



Initiativkreis Metropolitane  
Grenzregionen

# Border Regions in SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic Times

// Position Paper (long version)



# Imprint

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## **Picture credits**

See page 19

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Border regions are diverse and sustainable living, economic and cultural spaces - they are „Europe in miniature“. The Cross-Border Metropolitan Regions Initiative - or IMeG for short - has been representing its members' interests on a national and European level ever since its inception in the year 2011. The work of the network is meant to help draw attention to the specific potentials of these border regions. At the same time, the initiative wants to provide stimuli for promoting regional cross-border development in a sense of territorial cohesion, and actively supporting the work of cross-border institutions and/or European networks.

The ImeG partners have many years of experience in cross-border cooperation and topical issues like cross-border area monitoring, equal living conditions or the pandemic's impact on border regions, on their agenda. Inter alia, the regular ImeG meetings serve to prepare and adopt statements and publications. More information on the initiative and its activities is available from the IMeG website (<https://metropolitane-grenzregionen.eu>).

# Content

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Summary of the propositions .....	4
1. Introduction: Border regions in SARS-CoV-2 pandemic times .....	5
2. Reintroduction of border controls in the wake of the pandemic. ....	6
3. Impact of the border closures .....	10
4. Experiences with and lessons from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. ....	12
4.1 Establishing border regions as a homogenous space in politics and planning .....	12
4.2 More cross-border area monitoring as a basis for action .....	12
4.3 Improving information exchange routines in times of crisis. ....	13
4.4 Installing cross-border task forces for times of crisis. ....	13
4.5 Elaborating cross-border emergency plans. ....	14
4.6 Using established cross-border cooperation structures as communication channels .....	14
4.7 Banking on nearby institutions and actors in the crisis management. ....	15
4.8 Strengthening the collective in border regions – as a basis for greater resilience to crises. ....	15
5. Outlook .....	16
Sources .....	18
Picture credits .....	19

## Abstract

Border regions are functional patchworks straddling national borders. This applies in economic terms, but also to the lifeworlds of the people living there. Free cross-border traffic has become matter of course in the wake of the Schengen Agreement. The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and unexpected reintroduction of border controls and/or entry restrictions abruptly stopped and/or limited the ability to cross the border. The borders returned to people's everyday lives. The cross-border labour market with its many border commuters, the economy, commerce and the hospitality industry were all particularly affected, but also the social relationships in border areas.

The crisis has once again underscored the importance of a functioning cross-border cooperation, especially also in critical situations. Which is why the objective must now be to learn from the experiences made with the pandemic. In an intensive exchange, ImeG collated the border regions' specific challenges in the pandemic situation, and drew first lessons from them. The pandemic highlighted systemic deficits that call for systemic answers. Only they would enable the actors in border regions to respond better to unexpected future events, and reduce the negative impact for the economy and social cohesion in them. In this respect, IMeG formulated eight propositions aimed at a crisis-proof development of the border regions. It nonetheless needs to be emphasized that the long-term effects of the pandemic for the border regions are not yet reliably estimable at this point in time.

# Summary of the propositions

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## **Establishing border regions as a homogenous space in politics and planning**

Border regions need to be perceived as functional units in political and planning terms, irrespective of national borders, and thus understood as joint action areas. This requires the cross-border interrelations informing the regions' economies and people's everyday lives to be better understood and lent more visibility in the future. These interconnections are what makes the border regions „work“. The objective resides in being able to maintain them even in times of crisis.

## **More cross-border area monitoring as a basis for action**

Cross-border area monitoring is a central action field in border regions: It is able to supply a reliable data basis for learning from experience, designing future scenarios, and deriving options for future action. The cross-border area monitoring needs to be improved in a manner ensuring that it also meets the requirements for a greater stability in crises and the resilience of border regions.

## **Improving information exchange routines in times of crisis**

A continuous information exchange in the cross-border cooperation is not only essential for politics and planning. The pandemic especially highlighted the particular information needs of the populace. The requirements include a perpetuated and institutionalized information offer and new routines in the ad-hoc provision of information in times of crisis.

## **Installing cross-border task forces for times of crisis**

Cross-border task forces should be installed to enable faster responses in times of crisis. They would contribute to an early communication of national crisis interventions, to highlighting their cross-border impact, and to the initiation of coordination processes.

## **Elaborating cross-border emergency plans**

Cross-border emergency plans prepare administrations better for future challenges at borders. The envisaged workflows need to be rehearsed in regular emergency drills in the cross-border cooperation structures, and continuously evaluated.

## **Using established cross-border cooperation structures as communication channels**

Actors in border regions can draw on extensive experience and lived tradition in transnational cooperation. Especially in times of crisis, well-practised cooperation structures can serve for fast communication and quick responses. The potential of existing cross-border cooperation structures therefore needs to be strengthened for the challenges of crisis preparedness and crisis management, and made targeted use of.

## **Banking on nearby institutions and actors in the crisis management**

Local actors and institutions are close to the action – near the region and people. Which makes it meaningful to involve precisely these actors and institutions more extensively in the crisis management. This way their local know-how of border-specific peculiarities can be carried into the decision-making bodies and play a role in finding solutions.

## **Strengthening the collective in border regions – as a basis for greater resilience to crises**

For their residents, border regions are shared habitats. The collective straddling national borders generates a uniquely European cohesion. This cohesion and sense of unity in border regions will nonetheless need to be nurtured and strengthened – an intergenerational project! Particularly the mutual understanding can contribute to stability in times of crisis.



# 1. Introduction: Border regions in SARS-CoV-2 pandemic times

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The national subareas of border regions are tightly enmeshed in functional terms; this applies to the labour markets, but also the housing sector, public services, and to cultural and recreational proposals. As an achievement of the Schengen Agreement, free cross-border traffic has become a fixture and self-evident fact of everyday life. Although different administrative, legal and health systems still continue to collide at national borders to this day, European integration proceeds in these spaces by way of a close and lived cross-border cooperation. This is reflected in a great number of government and governance structures constituting the border region as an action area in recent decades.

The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and sudden, unexpected reintroduction of border controls and/or entry restrictions confronted the border regions with new challenges. The identification of housing, supply and work locations near the border as risk areas came with a „return to territorial borders“ that had long been forgotten in people's everyday lives (Baumgart/Krätzig 2021: 82).

Even with the cross-border cooperation being characterized by many years of rehearsed experience and practices, the border controls in the spring of 2020 were by no means met with routine in handling such crisis situations – neither in political and administrative terms, nor from the economic actors or the population. Lacking most of all were mechanisms for maintaining the commuter relationships and/or information exchange relating to entry restrictions and controls. The measures were linked with highly tangible repercussions for the economy, commerce, administration and lifeworlds of people on both sides of the border, with the commuter relationships also substantially restricted. Added to

this were opaque and partly incomprehensible border traffic regulations that led to an enormous demand for information, and loss of trust, amongst the population as well as on a political level. The social consequences of the closed borders particularly showed up in the re-emergence of old prejudices previously thought to have been long since overcome.

The experiences in dealing with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic have shown that we will need new options and mechanisms to enable a better coordination of measures in future pandemic situations, and a faster information exchange. It is decisive for the regional development actors to fathom how a preparation for future crisis situations can succeed, and their impact on the border regions better estimated. Strategies and programmes need to be developed in this area for dealing with future crises. It is important to raise the awareness of decision-making centres in national capitals for the specific situation of border regions, so that „border closures“ and all their effects on the inner functioning of the regions can be avoided.

The IMeG initiative compiled various lessons from the experiences and findings of recent months that are of practical relevance for cross-border cooperation. This position paper is meant to cast further light on these propositions.

## 2. Reintroduction of border controls in the wake of the pandemic

No other country in Europe has as many neighbours as the Federal Republic of Germany. Nine nations adjoin German territory along a border of 3,876 km in total (Federal Statistical Office, 15/7/2021). This lends border regions particular importance as interconnecting spaces, which leads to a greater need for coordination, especially also across national borders. A central feature of this cross-border cooperation is the free traffic of persons, goods and services. The Schengen Agreement ensures this for its contract territory, waiving border controls at all the borders within it (Art. 22 of the Schengen Borders Code). Border controls can be reintroduced if the public order or home security is at risk. But this only happens in exceptional cases and for limited periods (Schengen Borders Code Art. 25.1). Past years have seen temporary con-

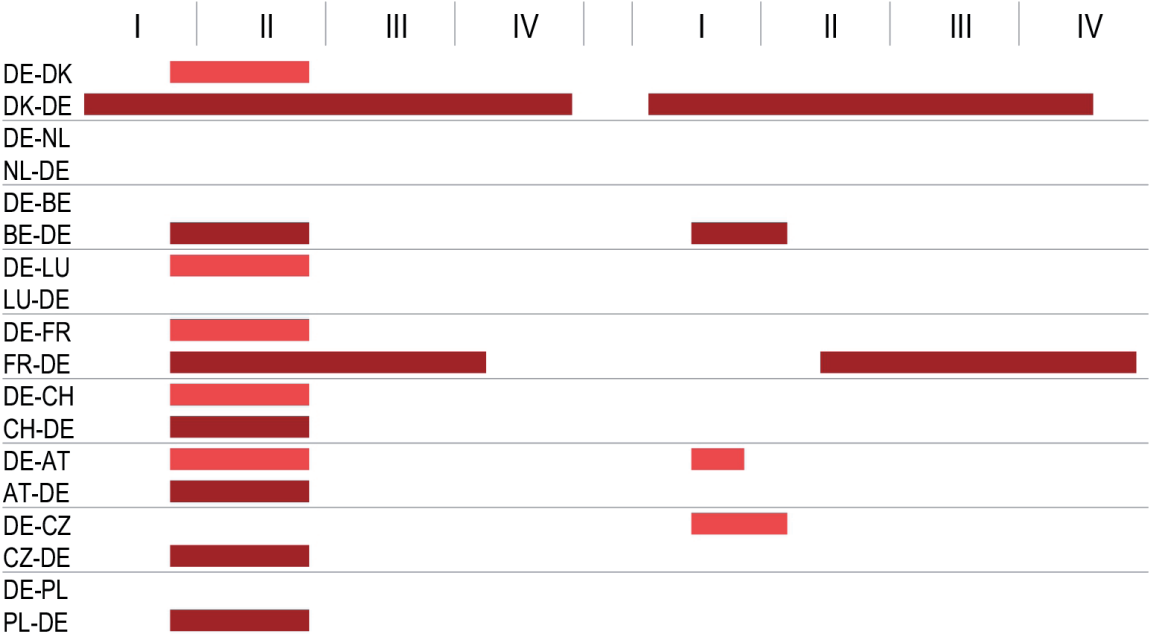
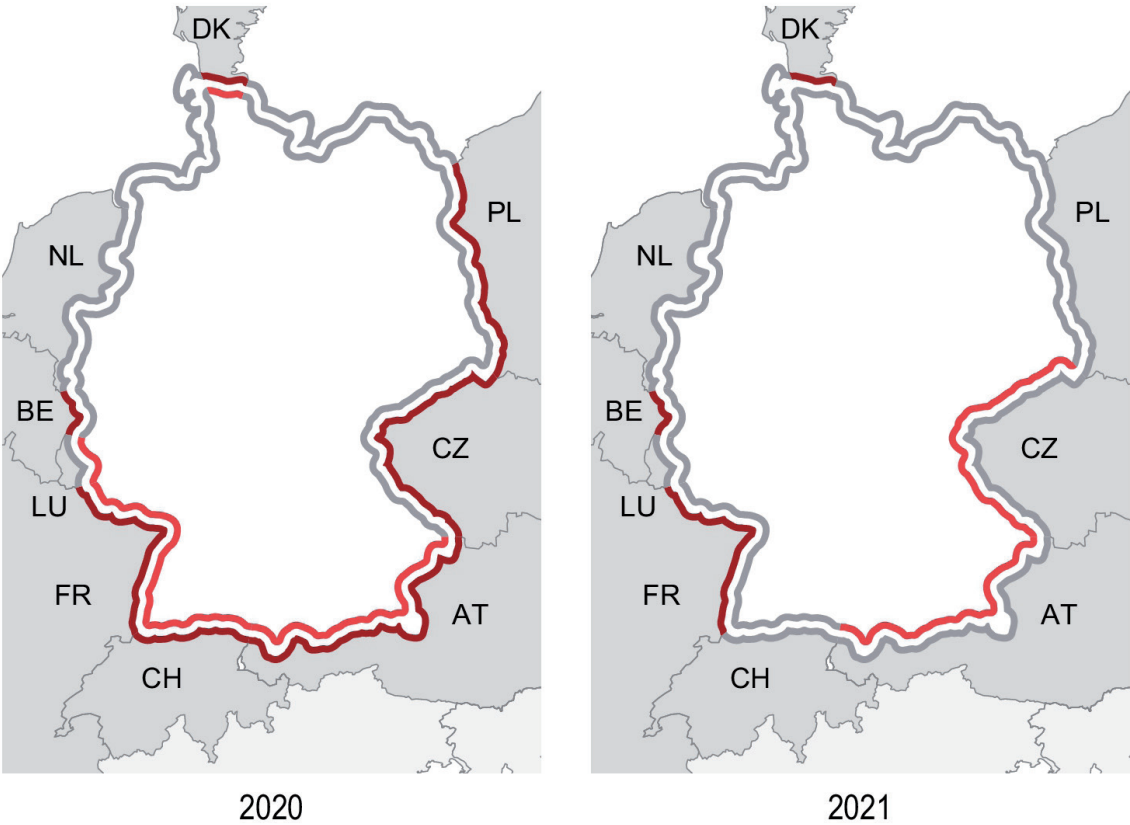
trols introduced at internal borders after terrorist attacks or for large sports events, for example (see European Commission, 2022). The controls went largely unnoticed by the population at the time. This was different when border controls were introduced in March 2020 in the wake of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. 18 nations made use of them in total, more than half the Schengen member states (European Commission, 2022: 5-13), turning inter-European borders into 'barriers' again from one day to the next (Duvernet/Gebhardt/Kurnol, 2021: 5).

**“The Schengen area is one of the EU's greatest achievements. It is an area without internal borders where citizens – many from third countries, businesspeople and tourists – can travel freely without being subjected to border controls.”**  
(European Union, 22/6/2021)



Picture 1: Border controls in the wake of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2020/2021

Own graphic based on the European Commission (2022: 2-13); the illustration shows the border controls reported to the European Commission by member states as per Art. 25 and 28 ff. of the Schengen Borders Code (as of 31/12/2021). The national governments' additional entry restrictions are not shown.





Although this was often colloquially equated, the internal borders were not fully closed, but still passable for defined purposes. The entry restrictions decreed and also controlled at official border crossings effectively reduced their „porousness“. The impact of the border controls was acutely tangible for citizens of the Schengen area:

- Restriction of the free movement of persons
- Systematic control of the borders
- Strict entry restrictions and controls for them
- Cross-border traffic at approved border crossings only
- Closure of smaller border crossings

The controls found their justification in the pandemic's progress on both sides of the federal border. Infection figures could vary surprisingly from one to the other: The infection figures for the French Département Moselle thus for example showed markedly greater numbers of cases at the high points of the second and third wave than the neighbouring German re-

gions. The pandemic developments in Germany with falling infection rates in spring 2021 also differed from the continuously high levels in France (Siekmann 18/6/2021a-d; SIG France 18/6/2021). As the pandemic dragged on over time, this led to various border regulations and entry restrictions between nation states. But the exact links between the cross-border relations, e.g. the proportion of commuters and spread of the virus, have remained unclear so far (Duvernet 2021: 55).

The period of border controls in 2020 was mostly the same except for Denmark and France, who sustained them much longer. Although border controls were largely limited to the pandemic's first wave as a response to the spreading infection, the nation states' divergent approach was even detectable then. This meant controls on both sides along the German border with France, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, and only on the German side at the border with Luxembourg. In contrast to which the border sections adjoining Belgium, Poland and the Czech Republic were not controlled on the German side, and both



Source: David Lohmüller



sides waived the reintroduction of controls altogether along the German-Dutch border (European Commission 2022: 6-13).

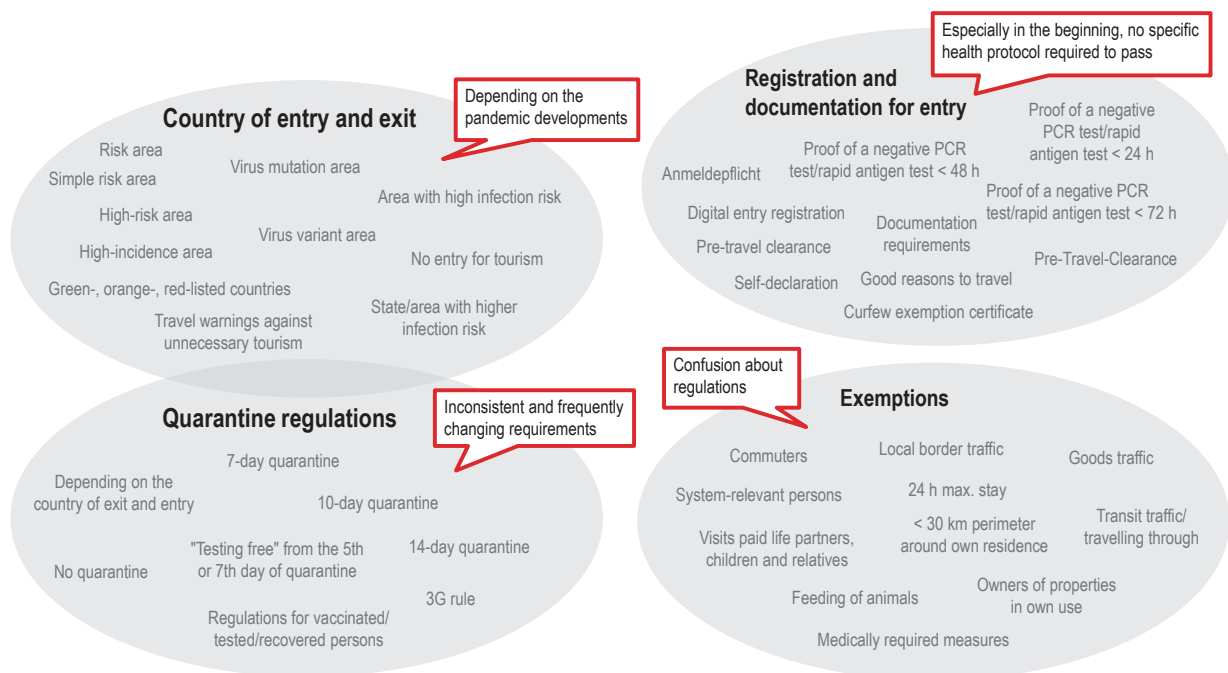
In 2021, fewer nation states introduced border controls overall, inter alia for reason of the negative effects of the 2020 approach.

Nor did the classification of neighbouring countries as risk areas necessarily entail border controls any longer. Based on the Czech Republic and Austrian region of Tirol's declaration as virus variant areas, border controls were introduced for entries to Germany from either country in February 2021 (NDR 28.2.2021). In contrast to the situation at the Franco-German border: Although the Département Moselle was also declared a virus variant area in February 2021, the entry and exit regulations were merely tightened. This included the local public passenger transport from the French Département Moselle to Germany being stopped, and cross-border coach and train transport suspended (Saarbahn GmbH 22.6.2021).

The controls entailed numerous border regulations as well as exemptions. These were continuously adjusted to the infection rates and attendant ratings of the state of exit or entry, being eased and/or tightened in parallel. Varying from one country to the next, these regulations were nearly impossible to systematize, and painted a rather non-transparent picture. The regulations revolved around the assessment of exit and entry states by way of the infection curves there. The assessments served as a basis for quarantine regulations and exemptions as well as the documentation required for entry, if any. Especially at the start of the border controls, no specific health protocol such as measuring the temperature or proof of a negative rapid test was required to pass. The regulations were adjusted as the pandemic proceeded, with a certain harmonization of various requirements at least in the border regions. The quarantine period thus no longer merely depended on the classification of the country of exit and entry, but also on whether the person had been tested, vaccinated or recovered (so-called 3G rule).

Picture 2: Diversity of entry restrictions

Own graphic based on the Foreign Office (22/6/2021); Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (22/6/2021); official Austrian tourist portal (22/6/2021); SIG France (21/6/2021); State Chancellery of the Saarland (21/6/2021)



### 3. Impact of the border closures

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The border controls and border closures for specific groups had a considerable impact on the lives and work of people in the border regions. The closely-knit functional interrelations were sundered by the abrupt tightening of entry restrictions, and national state borders regained importance (again) in the shortest of times (Cyrus/Ulrich 2021: 26; Duvernet 2021: 51; Wille/Kanesu 2020: 9).

The greater region is one of Europe's border regions with the greatest numbers of cross-border commuters. Luxembourg and the Saarland benefit from labour coming from the Département Moselle, especially, Lorraine from jobs available at its neighbours (Pigeron-Piroth/Evrard/Belkacem 2020:17). Some sectors such as healthcare and industry, but also the trades, substantially depend on the cross-border labour market. Around 70 % of the healthcare workers in Luxembourg thus come from the other side of the border (Pigeron-Piroth/Evrard/Belkacem 2020: 18; Wille 2020: 12). Which meant that the border closures particularly also hit the relevant industries for fighting the pandemic. The region's retail and hospitality industries are also highly dependent on the neighbouring countries: Over a third of the Saarland's retail and/or hospitality sales near the border are attributable to customers from France (SZ 24/5/2018), meaning that these industries suffered considerably under the lack of guests too.

The applied measures confronted the integrated labour market, commerce and economy with enormous challenges. Even were commuters had entry exemptions, getting to work took more time, entailing diversions, waiting periods and congestion at the crossings, as well as refusals at control points (Pigeron-Piroth/Evrard/Belkacem 2020: 20; Pigeron-Piroth et al. 2021: 80). Particularly in the first wave of the pandemic, many

border-crossers whose jobs were not thought to be system-relevant were prohibited from crossing by entry restrictions; arrangements for the „local border traffic“ had to be found quickly. Exemptions were in short-term use for employees in certain industries such as the health sector. But they only applied to their way to work, excluding any stays over and beyond the actual job, or any catering and/or shopping there. In parallel with the national governments' entry restrictions, major companies in the Saarland such as Ford, ZF and others adopted company policies for the duration of the entry regulations and excluded French workers (SZ 13/3/2020). In addition to which exemptions had to be provided quickly for intergovernmental agreements relating to social regulations and telework thresholds, or in the tax treaties, to prevent negative effects for employees through their working from home (Kauber 2021: 90; Pigeron-Piroth et al. 2021: 81; Scherer/Schnell 2021: 71).

The national governments' measures not only made themselves felt in the economic repercussions, but also entailed immaterial and psychological effects, as well as drastic interventions in people's everyday lives: Families and couples were separated by entry regulations, and „old“ barriers cut through border region-oriented life-worlds (Peyrony 2021: 100; Scherer/Schnell 2021: 70).

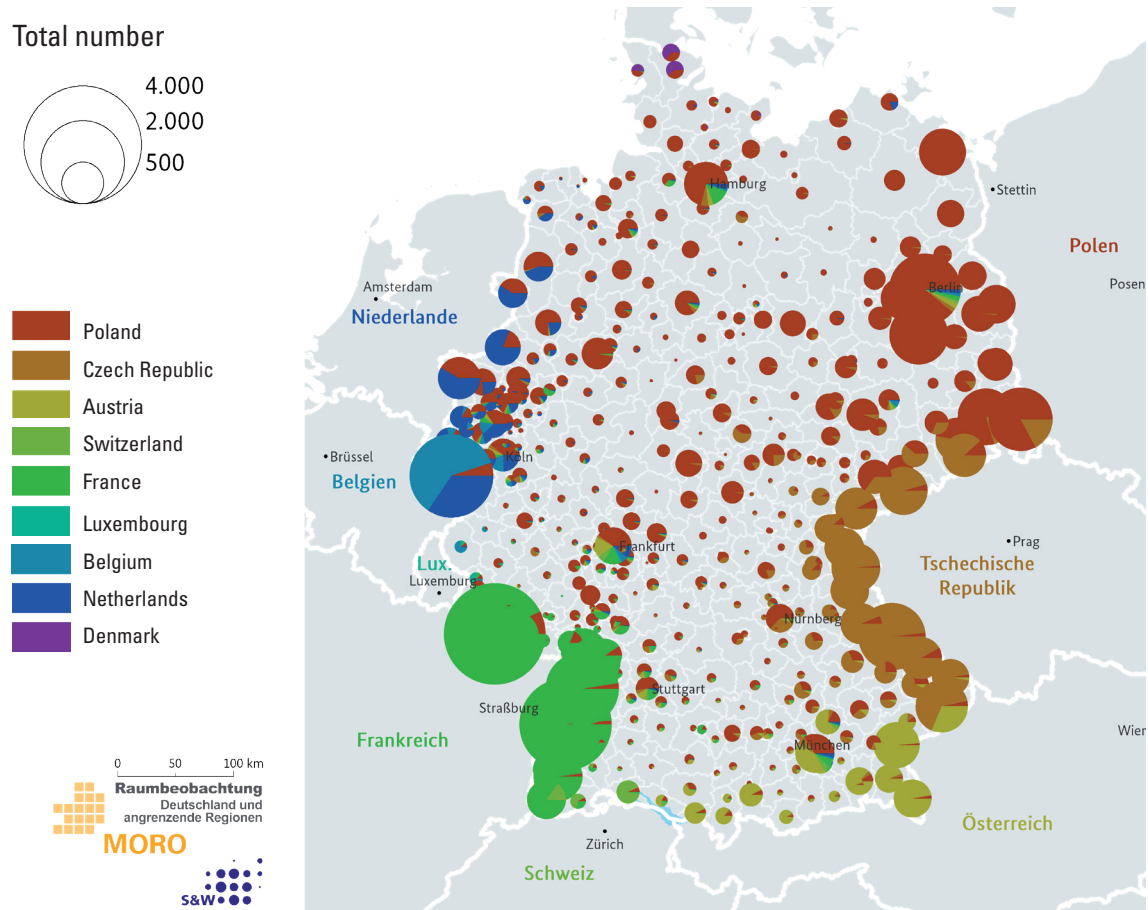
„Mental borders“ emerged along the nation states, with prejudices thought to have been long-forgotten or overcome ages ago flaring up again even in long-standing and/or well-established border regions (AEBR 12.11.2020a; Wassenberg 2020: 119; Scherer/Schnell 2021: 72). This was also observable in the interior, between regions undergoing different pandemic developments as well as between social strata and groups. The resurgence of prejudice in the border

regions drew particular attention nonetheless. The mistrust and aggression against „foreigners“ were followed by blaming and stigmatization of the neighbouring country's residents, with partly open expressions of hostilities (Peyrony 2021: 98, 100). The grown and lived European identity of the border regions was lost in many places for a while (Baumgart/Krätzig 2021: 20).

The social and economic consequences for border regions cannot be overlooked, and illustrate the urgent need for action in the management of crisis situations. The extent of the social and economic damage is hard to put in figures. Large enough in any case to start thinking about mechanisms that could be meaningfully provided in future pandemic situations to mitigate their impact in border regions.

Picture 3: Commuters to Germany from neighbouring countries

Source: Schwarze/Spieckermann 2021: 77



Datengrundlagen: IT.NRW/CBS basierend auf Bundesagentur für Arbeit, Sonderauswertung  
© EuroGeographics, BKG 2021 bezüglich der Verwaltungsgrenzen

## 4. Experiences with and lessons from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic

The impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic brings completely new, unprecedented challenges. Given the events of recent years, this also and particularly applies to border regions. The repercussions linked with the reintroduction of border controls and entry restrictions to/from neighbouring countries came into stark focus here. During that period, the border regions were assigned tasks as surveilled and protect-

ed spaces, and the public's awareness of them as connecting and living spaces was growing at the very same time (Duvernet/Gebhardt/Kurnol 2021: 5). The crisis once again underscored the importance of a reliable and trusting cross-border cooperation, and what it can achieve. First lessons were elaborated from this in an intensive exchange, and then formulated in eight propositions.

### 4.1 Establishing border regions as a homogenous space in politics and planning

**Border regions need to be perceived as functional units in political and planning terms, irrespective of national borders, and thus understood as joint action areas. This requires the cross-border interrelations informing the regions' economies and people's everyday lives to be better understood and lent more visibility in the future. These interconnections are what makes the border regions „work“. The objective resides in being able to maintain them even in times of crisis.**

Border regions are closely networked in virtually all areas of life, with the borders hardly noticeable when „things are normal“ these days. The reintroduction of border controls in the pandemic highlighted the actual intensity of these links, especially with regard to the labour market, commerce and services, passenger and goods transport, recreation and tourism, and not least of all the healthcare systems. Although their infection rates were not above those of other regions, border regions were particularly affected by the impact of pandemic containment measures (Duvernet 2021: 51). To keep border regions „working“ even in times of crisis, they need to be recognized as joint action areas. This would also include ensuring consistent legal requirements, e.g. for border commuters, by way of new cross-border legal instruments (Kauber 2021: 106).

### 4.2 More cross-border area monitoring as a basis for action

**Cross-border area monitoring is a central action field in border regions: It is able to supply a reliable data basis for learning from experience, designing future scenarios, and deriving options for future action. The cross-border area monitoring needs to be improved in a manner ensuring that it also meets the requirements for a greater stability in crises and the resilience of border regions.**

The pandemic in general and reintroduction of border controls and entry restrictions specifically highlighted the lack of comparable data on cross-border interrelationships, along with the need for harmonized data mapping the living conditions in border regions (Duvernet/Gebhardt/Kurnol 2021: 5; Miłosz-Augustowska/Jastrzbski 2021: 126). Cross-border area monitoring can yield information and serve as a basis for future decisions on measures. Even while the pandemic crisis showed up deficits in the cross-border area monitoring, it can also offer an opportunity for improving and perpetuating it, and arriving at a collective understanding of border regions (Peyrony 2021: 101ff.; Baumgart/Krätzig 2021: 21). Existing area monitoring systems have delivered positive examples for this, e.g. the interactive cross-border mapping of pandemic developments in the Upper Rhine area (see GeoRhena 23.8.2021).



### 4.3 Improving information exchange routines in times of crisis

**A continuous information exchange in the cross-border cooperation is not only essential for politics and planning. The pandemic especially highlighted the particular information needs of the populace. The requirements include a perpetuated and institutionalized information offer and new routines in the ad-hoc provision of information in times of crisis.**

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has very clearly revealed how important the exchange and provision of up-to-date information is. Especially in the respective language, this information about planned measures, schedules and required activities is particularly meaningful for people in border regions to be able to better organize their day-to-day lives. In times of crisis, this translates into a great need for advice on the part of the general public and a great demand for reliable information, as evidenced by the high workloads of existing border advice centres.

It is to be noted in retrospect that the information flow could not be ensured ad-hoc, at least not in the beginning of the pandemic. Neither did local media fully cover the situation and/or applicable regulations in the neighbouring country and for crossing the border. Standards and mechanisms therefore need to be elaborated for the information exchange, especially for emergency situations, and information channels institutionalized. An outstanding example is the PANDEMERIC project in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion (EMRIC 23.8.2021): The „Crossing Borders“ web form developed in connection with the project offers border commuters a fast overview of the current regulations for entering and staying in the respective countries of the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion after answering a small number of easily understood questions. A dashboard marshals the situations in the entire region's ICUs.

### 4.4 Installing cross-border task forces for times of crisis

**Cross-border task forces should be installed to enable faster responses in times of crisis. They would contribute to an early communication of national crisis interventions, to highlighting their cross-border impact, and to the initiation of coordination processes.**

The reintroduction of border controls and attendant entry restrictions could also be required in future as a rapid emergency response. Border regions should therefore demand structures in the form of cross-border task forces focusing on their specific situation. This would help to cushion adverse effects better. Besides informing the public, the task forces should continuously track the cross-border impacts, communicating them to the acting state hierarchies and coordination processes. In addition to which they can establish contacts and ease the communication with responsible actors on the other side of the border.

The Meuse–Rhine Euroregion has had a cross-border crisis unit (Euregio Maas - Rhein Vorfall - und Krisenbewältigung – EMRIC) in place for 20 years, which provides various services in the area of cross-border crisis preparedness and crisis management (EMRIC 23/8/2021). A cross-border coordination committee was installed in the Meuse–Rhine Euroregion in the wake of the pandemic in 2020. Its tasks inter alia included enabling a continuous trilateral exchange of important information between the institutions (AEBR 12/11/2020b). New coordination platforms were also created in other regions as a result of the crisis dialogue, such as the Franco-German task force (State Chancellery RLP 23.2.2021). They may not be authorized to coordinate national measures, but still significantly contribute to the discussion of arising problems and development of joint solutions (Kauber 2021: 91).

## 4.5 Elaborating cross-border emergency plans

**Cross-border emergency plans prepare administrations better for future challenges at borders. The envisaged workflows need to be rehearsed in regular emergency drills in the cross-border cooperation structures, and continuously evaluated.**

Cross-border protocols or cooperation agreements do exist for areas of disaster control – e.g. for dealing with accidents in Seveso operations near the border – to prepare local actors for them (Kauber 2021: 90). The outbreak of a pandemic and specific upheavals in border areas are included in the nation states' crisis intervention plans yet. Neither have the local actors and institutions rehearsed workflows as responses to these problems. In the concrete threat, the medical care and humanitarian support were in the foreground. But a coordinated and structured approach to the cross-border cooperation is still needed in future in the area of emergency care and for the event of a pandemic (Kauber 2021: 91). This could be redressed by a European regulation on cross-border emergency plans or cross-border risk (management) plans as well as the creation of a European health union, which would inter alia develop cross-border strategies for epidemics, or network health systems across borders (DFPV 2020: 5f.; Peyrony 2021: 105). A European regulation could for example require threat environments and/or risk exposures to be mapped in a 360°-perspective as a matter of principle.

## 4.6 Using established cross-border cooperation structures as communication channels

**Actors in border regions can draw on extensive experience and lived tradition in transnational cooperation. Especially in times of crisis, well-practised cooperation structures can serve for fast communication and quick responses. The potential of existing cross-border cooperation structures therefore needs to be strengthened for the challenges of crisis preparedness and crisis management, and made targeted use of.**

Cross-border cooperation structures arose in border regions by a development process spanning decades. These horizontally oriented structures potentially offer a faster response to problem situations in border regions and their population's needs than the vertically organized state institutions. Cross-border cooperation has already been a central issue of the border regions' actors and institutions in the past, while the pandemic highlighted its particular relevance (Duvernet/Gebhardt/Kurnol 2021: 5; Kuebart/Stabler 2021: 48).

Activities in a pandemic context mostly build on the existing partnerships: Well-practised coordination (committee) and cross-border governance structures like European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) or Euroregions saw to important tasks: They took care of informing the public with the help of multilingual advice centres, provided the official measures, regulations and available documents from the respective countries, and updated them regularly (AEBR 12/11/2020b; Peyrony 2021: 103).

But the case of the EMRIC (see above) still showed that the cooperation in the region quickly came under the sway of national strategies at the start of the pandemic, despite existing cooperation agreements. The consequence being that the respective national measures were no longer mutually compatible. Which is why the PANDEMERIC project focusing on promoting Euroregional cooperation during the current but also future pandemics was set up under EMRIC's management (EMRIC 23/8/2021). A so-called PANDEMERIC symposium evaluates and discusses how the cooperation could be further improved in future, based on the knowledge gained (EGTC EMR 23/8/2021).

## 4.7 Banking on nearby institutions and actors in the crisis management

**Local actors and institutions are close to the action – near the region and people. Which makes it meaningful to involve precisely these actors and institutions more extensively in the crisis management. This way their local know-how of border-specific peculiarities can be carried into the decision-making bodies and play a role in finding solutions.**

Where the implementation and/or effects of the pandemic containment measures are concerned, local authorities and institutions are able to act more pragmatically and place a stronger focus on the regions' specific needs. This is closely linked with the work of cross-border cooperation structures (see 4.6). The work of the EGTCs was rated particularly important, for example: Besides the provision of information offers, they also helped organize cross-border patient transfers (AEBR 12/11/2020b). Even in the absence of structured understandings, mutual assistance was organized at the high point of the pandemic's first wave already in the cross-border treatment of patients to reduce the pressure on overstretched intensive care units. These patient transfers were brought about by local political requests as well as an ad-hoc cooperation of local actors (Kauber 2021: 90). It was also found that regions lacking cross-border institutions suffered more problems overall (Peyrony 2021: 100).

## 4.8 Strengthening the collective in border regions – as a basis for greater resilience to crises

**For their residents, border regions are shared habitats. The collective straddling national borders generates a uniquely European cohesion. This cohesion and sense of unity in border regions will nonetheless need to be nurtured and strengthened – an intergenerational project! Particularly the mutual understanding can contribute to stability in times of crisis.**

As people tend to segregate in exceptional situations, open signs of friendship, unity and solidarity carry a special importance. This applies to political actors and cross-border institutions as much as the population. Both sides of the borders saw a variety of protests against the national governments' measures and encouraging expressions of solidarity amongst the population. An important signal for the public on a state level was for example sent by the mutual help and cooperation in the accommodation and treatment of intensive care patients from neighbouring countries (DFPV 2020: 4f.; Kauber 2021: 90). The „hiwe und driwe“ initiative in the Alsatian/Rhineland-Palatinate border region sent positive signals of solidarity, and appealed to cross-border cooperation and friendship even in corona pandemic times with its manifesto.

The pandemic containment measures not only highlighted the importance of open borders in cross-border patchworks, but also brought new esteem for the cross-border cooperation (Scherer/Schnell 2021: 73). The outbreak of prejudice during the pandemic drew particular attention to border regions. It showed that the integration of border regions is still a fragile, multigenerational project, and that the cross-border dimension is not deeply anchored in the population. Even if it entailed alarming scenes in parts, the current situation should be taken as an opportunity for reflecting on the activities in the cross-border cooperation that worked well in the past. They could be used in the future to carry cross-border themes into civil society, reduce misgivings further, and make the neighbourly collective more resilient to crisis.

## 5. Outlook

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Even with SARS-CoV-2 bringing completely new challenges, huge progress in managing the pandemic could be made in these past years already. At the same time, the pandemic is still ongoing, and the health crisis will also continue to occupy border regions in future. The social and economic repercussions for border regions are still open and unforeseeable. A certain normality has meanwhile settled into dealing with the pandemic; routines became practised. In addition to which many measures could be lifted by now, making people's everyday lives easier in border regions. This includes the discontinuance of most border controls, for example, and additional exemptions for border commuters in entry restrictions.

Although the pandemic is not the first challenge facing border regions, it still revealed deficits that call for systemic answers. These should particularly also focus on the specific situation of border regions as functional patchworks. To be better prepared for future crisis situations, and able to respond to them more purposefully against the background of the border regions' specific situation, it is all the more important to derive border region-specific lessons from the current situation, and learn from them.

Many activities in this respect are currently undertaken in border regions, also including the greater region. The results of the analyses, surveys or studies help to actively remediate existing deficits. The plenum of the Franco-German-Swiss Upper Rhine Conference made pandemic management a focal point for the year 2022. In this regard, an ad-hoc group was tasked with elaborating a regional strategy for dealing with pandemic situations in the cross-border region (ORK 2021: 2).

The trinational „Pandemic at the Upper Rhine“ conference explored the question how the region can respond to pandemic or other crisis situations better collectively in the future. The discussion in this context highlighted the role of learning from one another in dealing with the pandemic, and the exchange of good examples between border regions (ORK 26.11.2021: 5).

The border region-specific challenges from the pandemic also came into stronger focus on a European level. In response to new and changeable challenges, the European Commission formulated a proposal to amend the Schengen Borders Code. This would address adverse effects of border controls and the restriction of the freedom of movement and is meant to help prevent negative social and economic consequences for the people in these regions in future (European Commission 2021). Two amendments are of particular import in this: The proposed revision of Art. 26 would require member states to take the expected impact of the temporary reintroduction of controls at internal borders on the functioning of cross-border regions into account. Including the extensive social and economic interrelationships (European Commission 2021: 41).

Over and beyond this, the newly added Art. 42b would require member states to name cross-border regions in their territory to the Commission (European Commission 2021: 45). Inter alia, the proposal to adapt the legal Schengen framework to new challenges also responded on the special situation of the border regions. This lays an important foundation for the future management of crisis situations. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic will not remain the last crisis situation, even if the next crisis is highly likely to take a different form.





Source: Landratsamt Konstanz



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