarlorlux Region as a European Laboratory?

As outlined above, municipalities are in the special situation of involvement in European, national and regional decision-making processes on the one hand and in citizen expectations on the other. How do municipal representatives assess Europe from a 'bottom-up' perspective and what opportunities and challenges do they see in the border region SaarLorLux? The European Commission (2021, p. 1) describes border regions as 'living labs of European integration' "where new ideas and solutions for European integration are often tested for the first time". This metaphor can be used with regard to cross-border horizontal Europeanization: asked to what extent they agreed with the idea, mayors in the federal state of Saarland (almost 70%), *département* Moselle (c. 80%), and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (c. 80%) stated that they fully or to some extent agreed (see Figure 1). Despite a certain ambivalence in all three sub-regions, rejection was only found to a limited extent on the German and French side. Statements allow for differentiation between reasons for assessments: "Here we live it [i.e. the 'living lab' metaphor] in such a way that it is also perceived [...] as a role model"[2] (Int_DE_2). One French mayor explicitly emphasizes experimentation: "We are truly a laboratory for European issues, a testing ground" (Int_FR_4). However, this must become more concrete: "It's actually not bad. It just needs to be developed further, because you can't stop at the metaphor. The lab has to be alive" (Int_FR_3). Moreover, there are still obstacles that run counter to the laboratory concept, including

different and insufficiently harmonized laws and inadequate funding for border regions and their development (Int_LU_1). These hurdles are not easy to communicate to citizens. Another Luxembourg mayor (Int_LU_2) also emphasizes the insufficient impact beyond the border region: "So if they really saw us as laboratories, then Europe would have to function much better. [...]. We live Europe here on a small scale, so we should also be able to live Europe on a large scale". One can conclude from these statements that political desire and social reality are by no means always congruent.
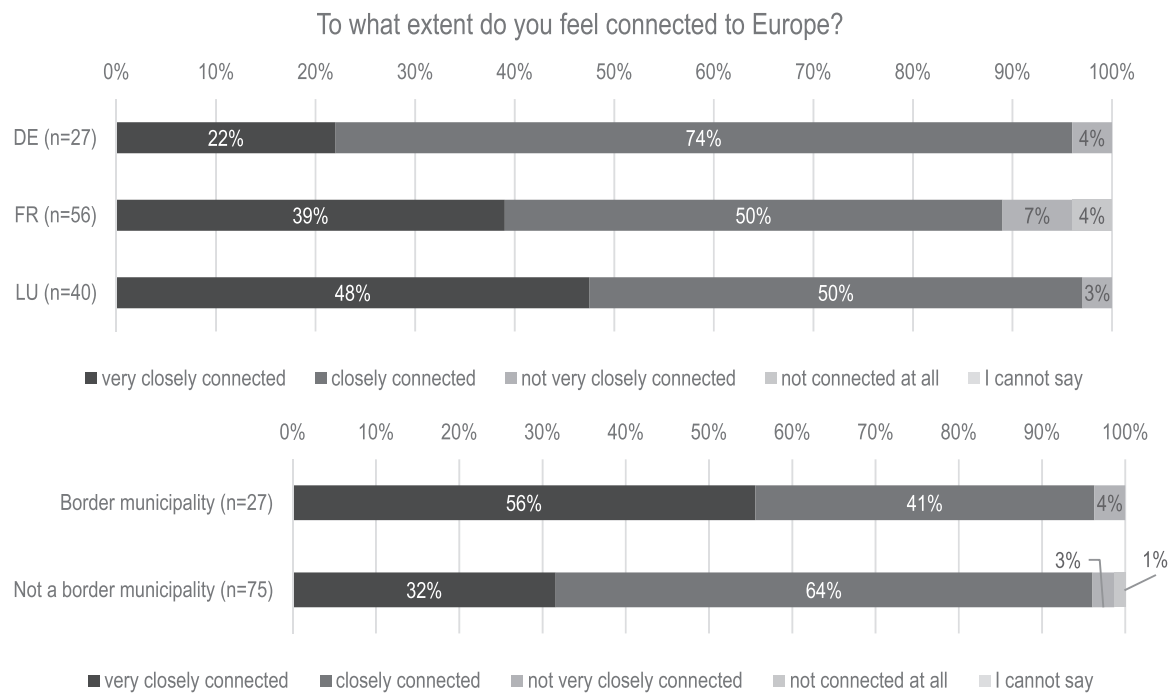
4.2 | Connections With Europe and the Border Region

The general attachment to Europe is rated very highly despite certain reservations (Figure 2 above). *Very close ties* are least pronounced in Saarland at 22%, followed by 39% in Moselle and 48% in Luxembourg, but if *very close* and *close ties* are taken together, then a figure of almost 90% and more is reached in the sub-regions. For a comparison with a broader citizens' perception, a Eurobarometer survey in 2023 can be used (European Commission 2024): 68% of respondents in Germany ($n = 1527$), 60% in France ($n = 1025$) and 85% in Luxembourg ($n = 503$) felt very closely or closely connected to Europe, which means that approval in the SaarLorLux region was clear and pronounced. The location of the municipalities is also a key factor (Figure 2 below): If a distinction is made between municipalities with a direct border to the neighbouring country/countries and other municipalities, it can be seen that border municipality representatives express a very close bond at 56% and a close bond at 41%—compared to 32% and 64% in non-border municipalities.

The question about attachment to Europe can be interpreted as a basic indicator of local assessment, but can also be made more precise by looking at associations with Europe based on an open (subsequently coded) question: With 51 codes ($n = 116$, multiple answers possible), the topic of *open borders with their freedom to travel* dominates, followed by the EU as a *monetary union* and *peace* with 39 codes each. With between 20 and 25 codes, values such as *solidarity and cohesion* or *freedom*, the *idea of community, partnership or friendly relations* as well as *different forms of cooperation or exchange* were also mentioned.

The European Commission describes border regions as "laboratories of European integration", as it is here that "new ideas and solutions for European integration are often tested for the first time". To what extent do you agree with this statement?

DE (n=26)	31%	38%	15%	8%	8%
FR (n=54)	30%	50%	15%	2%	4%
LU (n=34)	41%	38%	21%		

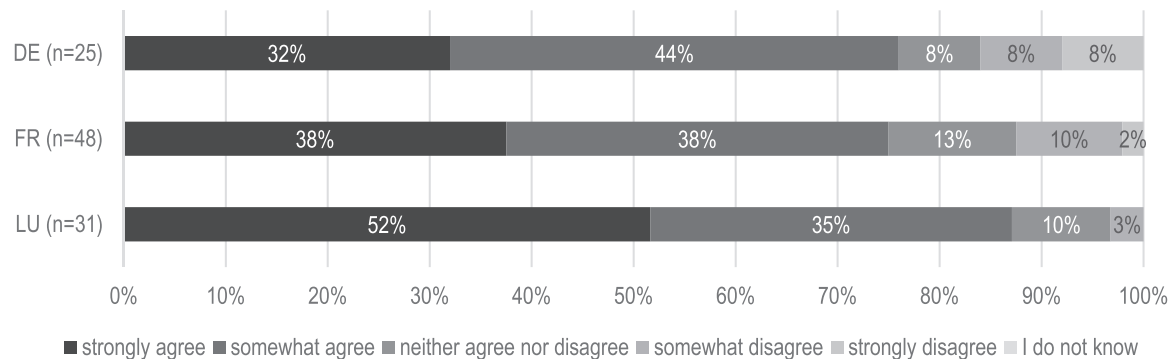■ strongly agree ■ somewhat agree ■ neither agree nor disagree ■ somewhat disagree ■ strongly disagree ■ I do not know

FIGURE 1 | Border regions as laboratories of European integration. *Source:* Own survey and illustration 2024.

To what extent do you feel connected to Europe?

DE (n=27): very closely connected 22%, closely connected 74%, not very closely connected 4%

FR (n=56): very closely connected 39%, closely connected 50%, not very closely connected 7%, not connected at all 4%

LU (n=40): very closely connected 48%, closely connected 50%, not very closely connected 3%

Legend: ■ very closely connected ■ closely connected ■ not very closely connected ■ not connected at all ■ I cannot say

Border municipality (n=27): very closely connected 56%, closely connected 41%, not very closely connected 4%

Not a border municipality (n=75): very closely connected 32%, closely connected 64%, not very closely connected 3%, not connected at all 1%

Legend: ■ very closely connected ■ closely connected ■ not very closely connected ■ not connected at all ■ I cannot say

FIGURE 2 | Connectedness with Europe. *Source:* Own survey and illustration 2024.

In a government statement in January 2023, Saarland Premier Anke Rehlinger said: "While 'Brussels' often seems abstract as a cipher for the European Union, here in the Greater Region, Europe is very concrete. Here we experience the interface of growing together. This is where Europe is lived." To what extent do you agree with this statement?
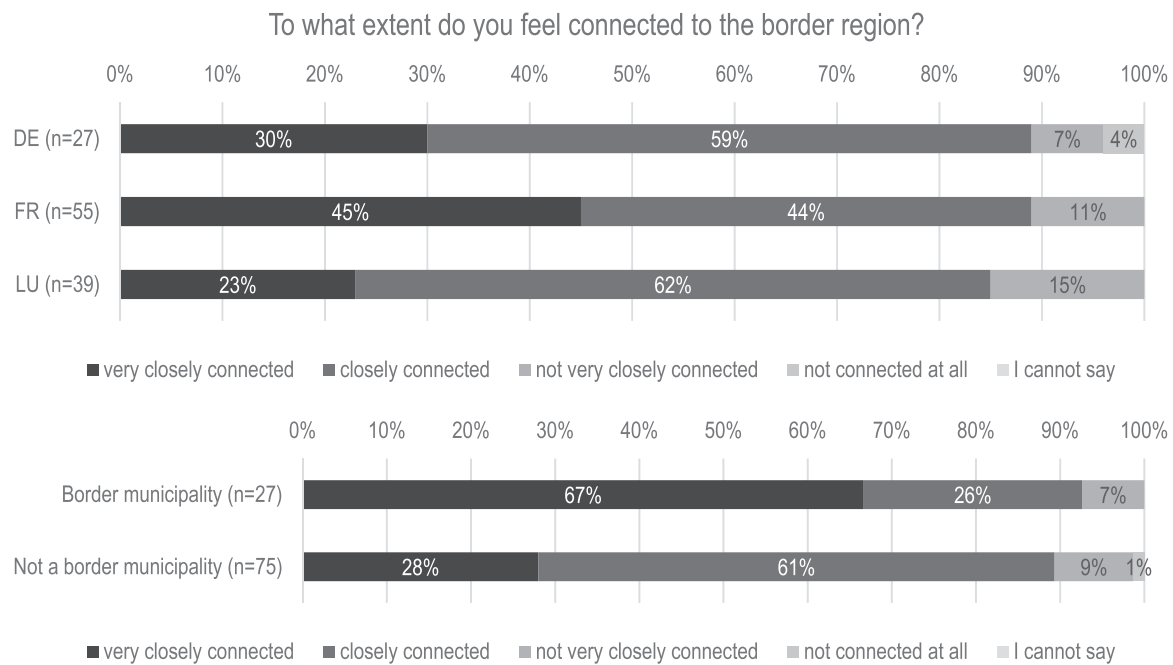
DE (n=25): strongly agree 32%, somewhat agree 44%, neither agree nor disagree 8%, somewhat disagree 8%, strongly disagree 8%

FR (n=48): strongly agree 38%, somewhat agree 38%, neither agree nor disagree 13%, somewhat disagree 10%, strongly disagree 2%

LU (n=31): strongly agree 52%, somewhat agree 35%, neither agree nor disagree 10%, somewhat disagree 3%

Legend: ■ strongly agree ■ somewhat agree ■ neither agree nor disagree ■ somewhat disagree ■ strongly disagree ■ I do not know

FIGURE 3 | Border regions as 'living' Europe. *Source:* Own survey and illustration 2024.

The focus is on European achievements gained through 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' interaction. Interviews emphasize that Europe stands for open borders that should be freely passable (e.g. Int_LU_1; Int_FR_4). One quote illustrates today's close links across borders (Int_LU_2): "Our hiking trails criss-cross the region. They go via Luxembourg, France, Germany and back. Our cycle path [...], if you cycle to [municipality X], [then you] cycle back on the German side on the cycle path. [...]. It's all closely connected. It wouldn't work any other way. People have that in their heads". The assessments are in line with results from Eurobarometer 549 on the Schengen Area: "More than eight out of ten EU citizens (82%) agree that the Schengen Area promotes interactions between people from different cultures, while 13% disagree. [...]. When asked whether they think the Schengen Area has more advantages than disadvantages for their country, three quarters [...] of EU citizens agree, while 17% disagree." From a municipal perspective, open borders are part of everyday cultural reality (e.g. Surv_FR_24; Surv_FR_33; Surv_LU_11). Border-crossing practices can thus form an important building block of Europeanization at the local level.

We can, then, look at the question of the extent to which Europe is actually lived and experienced in the SaarLorLux border region (Figure 3). Although general approval is quite

FIGURE 4 | Connectedness with the border region. *Source:* Own survey and illustration 2024.

high, only in Luxembourg is full approval clearly pronounced (52%). General affinity is thus higher than approval of Europe lived locally, which shows a certain reluctance towards cross-border horizontal Europeanization at the subnational level. This can be linked, among other things, to the fact that there are explicit local challenges where EU regulations are still lacking. In emergencies, for example, fire brigades help each other across borders without restrictions (Int_DE_1), but there is a lack of firm legal security for the provision of assistance. The Covid-19 pandemic, which will be discussed further, is remembered particularly negatively, with initially uncoordinated action with regard to border security: 'Because closing the border in a living Europe' (Int_DE_1) is seen as a mistake.
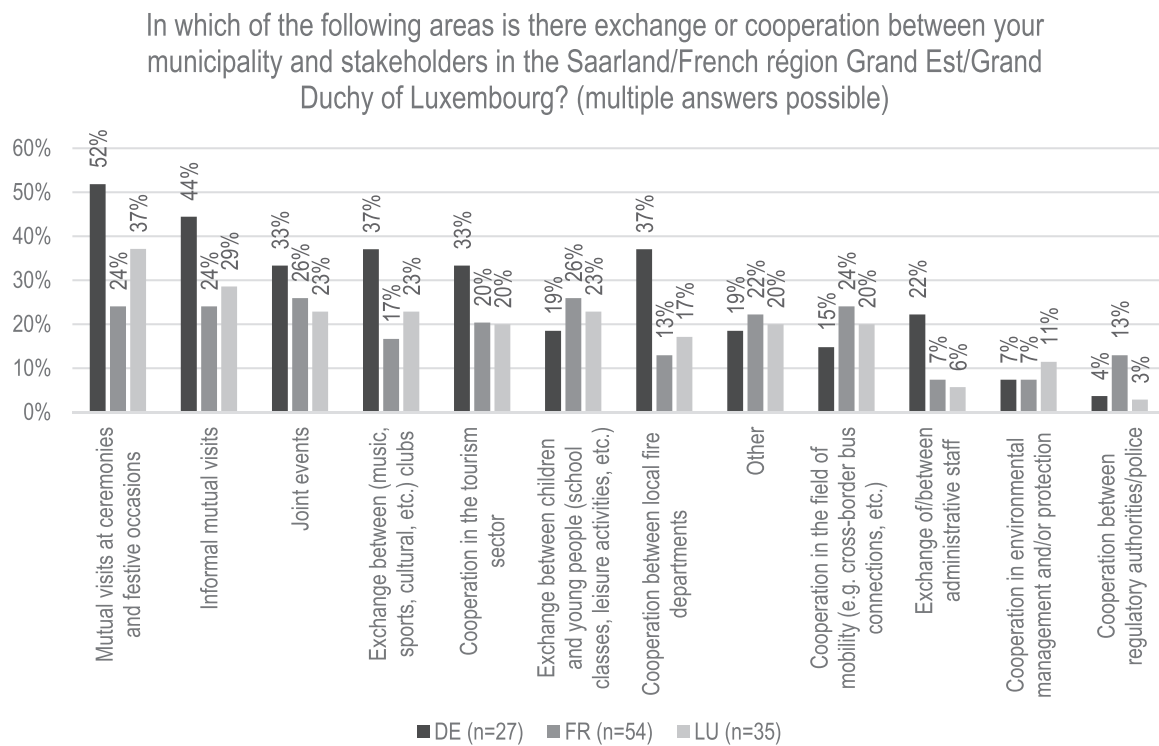
One could speculate that attachment to the border region will be pronounced to a high degree, but the survey does not show a consistent corresponding trend here (Figure 4). The highest approval ratings are found on the French side, but significantly lower—surprisingly—in Luxembourg. When differentiating between border municipalities versus non-border municipalities, the result becomes clearer again: at 67% compared to 28%, there is a strong connection in border municipalities—space matters. The location of the municipalities plays a central role here.

At the same time, Europe or the border region are not automatically the only possible references (see Annex B): The highest approval ratings in all three sub-regions are to one's own place of residence (between just under 80 and over 90% very closely attached). The feeling of regional attachment is more pronounced in Germany (63%) and France (57%) than in Luxembourg (46%), and attachment to one's own country is higher in France and Luxembourg (both over 75% very closely attached) than in Germany, which is characteristically federal (52% very closely attached).

4.3 | Subnational Fields of Action, Opportunities and Challenges

Mayors are also involved in horizontal Europeanization via cross-border contacts, practices, networks and institutions (following Heidenreich 2019c, p. 13; Mau and Mewes 2012, p. 10). The first low-threshold instrument here is exchange with partner municipalities and associated interactions: 53% of mayors surveyed in the three sub-regions of our survey ($n = 86$) stated that they maintain a partnership with one or more municipalities. These and further-reaching collaborations are initially based to a large extent on individual arrangements: formal and informal reciprocal visits, as well as joint events (Figure 5). Exchanges in the fields of culture, tourism and education also play an important role. Regular cooperation in the public sector was mentioned less frequently, i.e. cooperation between fire brigades, administrative staff, and regulatory authorities, or on topics such as transport infrastructure and environmental issues. Against this background, a spectrum opens between informal exchange and formalized cooperation. The values tend to be lower the more formal—and therefore more complex—the cooperation is in terms of organization. This assessment can be underpinned by a differentiation of perceived challenges to cross-border cooperation.

As the previous statements show, local authorities are trying to help breathe life into the cross-border idea. However, they are hindered by barriers that are very similar in Saarland, the *département* Moselle and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Based on a longer list of hurdles, six challenges crystallize as TOP 5 of the three sub-regions (Table 1). The criticism is that other tasks take priority in normal day-to-day municipal business, which is particularly dominant in Saarland (92%). This is linked to requirements that have an obstructive effect, as one representative notes: "Due to the excessive task overload caused by the federal and state governments, there is hardly any room for

FIGURE 5 | Areas of cooperation, sorted in descending order based on the accumulated percentage values of the three sub-regions. *Source:* Own survey and illustration 2024.

TABLE 1 | TOP 5 challenges (based on strongly agree and somewhat agree) from the perspective of municipal representatives in the three sub-regions.

Rank	Saarland	Moselle	Luxembourg
1	Other tasks predominate in day-to-day business (92%, $n = 25$)	High bureaucratic effort in the acquisition of funding for cross-border exchange (85%, $n = 41$)	Different financial resources (79%, $n = 33$)
2	Limited financial and human resources in their own municipality (80%, $n = 25$)	Other tasks predominate in day-to-day business (74%, $n = 42$)	High bureaucratic effort in the acquisition of funding for cross-border exchange (58%, $n = 31$)
3	High bureaucratic effort in the acquisition of funding for cross-border exchange (80%, $n = 25$)	Language barriers (74%, $n = 53$)	Other tasks predominate in day-to-day business (57%, $n = 30$)
4	Language barriers (77%, $n = 26$)	Limited financial and human resources in their own municipality (73%, $n = 52$)	Different distribution of responsibilities and competencies (federal *vs.* predominantly centralized system) (54%, $n = 28$)
5	Different financial resources (72%, $n = 25$)	Different financial resources (73%, $n = 44$)	Limited financial and human resources in their own municipality (50%, $n = 33$)

Note: Identical items across the three columns were given one colour.
Source: Own summary and presentation 2025.

these 'voluntary' projects for the municipalities" (Surv_DE_4). One issue criticized in the multilevel network is that the capital cities are too far removed from the cross-border reality in the SaarLorLux region (Surv_LU_5; Int_LU_1; Int_LU_2): "When you talk about living together in Berlin or Brussels or Paris, they don't know what it's like at all" (Int_LU_2). Despite all the existing vertical Europeanization, restrictions must still be noted here today. Another challenge criticized is the high level of bureaucracy involved in acquiring funding—TOP 3 in all

sub-regions, particularly in Moselle (85%) and Saarland (80%). This can ultimately result from the fact that it is difficult to explain to the population with their wishes why some things take so long: "[I]t is simply not comprehensible for the normal citizen what hurdles you have to overcome" (Int_DE_1). *Insufficient* financial and human resources as well as *different* financial resources in neighbouring countries are also relevant. The resources of French municipalities in particular are limited, which can stand in the way of joint projects (Int_DE_2;

Int_FR_3; Int_LU_1; Int_LU_2). Furthermore, language barriers in Germany and France are seen as an obstacle. Younger people in particular do not speak the neighbouring language well enough (Int_DE_2; Int_FR_1; Int_FR_3). In Luxembourg, by contrast, the country's multilingual orientation places less emphasis on language aspects. Municipal representatives see further challenges in 'cultural' differences, limited interest on the part of municipal staff and citizens, responsibilities that still end at the border, and border crime, although these are not very significant in quantitative terms in the survey. Euroscepticism was not explicitly addressed in the surveys, but specific voting behaviour (see Bürkner 2020; Hamez 2024) makes it increasingly likely that it will become an issue in upcoming years.

In the 3 years from spring 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic, with increased border controls and travel restrictions, had a major impact on cross-border life. The experiences of those years still have an impact today. From a municipal perspective the pandemic is seen as a step backwards rather than a new impetus for cross-border cooperation and European integration: 36% of respondents in Saarland, 48% in Moselle and 43% in Luxembourg see the pandemic as initiating a step backwards, while only 12% of mayors in Saarland, 26% in Moselle and 18% in Luxembourg see any forward impetus (see Annex C). Border controls in particular are mentioned in the free text responses to the quantitative survey, as well as in the interviews, as a negative turning point: "Then that's the way it is. I wasn't happy with the Germans either. It was intimidating when I wanted to go to my parents-in-law and they were standing there at the border with machine guns" (Int_LU_1). These are impressions of isolation that contrast with the Europe of open internal borders and a common European response, as a Luxembourg mayor points out (Int_LU_2): "When you talk about Europe and you see that there is only a river that is 50 metres wide, if that, that things are done differently, that doesn't bring a region together. [...]. It is absolutely essential that there is much more official harmonization". On the French side, resentment was felt at times (e.g. Surv_FR_8), while on the Luxembourg side it was criticized that established contacts and regular meetings had suffered and had not reached the same level as before the pandemic (Surv_LU_11).

The mayors who see the Covid-19 pandemic as an impetus, emphasize the need to act together to counter the crisis. The decisions made in the capital cities had a particularly negative impact on the border region and ways of dealing with them had to be found (e.g. Int_FR_4; Int_LU_1; Int_LU_2). Opportunities are seen in European solidarity and cooperation (see also European Parliament 2021, p. 64), for example visible in a Franco-German Covid-19 test centre and an exchange in the health sector: "And there were also good things at times, for example the large test centre at the *Goldene Bremm* [border crossing point]. You don't always have to make everything black or negative. There are also good things and that was a good thing" (Int_FR_1). In times of crisis, there is a need for mutual support and cross-border solidarity—a statement that 68% of respondents fully and 24% partly agreed with (Annex D).

4.4 | Future Prospects

For the future, it can be deduced that from a municipal perspective—comparable in the three sub-regions—improvements

must be achieved and adjustments made in several areas, which, if implemented, will bring opportunities for cross-border regional development. Education and second language learning provide a foundation for this (Surv_DE_28; Surv_FR_24). Commitments at school and lifelong learning, including training in a professional context, are seen as crucial (Surv_DE_3). The reduction of bureaucratic hurdles is another field of action (Surv_DE_29; Surv_LU_35; Int_FR_1), as is the strengthening of local authority powers. In the quantitative survey, 85% of respondents in the three sub-regions fully (35%) or partly agree (50%) with the latter demand (Annex D). Barriers originating from higher levels often restrict municipalities in their organizational options: "There is always someone who says, 'No, that's not possible: No, that's not working out. You can't do that'. [...]. Everything is supposed to work normally, everything is supposed to be simple, but that's not the case. [...]. So, everything the municipalities are allowed to decide for themselves runs smoothly. And without any fuss. But as soon as we need authorization somewhere, for something, [it becomes difficult]" (Int_FR_1). Filling cross-border horizontal Europeanization with life from the municipal level requires an expansion of opportunities for action (Int_FR_2; also Surv_DE_4) and "more lobbying at national level" (Surv_DE_29; also Surv_FR_14). Europeanization is, then, seen as a process of self-empowerment of the municipalities and a springboard to greater autonomy. At the same time, this requires more financial room for manoeuvre (Int_DE_2; Int_FR_3). Greater proximity to citizens is seen as an opportunity for local authorities to improve cross-border dialogue. Many areas affect the immediate living environment of citizens, so that their views and wishes should be better integrated into local political action (Surv_DE_3; Surv_FR_6; Int_LU_2). Finally, pragmatic action and a fundamental enabling attitude are required. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that solutions to problems can be created without bureaucracy, but today concerns and bureaucracy are back on the agenda (Int_DE_1; Int_FR_4). Accordingly, efforts should be made to find regulations that do justice to everyday cross-border life—to be interpreted as a 'bottom-up' promotion of Europeanization.

The reality of Europeanization in the border regions is strikingly expressed in a free text from the quantitative survey (Surv_LU_11): "In border regions, the European idea, its goals and projects, are sometimes realized on a small scale, but in a very concrete and less abstract way. In [our] border region, there is the labour market of the Greater Region, there are joint schools, cross-border projects in public services, and so on. Unfortunately, this is very often taken for granted and is no longer always associated with European unification". 81% of the mayors surveyed agree with the concept of 'living the European idea on a small scale' (Annex D). From a municipal viewpoint, it is not necessarily only commonalities that have a positive effect, but also the experience of differences: "In border regions, the different national systems and regulations clash, as do social and cultural traditions. At many borders in Europe there are cross-border areas of interdependence in which both the advantages and the problems of such interfaces become recognizable. The experience gained here is an important impulse for European development" (Surv_DE_17). In this light, bringing people together and working on cross-border community building could have positive effects for the entire EU (Surv_DE_11; Surv_LU_6). 84% of the local authority representatives surveyed either fully or to some extend agree that

cross-border cooperation is 'a driving force for the development of the European Union' (Annex D). It is, then, at the sub-national level and in the direct context of border regions, that horizontal Europeanization can have a crucial impact if appropriate framework conditions are in place.

5 | Conclusion

By focusing specifically on the SaarLorLux border region as a case study, we have sought in this article to shed light on one aspect of the many facets of Europeanization at the subnational level. Our theoretical and conceptual starting point was the distinction between vertical and horizontal Europeanization, coupled with considerations from border studies. Against this background we have adopted an explicitly cross-border horizontal perspective. Place matters, so that the focus was shifted to the specific border region. Quantitative and qualitative surveys (year 2024) of local decision-makers have placed Saar-LorLux at the centre of the analysis.

The results show a strong inherent mental and cultural connection with Europe: the idea of border regions as living labs of European integration is very much alive in the three sub-regions of Saarland, Moselle and Luxembourg—most of all in Luxembourg. Vertical Europeanization has laid the foundation for a close cross-border networking, which manifests itself in economic, cultural and social exchange relationships. In the *département* Moselle this is precisely where the greatest advantages are perceived: the Europe of open borders promotes interaction and provides a basis for positive perceptions of the EU. However, the thesis that Europe is lived locally is shared to a lesser extent than we had assumed. Persistent political and administrative hurdles contribute in all three sub-regions to this caveat. The Covid-19 pandemic also played a special role as a backlash, with accompanying border controls and the temporary closure of some border crossings. In this respect, one can speak of rebordering processes hindering cross-border exchange, also at municipal level—a particularly prominent case (in 2020) of dependence on national decisions that were insufficiently coordinated with regional and local decision-makers. Here, the municipalities found themselves in a sandwich position between higher-level requirements and citizens' wishes, and were obliged to play a mediating role. Ongoing restrictions and limitations have crystallized into challenges that set limits to the promotion of Europeanization, and the situation is exacerbated by insufficient financial and human resources.

At the same time, however, opportunities arise to strengthen joint coordination in the cross-border regional context to be heard in the capitals and at EU level. From a municipal perspective, solidarity, proximity to citizens, and opportunities to experience diversity first-hand offer further opportunities. To fill these with life and to further advance cross-border horizontal Europeanization, local authority representatives are calling for more room for manoeuvre. Rebordering tendencies with renewed controls at various borders of EU countries will raise new questions in 2025; these, too, can be analysed from a comparative perspective. How will cross-border initiatives, networks and institutions, everyday interdependencies and

identities continue to develop in this light? With the SaarLor-Lux region, we have analysed a border region that can be seen as a European forerunner due to its close interdependencies, which are, however, not completely resilient in times of crisis. Comparisons with other border regions or other regional contexts in the EU are useful here to analyse driving forces and obstacles. It seems also worthwhile to think synoptically about Europeanization and border studies—as perspectives that can be mutually beneficial, as they set different priorities under a broader spotlight. In this article, we have put forward an initial proposal for this intersection, which is aimed at the specific geographical-spatial orientation, taking into account political and administrative framework conditions and everyday practices, empirically underpinned from the perspective of municipal representatives.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] The Greater Region consists of the French region Lorraine within today's region Grand Est, the German federal states Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg as well as the Federation Wallonia-Brussels and the German-speaking Community of Belgium. We focus on the historically grown border 'seam' between the Saarland, Lorraine and Luxemburg.

[2] French and German statements have been translated into English.

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Annex

A. Overview of the interviews.

Abbreviation	Description	Date	Length	Realization	Language
Int_LU_1	Mayor of a Luxembourg border municipality	02 April 2024	01:14 h	face-to-face	German
Int_LU_2	Mayor of a Luxembourg border municipality	03 April 2024	01:09 h	face-to-face	German
Int_DE_1	Mayor of a German border community	16 April 2024	00:60 h	face-to-face	German, French and Lorraine *platt*
Int_FR_1	Mayor of a French border municipality				
Int_FR_2	Councillor for cross-border relations of a French border municipality				
Int_DE_2	Mayor of a German border community	22 April 2024	00:52 h	face-to-face	German
Int_FR_3	Councillor for cross-border relations of a French border municipality	25 April 2024	00:30 h	Zoom	French and German
Int_FR_4	Mayor of a French border municipality	03 May 2024	01:18 h	face-to-face	French

B. Answers to the question 'To what extent do you feel connected to...?'

Answers DE ($n = 27$)	Place of residence	Federal state	Border region	Germany	France	Luxembourg	Europe
Very closely connected	93%	63%	30%	52%	15%	11%	22%
Closely connected	4%	37%	59%	37%	70%	37%	74%
Not very closely connected	4%	0%	7%	11%	11%	44%	4%
Not connected at all	0%	0%	4%	0%	4%	7%	0%
I cannot say	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Answers FR ($n = 56$)	Place of residence	*département* of residence	Border region	Germany	France	Luxembourg	Europe
Very closely connected	79%	57%	45%	16%	76%	16%	39%
Closely connected	21%	41%	44%	65%	24%	49%	50%
Not very closely connected	0%	2%	11%	15%	0%	24%	7%
Not connected at all	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	11%	4%
I cannot say	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Answers LU ($n = 39$)	Place of residence	District ('canton') of residence	Border region	Germany	France	Luxembourg	Europe
Very closely connected	88%	46%	23%	23%	13%	78%	48%
Closely connected	13%	41%	62%	48%	46%	23%	50%
Not very closely connected	0%	13%	15%	30%	36%	0%	3%
Not connected at all	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%
I cannot say	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

C. Answers to the question: 'Has the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a step backwards or an impetus for cross-border cooperation in the SaarLorLux region?'

	DE (n = 25)	FR (n = 42)	LU (n = 28)
Step backwards	36%	48%	43%
Neither	52%	26%	39%
Impetus	12%	26%	18%
I don't know	0%	0%	0%

D. Answers to statements.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know
In times of crisis, there is a need for mutual support and cross-border solidarity (n = 110)	68%	24%	8%	0%	0%	0%
Border regions need more regional and local authority so that they can make an even greater contribution to living Europe in the future (n = 106)	35%	50%	12%	4%	0%	0%
In our border region, we are used to living across borders. We live the European idea on a small scale (n = 109)	54%	27%	12%	8%	0%	0%
Cross-border cooperation is a driving force for the development of the European Union (n = 109)	46%	38%	8%	8%	0%	0%