

Border Regions as Nuclei of European Integration? Evidence From Germany

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Abstract

What role do border regions play in fostering a European identity? The European Union considers them relevant places of integration and has dedicated €10 billion to cross-border co-operation between 2014 and 2020. This action relies on the idea that border regions are hot spots of integration, as they allow citizens to engage in transnational activities, stimulating a sense of cross-border community, which is said to increase attachment to Europe. However, it remains unclear whether individuals in border regions are indeed more attached to Europe, as theory would predict. We address this research question by comparing the attachment to Europe of 25,257 German border and non-border residents, analysing several factors that could impact attachment to Europe in these regions. Our results indicate that living in a border region is unrelated to increased attachment to Europe. This finding casts doubt on the thesis of border regions as hot spots of an emerging European identity.

Keywords: attachment to Europe; border regions; European integration; Germany; transnationalism

Introduction: European Identification in Border Regions

The four freedoms of movement (workers, goods, services and capital) are the cornerstones of the European Union's (EU's) Single Market. They enable citizens to work and live in all EU countries. In addition, many EU countries have abolished structural border controls through the Schengen Agreement. Against this background, intra-EU border regions are geo-politically unique, as they allow more exchange of citizens and transnational integration than their inland counterparts (Kohli, 2000). Hence, the European Commission (2017) stated that

[b]order regions are places where the European integration process should be felt most positively – studying, training, working, caring and doing business across borders are all daily activities that should be possible regardless of the existence of an administrative national border.

To further integrate border regions, the EU funds cross-border co-operation with €10 billion between 2014 and 2020 (so-called Interreg programmes) and plans to invest approximately the same in the following budgetary period (European Commission, 2023). In a nutshell, the key aim of these EU policies is to promote border regions 'as hot spots and laboratories of European integration' (European Commission, 2021).

The idea that border regions are hot spots of integration relies on the thesis that citizens living closer to a border have better opportunities to engage in transnational activities, which makes them more prone to feel attached to Europe (Graf et al., 2014; Kuhn, 2012; Mau et al., 2008). This assumption can be deduced from intergroup

contact theory, which holds that exchange between populations can reduce prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), and from Deutsch's (1953) thesis that transnational interaction fosters transnational community (also cf. Lijphart, 1964).

However, empirical results are inconclusive. Whilst some indeed indicate that border residents are more transnational and consequently more attached to Europe (Díez Medrano, 2003; Gabel, 1998), others show that more exchange can also result in increased cross-border tensions (Durand et al., 2020, pp. 603–604) and that cross-border regional integration can reduce mutual trust (Decoville and Durand, 2019; Durand et al., 2020), feeding into anti-European sentiments (Brack and Startin, 2015; de Vries, 2018). Some even point to local opposition against making borders more permeable (Bürkner, 2020, p. 557; Dürrschmidt, 2006; Jacobs and Kooij, 2013) and see European border regions as places of confrontation where transnational conflicts can crystallise (Klatt, 2021, p. 145; Kuhn, 2011, p. 95; Weber and Dörrenbächer, 2022, p. 182). Similarly, the most comprehensive quantitative study found that whilst Euroscepticism in German border regions is lower due to the transnational practices of border residents, this is not the case for French border residents (Kuhn, 2011).

Hence, as both increased and decreased attachments to Europe seem possible, further research on border regions can help uncover whether residents of border regions are more or less attached to Europe and what drives these attachments. By studying this question, this article contributes to the literature on border regions as possible enablers for the creation of a European identity. Using new data collected through the German 'Socio-Economic Panel' (SOEP) in 2020, we provide an update on the relationship between cross-border integration and individual attachment to Europe. This renewed analysis is not only justified because we can leverage more fine-grained data on the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS)-3 level and relate it to administrative data. It is also necessary, as much time has passed since 2006, when the data for the last similar study was collected (Kuhn, 2011). Since then, the EU has spent billions of euros to finance cross-border co-operation programmes to enhance the role of border regions as facilitators of integration, and the number of cross-border workers has almost doubled to 1.3 million (Fries-Tersch et al., 2021), emphasising the increasing relevance of border regions in the European labour market.

Our results indicate that neither people living in border regions nor individuals who moved into border regions are generally more attached to Europe than inland residents. Neither are groups who are in a better situation to profit from transnational interaction (due to higher income or education) and are more attached to Europe when living in border regions. Instead, our results show differences between German regions, particularly as East Germans are overall less attached to Europe than West Germans.¹ We also find weak evidence that the frequency of cross-border social interactions covaries with an increased attachment to Europe in East German border regions – whereas we do not find this effect in border regions in the West. Overall, our results suggest that no straightforward relationship between border residency and European attachment exists.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section I presents the theoretical argument and empirical state of the art on the relationship between border residency and

¹Note that we categorise East and West Germany according to the former borders between East and West Germany.

attachment to Europe. Section II explains our data and methodology. Section III presents the results. Section IV discusses implications for the conceptualisation of border regions and for future research.

I. Theoretical Argument and Empirical Studies

Why might residents of border regions feel more attached to Europe? Theoretical approaches mostly point to economic and social interactions as causal mechanisms. A key reference is Deutsch (1953, p. 173), in which he argued that

[w]here the exchange economy came to embrace the bulk of the population and to bring many of them into direct contact with each other in the interchange of a wider variety of goods and services, there we find a tendency to 'national' or at least regional, linguistic, and cultural 'awakening'.

Such views can be traced back to Smith (2008 [1776], p. 33), who argued that trade on proximate markets promotes social integration. This form of interaction implies a utilitarian argument (Kuhn, 2011, p. 96), linking integration to instrumental purposes such as enhancing economic utility (Sohn, 2014): because border residents materially benefit from crossing the border, they support the European achievement of free movement across borders. Following this line of argument, border residents could be more attached to Europe because they materially gain from crossing the border, for example, by paying lower prices for products and services, by having a wider selection of goods and services or by finding employment across the border.

Second, social interaction could play a role (Kuhn, 2011, p. 96; see also Lijphart, 1964).² Intergroup contact theory argues that interpersonal exchange reduces negative sentiment towards group outsiders (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Kohli (2000) argued that German and French border residents had more trust in their neighbours than their inland counterparts. Mau et al. (2008) consider transnational interaction significant in building cosmopolitan attitudes – an argument that is also supported by Prokkola et al. (2015, p. 114) who stress that regional identities are forged through 'socio-spatial relations and activities'. Similarly, Stoeckel (2016) and Prati et al. (2019) emphasise that social contacts such as friendships across the border are conducive to a European identity amongst border residents and students. Lastly, Kuhn (2012) finds that transnational practices play a decisive role in the emergence of a European identity, in particular for the less educated.³

In sum, these findings suggest that transnational interaction, whether of a commercial or social nature, is an important factor contributing to an individual's attachment to Europe. Considering the geographical proximity to neighbouring populations and markets, residents of border regions can therefore be expected to be more exposed to cross-border exchange and thus more influenced by these factors. Overall, of the nine conditions that Deutsch et al. (2014 [1957], p. 138) saw as conducive to the amalgamation of regions into communities, residents of border regions may have an easier time than

²Note that we define social interaction as interpersonal exchange between individuals for the purpose of socialising (i.e., meeting friends or family) and distinguish this from commercial interactions (i.e., consuming products or services).

³Evidently, one can also argue with the sociological literature that economic exchange is the foundation for social exchange. According to this view, spatial proximity leads to self-interested economic transactions, which can then facilitate social bonds that extend beyond mere economic interests (Durkheim, 1977).

residents of interior regions to establish cross-nationally (1) similar values, (2) a similar way of life, (3) economic ties, (4) political and administrative links, (5) communication, (6) mobility of persons and (7) communication and transaction across the border.⁴ Against this theoretical background, we expect border region residents to be more attached to Europe, which is thus our baseline hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals living in border regions feel more attached to Europe.

However, this general effect of border residency on European attachment may vary from one group to the next. Notably, those with more education, especially linguistic proficiency, are better situated to benefit from cross-border interactions (Gabel, 1998; Kuhn, 2012). On the contrary, the less educated may feel more threatened by competition from foreign workers whilst being less in a position to profit from cross-cultural exchange (see also Durand et al., 2020). This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The effect of living in border regions on attachment to Europe is stronger for individuals with a higher education.

In addition, the actual intensity with which a person has been exposed to cross-border contacts could matter. This is the reason why the accumulated length of a person's border region experience may be important: those who have just moved into a border region have a lower chance to create personal connections and ties to the neighbouring country (Deutsch, 1953) and should therefore be less attached to Europe. To our knowledge, no research has yet answered whether the duration of exposure to the border region's unique geographical status has an impact on a person's sentiment towards the neighbouring population or Europe at large – possibly because this information is lacking in cross-sectional surveys. In contrast, the SOEP's panel data, which reaches back to the 1980s, provides information about the life course of respondents, which allows us to test this argument empirically for the first time, leading to our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The longer a person has lived in a border region, the stronger their attachment to Europe.

Individual cross-border experiences should also depend on the permeability of the border. If we take the idea of intergroup contact theory seriously, that interpersonal exchange reduces negative sentiment towards group outsiders (Pettigrew, 1998), it should matter how many interactions across the border take place in a region. Kuhn (2011) similarly points out that Euroscepticism decreases with increasing transnational activities. One way to measure these interpersonal contacts is to consider how many commuters from abroad are travelling into a region for work, which ranges from a mere 0.2% (in comparison to the local population) in the region Schwarzwald-Baar-Kreis adjacent to Switzerland to 4.2% in the region Tirschenreuth on the border between Bavaria and the

⁴The other two essential conditions that Deutsch et al. (2014 [1957]) saw as important for community building are (8) superior economic growth and (9) a broadening of the political elite, for which we do not see why border regions should have them more than inland regions.

Czech Republic. Following our theoretical claim about the importance of cross-border interactions, one would expect that more commuters would increase interactions across the border and therefore attachment to Europe. We therefore expect that

Hypothesis 4: The stronger the effect of living in a border region on attachment to Europe, the more cross-border commutes take place in that region.

Studies have shown that cross-border interactions differ between West and East European countries. Based on a descriptive analysis of cross-border trust, Decoville and Durand (2019, p. 144) conclude that

the Iron Curtain that separated Western Europe from Eastern Europe from several decades still remains in a lot of people's minds, both between Eastern and Western Europe and between Eastern European countries.

Bürkner (2020) argues that residents of East Germany feel as second-class citizens who have been left behind socio-economically, which has led to distrust towards Europeanisation. A continuing legacy of socio-economic disparities also explains part of the disproportionate success of far-right parties in East German regions (Weisskircher, 2020). Similarly, Teney et al. (2014) argue that those who feel left behind by globalisation and the opening of European borders may perceive border residence as a threat rather than welcoming it. Kiess et al. (2017) consider this 'subjective alienation' as the driver for anti-democratic and Eurosceptic views and find a strong correlation between far-right ideology and Euroscepticism.

Taking these insights seriously has two consequences for our theorising. First, we should expect residents in the eastern parts of Germany to be less attached to Europe. Second, general distrust towards Europeanisation could also influence how border residency affects individual attitudes towards Europe in the East. Instead of border residency being a driver of attachment to Europe, living in a border region whilst already being distrustful of Europe could rather decrease European attachment. For instance, Bürkner (2020, p. 551) reports from the German–Polish border that 'intense political endeavours by EU institutions (e.g. Interreg Programs, Euroregions) and committed local politicians to establish border communities as laboratories of EU integration were irritated by local opposition to debordering on the German side of the border [...] and that the opposition to further integration was [...] heated by activities of hooligans and right-wing activists concentrated on East German peripheries'. Given this evidence of possible differences between East and West Germany in how residency in border regions may influence European attachment, we therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: The effect of living in border regions on attachment to Europe is more negative in East German regions compared with West German regions.

Finally, the *type* of interaction a person has across the border may influence how border residency is related to European attachment (Fernández et al., 2016). Kuhn (2011) has shown how social interactions may favour European attachment more than commercial interactions, such as purchasing goods and services. Deutschmann et al. (2018) similarly

show that social contacts across borders are very important for developing transnational attachment, suggesting that not the mere frequency but the quality of cross-border contacts matters. This leads to our last hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6a: Attachment to Europe is higher for individuals who live in regions where a larger share of cross-border interactions is social rather than commercial.

However, given our argument that being exposed to cross-border interactions may have different effects on European attachment depending on whether we look at border residents in eastern and western Germany, we can further qualify our hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6b: The effect of the quality of cross-border interactions can be expected to differ between East German regions compared with West German regions.

II. Data and Methods

We use data from the German SOEP, which asked 25,223 respondents in 2020 how emotionally attached they feel to Europe.⁵ Answers range from 0 to 10, with higher numbers indicating stronger attachment.⁶ ‘Attachment’ is seen as *the* archetypical case of diffuse support, differing from support that is conditional on favourable outcomes (Easton, 1975, pp. 438ff.). Attachment is also seen as mirroring ‘affective identification’ (Bergbauer, 2018, p. 101), so that attachment to Europe can be understood as ‘identification with’ Europe (Bruter, 2005, p. 1; Ceka and Sojka, 2016, p. 483), which is indicative of ‘a common sense of community’ (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p. 30).

Using SOEP data enables us to move beyond the state of the art in four respects: first, SOEP data is accessible on the level of NUTS-3 regions, allowing to fine grain the distinction between border and inland regions, which has been done only by Kuhn (2011) so far (with data from 2006). Whilst the SOEP is representative of the population of Germany, not every NUTS-3 district is a representation of the German population. Instead, NUTS-3 districts vary from what is typical for Germany with regard to demographics, education, gender, income, cross-border interactions and so forth. The question is therefore whether any of these factors is responsible for a possibly higher attachment to Europe in border regions. We therefore try to find such a main effect and then test whether it can be found after controlling for what might differentiate border regions from inland regions. Due to Germany’s comparably large territory, the distinction between border and inland regions might be more pronounced than in smaller countries, where most NUTS-3 regions are categorised as border regions (e.g., Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia or Croatia).

Second, the SOEP allows to take the history of respondents since 1984 into account, showing how long a respondent has lived close to a border, which is important as border region residency might have a cumulative effect on attitudes. Third, we have combined

⁵Note that data was collected before and after the introduction of national lockdowns linked to Covid-19. However, as the impact of border regions is not hypothesised as momentary but as structural, the timing is expected not to distort the outcome.

⁶In German, the question was as follows: ‘Wie stark fühlen Sie sich Europa gefühlsmäßig verbunden?’

the SOEP with district-level data, notably a region's share of incoming commuters (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023), to measure actual exchange with adjacent regions (see Hypothesis 4). Fourth, we merge this data with a measure indicating the type of cross-border interaction in a border region (see Hypotheses 6a and 6b). To do so, we have aggregated the data from the Eurobarometer (EB) Survey 422 (European Commission, 2015), which asked border residents how they interact with the neighbouring border region. However, as the EB survey has exclusively queried border regions, the analysis of Hypotheses 6a and 6b uses a smaller sample of border region residents ($N = 4915$).

We classified all 6104 individuals (24% of respondents) as border residents who live in an NUTS-3 region that has been classified as a border region according to the Eurostat (2019, p. 100) definition of being situated within 25 km of a border. This will be our independent variable to test Hypothesis 1. As the SOEP includes a measure of education, we use this to test the interaction effect as put forward by Hypothesis 2.

Because attachment may be tied to a person's identity, it should be relatively stable intra-individually (Down and Wilson, 2017, p. 201). For this reason, we use the SOEP's panel structure to distinguish a 'population effect' (also known as a between-individual effect), which measures whether populations who spent more time in border regions are more attached to Europe than populations who spent less time in border regions, from a 'within-person effect', which shows whether the same person feels more European whilst living in a border region compared with living in Germany's interior. We can thus differentiate the effect of being part of a border population from the effect of moving closer to a border.

We also explain whether border residents have a stronger attachment to Europe before and after controlling for what has commonly been seen as influencing European attachment, notably household income (logged and equalised by the square root of household members), rural versus urban residency (with increasing distance to city centre), sex and age, as well as living in East or West Germany.

As indicated above, we use data from the EB Survey 422 to distinguish social versus commercial cross-border interaction via a survey question that asks whether respondents cross borders for visiting family (which we term social interactions) or for shopping and leisure activities (which we term commercial interactions). Both indicators are measured on a 4-point scale, which we recoded, so that higher values indicate more frequent border crossings for that reason (4 = *at least once a month*; 3 = *several times a year*; 2 = *once a year or less*; 1 = *never*). The EB survey identifies border regions based on the Interreg rather than NUTS-3 regions. We therefore calculate the mean of each of the two border crossing variables at the level of each Interreg region and then generalise the data to all NUTS-3 regions that belong to this Interreg region.⁷ All NUTS-3 regions within the same Interreg programme region therefore have the same value. Because the EB data is only available for border regions, we can only analyse those 4915 respondents who live in the 51 Interreg border regions, and we cannot compare residents of border regions with inland citizens. Moreover, as the EB has not asked the same individuals as the SOEP, we can only use the aggregate value of social and commercial interactions that takes place within a border region. In sum, these limitations mean that Hypothesis 6a or 6b, on

⁷In the few cases of overlap where one NUTS-3 region is part of two programme regions, we take the average of the two programme regions to which it belongs.

whether it makes a difference for a person's attachment to Europe if they live in a border region where fellow citizens cross the border for social versus commercial reasons, will be studied using this more restricted sample that only comprises border regions. Merely comparing border regions for this hypothesis makes sense substantively however, as we aim to test whether residents of some border regions feel more European than others.

Our multilevel regressions cluster individuals in the 401 German NUTS-3 regions. This avoids the ecological fallacy of estimating individual-level correlations using aggregate-level data, as it preserves the individual-level structure of the data, and in those cases where we have district-level variables, it is for the express purpose of explaining individual-level attitudes through district-level circumstances. Thus, for example, we are not merely interested in whether an individual who has more cross-border interactions feels more attached to Europe but whether an individual who lives in a district with more cross-border interactions feels more European.

Table 1 shows data for all variables used in our analyses. It indicates how 24% of the population lives in border regions, whilst the minimum and maximum values of 'within-person border experience' indicate that some individuals have spent more than 95% of their time after having moved away from or into a border region. An average individual has spent only about 8% of their time after having moved away from or into a border region. Our regressions use this variation to explain whether individuals who moved away from a border region feel less European and whether those who have moved into a border region feel more European.

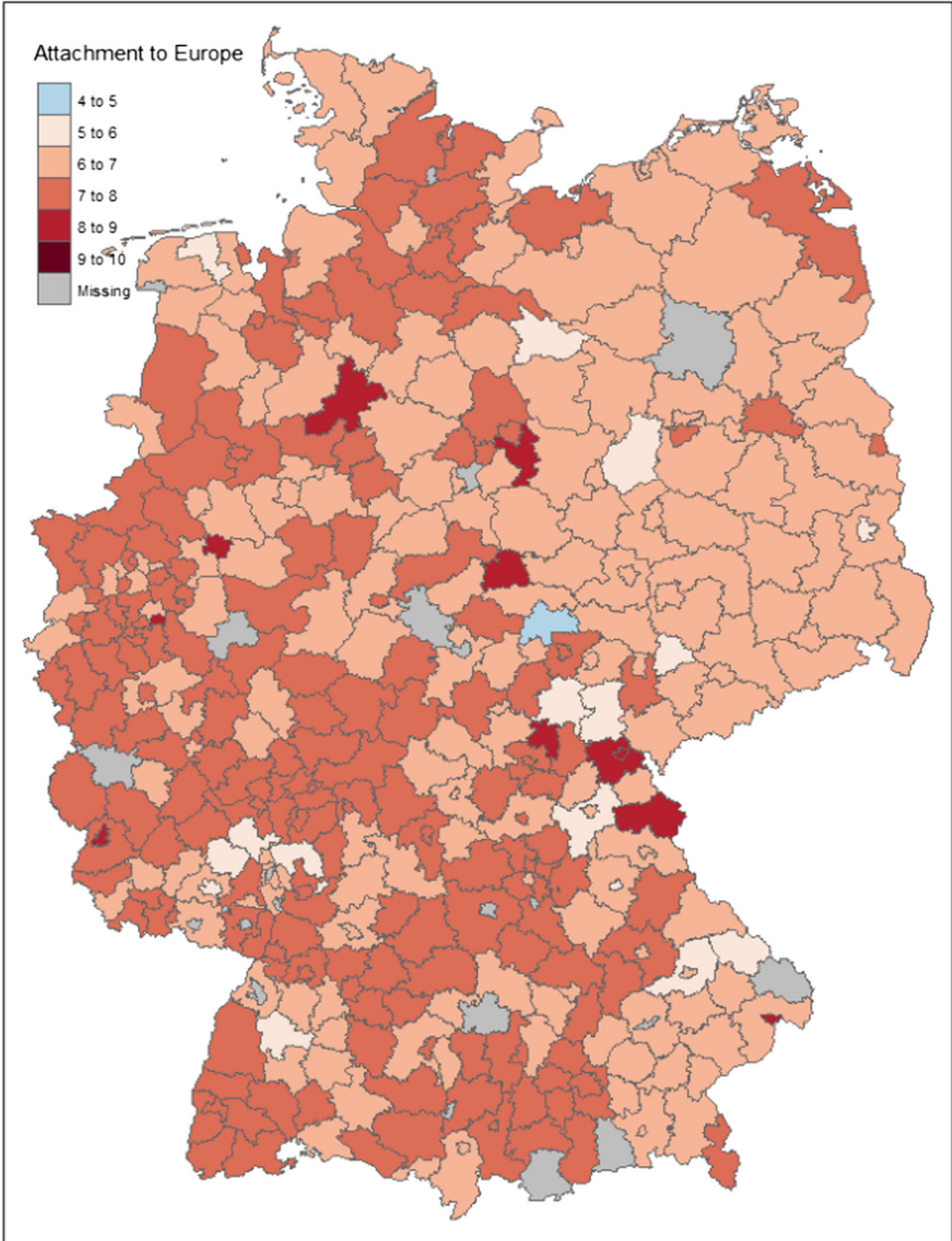
Figure 1 shows EU attachment in NUTS-3 regions. The descriptive pattern mainly suggests an East–West divide in European attachment, with respondents in the West being more attached to Europe, but – at least at first sight – there is no clear-cut border region effect. In the following, we use linear multilevel regression models that cluster respondents in the 401 NUTS-3 regions, to study our hypotheses more systematically.

Table 1: Data Descriptives.

Variable	<i>Obs</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std dev.</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Equalised household income	25,103	2796	4539	0	32,1781
Logged equalised household income	25,103	7.681	0.709	0	12,682
Gender	25,251	0.523	0.500	0	1
Age	25,256	48.835	17.626	18	99
Education	24,922	4.014	1.759	1	8
Distance from next city centre	21,159	3.346	1.526	1	6
Commuters	24,101	0.289	0.496	0	4.191
East Germany (0 = West, 1 = East, 0.5 = Berlin)	25,257	0.212	0.394	0	1
Between-population border experience	25,257	0.237	0.416	0	1
Living in border region	25,257	0.242	0.428	0	1
Within-person border experience	25,257	0.005	0.094	−0.909	0.964
Crossing border for visiting family (mean in NUTS region)	6104	1.340	0.108	1.165	1.573
Crossing border for shopping (mean in NUTS region)	5943	2.249	0.198	1.807	2.471

Abbreviation: NUTS, Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics.

Figure 1: Attachment to Europe by Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics-3 Regions (Only Regions With >10 Respondents). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



III. Empirical Results

Table 2 shows the multilevel regression results. Model 1 is a null model that includes only the constant, indicating that only about 3% ($0.122/(0.122 + 4.509)$) of variance in EU attachment lies between NUTS-3 regions, whilst 97% of attachment to Europe varies between individuals. This means that EU attachment is strongly driven by who people are and much less by what region they live in.

Model 2 includes a border region dummy variable, indicating that individuals living in border regions are not more attached to Europe. Model 3 adds control variables that have been shown to influence European attachment. In line with existing studies, it shows that European attachment is related to what the literature typically finds: those with a higher educational degree, those with a higher household income and those who live closer to an urban region feel more attached to Europe. Women are more attached, and attachment first decreases with age and then increases (negative linear and positive squared effects). Yet controlling for these factors does not change the insignificant coefficient for the dichotomous border region variable. Hence, both Models 2 and 3 refute our main hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) that individuals who live in a border region are more attached to Europe than individuals in interior regions. Instead, individuals in border regions do not feel more attached to Europe, before (Model 2) and after (Model 3) adjusting for controls.

Model 4 tests Hypothesis 2, which suggests that individuals with a higher education might be more attached to Europe when living in border regions, whilst those with a lower education might not. However, the results do not support this expectation. Whilst it is true that those who are more educated feel more attached to Europe, having a higher education does not particularly increase European attachment for those who live in border regions beyond the general effect of education. The same is true for income (not shown here), which is related to feeling more attached to Europe, but not particularly so for individuals in border regions. Thus, not only do border residents not feel more European, but border residents who are in a better position to profit from cross-border interaction, due to their higher education or higher income, are also not particularly more attached to Europe when they live in border regions.

Hypothesis 3 suggests that time spent in a border region explains European attachment. However, the insignificant coefficient for the ‘between effect’ in Model 5 shows that individuals who have spent a larger share of their lives closer to a border do not feel more attached to Europe than persons who have not (no between-population border effect). Nor does the same person feel more attached to Europe after having moved into a border region (no within-individual border effect).

Hypothesis 4 postulates that individuals may feel more attached to Europe in border regions that have more cross-border commutes, as there are more direct contacts with foreigners in those regions. Model 6 tests this hypothesis by interacting our border region dummy with the share of commuters. However, the coefficient for the interaction term is insignificant, refuting the hypothesis that living in border regions has a stronger effect in regions with more cross-border commutes (Hypothesis 4). Indeed, Model 6 shows that the general effect is insignificant as well, suggesting that *inland regions* with more commuters across the German border are also not more attached to Europe, nor are *border regions* with more cross-border commuters more attached to Europe.

Table 2: Border Regions and Attachment to Europe.

	(1) Empty region (Hypothesis 1)	(3) Border region + controls (Hypothesis 1)	(4) Border region * education + controls (Hypothesis 2)	(5) Border experience (BE and FE) (Hypothesis 3)	(6) Border regions * commuters + controls (Hypothesis 4)	(7) Border region * East-West + controls (Hypothesis 5)
Individual-level variables						
Border experience_between effects				-0.025 (-0.45)		
Border experience_fixed effects				0.105 (0.62)		
Education		0.165*** (16.64)	0.170*** (14.81)		0.159*** (16.62)	0.165*** (16.65)
Border region * education			-0.022 (-1.18)			
Household income (log)		0.398*** (14.66)	0.398*** (14.56)		0.403*** (14.21)	0.398*** (14.65)
Living in a more rural area		-0.041*** (-3.25)	-0.040*** (-3.23)		-0.037*** (-2.91)	-0.041*** (-3.29)
Female		0.198*** (7.33)	0.198*** (7.32)		0.203*** (7.36)	0.198*** (7.33)
Age		-0.035*** (-7.22)	-0.035*** (-7.21)		-0.036*** (-7.37)	-0.035*** (-7.22)
Age (squared)		0.0004*** (9.41)	0.0005*** (9.40)		0.0005*** (9.37)	0.0005*** (9.41)
NUTS-3 regional-level variables						
Border region dummy	-0.018 (-0.33)	-0.003 (-0.07)	0.084 (0.94)		-0.011 (-0.21)	0.023 (0.47)

Table 2: (Continued)

	(1) Empty region (Hypothesis 1)	(2) Border region + controls (Hypothesis 1)	(3) Border region * education + controls (Hypothesis 2)	(4) Border region * commuters + controls (Hypothesis 3)	(5) Border experience (BE and FE) (Hypothesis 4)	(6) Border regions * commuters + controls (Hypothesis 4)	(7) Border region * East-West + controls (Hypothesis 5)
Share of commuters							
Border region * share of commuters							
East-West Germany (East = 1)			-0.46*** (-10.35)				
Border region * East-West Germany				-0.46*** (-10.34)		-0.46*** (-9.65)	-0.431*** (-7.84)
Constant	6.943*** (292.79)	6.948*** (253.43)	3.796*** (17.67)	3.796*** (17.67)	6.949*** (252.58)	3.780*** (16.69)	3.792*** (17.67)
Variance components							
NUTS-3 level	0.122	0.121	0.037	0.037	0.121	0.040	0.037
Individual level	4.508	4.508	4.243	4.243	4.508	4.23	4.24
<i>N</i> (no. of groups)	25,257 (401)	25,257 (401)	20,915 (401)	20,915 (401)	25,257 (401)	20,067 (398)	20,915 (401)
Log likelihood	-	-55,029.17	-44,860.69	-44,860.09	-55,029.15	-43,002.95	-44,860.11

Note: All models include robust standard errors and random intercepts (i.e., fixed slopes). Abbreviations: BE, between effect; FE, fixed effect; NUTS, Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics. *** $p < 0.01$.

Hypothesis 5 posits that living in an East German border region has a different effect than living in a West German border region. Model 7 tests this effect. It shows that East Germans are significantly less attached to Europe, yet the effect of living in a border region is not moderated by whether it is in East or West Germany (see the non-significant interaction term). However, the substantive interpretation is interesting, as the insignificantly negative coefficient indicates that living in a border region moderately *decreases* European attachment to East German border regions relative to East German inland regions, whilst West German border regions have an insignificantly higher attachment to Europe than West German inland regions (see also the marginal effects in Table 3). This indication would mean that living in a border region in East Germany is actually associated with less attachment, as has been proposed by some qualitative case studies (see, e.g., Bürkner, 2020). However, as pointed out, the interaction effect is not significant at conventional levels, and thus, we refrain from making any strong inferences from it.

Our last hypotheses (Hypotheses 6a and 6b) proposed that the *type* of cross-border interaction, rather than its mere frequency, is important for developing an attachment to Europe. The regressions in Table 4 introduce two Level 2 variables that indicate how frequently people in a border region interact either socially (crossing the border to visit family) or commercially (crossing the border for leisure or shopping). Because this data does not exist on an individual level, it does not show whether individuals feel more attached to Europe when they themselves cross borders for one reason or another but whether individuals feel more attached to Europe when they live in a region where more border crossings take place for one reason or another. Because this data exists only for border regions, we omit a general ‘border region’ variable. Thus, instead of comparing border region residents against interior residents, the subsequent analysis examines whether residents of some border regions feel more attached to Europe than residents of other border regions. For control variables, we use the variables from the models above.

The results in Table 4 show that there is no direct effect of the type of cross-border interaction on how attached to Europe residents feel in this region. Neither do residents feel more attachment to Europe when they live in a border region with more social interaction nor when they live in a border region with more commercial interaction, as the insignificant coefficients in Models 1–3 show. We therefore reject Hypothesis 6a. However, Model 4 in Table 4 gives an indication as to why there may be no direct effect of social cross-border interaction. Differentiating between East and West German border regions, as does the interaction effect included in Model 4, shows that the direct effect hides two opposing trends: in West German border regions, more social cross-border interaction leads to less attachment to Europe, whereas in East German border regions, the opposite is true. This can also be seen in Figure 2, which illustrates the marginal effects of social interaction on attachment to Europe in East and West border regions, with the x-axis

Table 3: Marginal Effects of Living in Border Region on European Attachment in East/West Germany.

	<i>No border region</i>	<i>Border region</i>
West Germany	7.05 [7.0–7.1]	7.07 [7.0–7.2]
East Germany	6.62 [6.5–6.7]	6.53 [6.4–6.6]

Note: Marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals in brackets; based on Model 7 in Table 2.

Table 4: Type of Interaction – Reduced Sample of Border Regions Only.

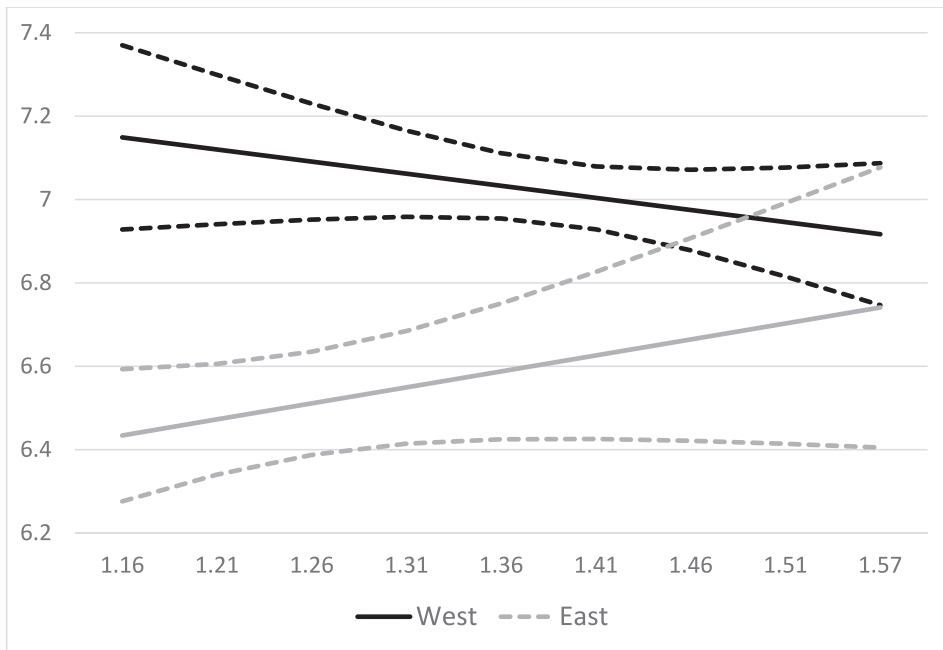
	(1) Social border crossing	(2) Commercial border crossing	(3) Social + commercial border crossing	(4) Social border crossing * East–West	(5) Commercial border crossing * East–West
	<i>Hypothesis 6a</i>				
Individual-level variables					
Education (metric)	0.151*** (8.40)	0.151*** (8.14)	0.151*** (8.14)	0.152*** (8.24)	0.151*** (8.16)
Household income (log)	0.391*** (6.83)	0.386*** (6.54)	0.386*** (6.54)	0.387*** (6.57)	0.386*** (6.55)
Living in a more rural area	-0.047** (-2.14)	-0.044* (-1.85)	-0.042* (-1.77)	-0.043* (-1.77)	-0.043* (-1.78)
Female	0.126*** (2.55)	0.131** (2.58)	0.131** (2.65)	0.131** (2.59)	0.131** (2.59)
Age	-0.038*** (-3.60)	-0.035*** (-3.32)	-0.035*** (-3.32)	-0.035*** (-3.32)	-0.035*** (-3.33)
Age (squared)	0.0004*** (4.67)	0.0004*** (4.37)	0.0004*** (4.37)	0.0004*** (4.35)	0.0004*** (4.38)
NUTS-3-level variables					
Social border crossings	0.143 (0.44)		-0.094 (-0.26)	-0.580 (-1.26)	-0.096 (-0.26)
Commercial border crossings		-0.094 (-0.53)	-0.104 (-0.57)	-0.161 (-0.86)	-0.096 (-0.52)
East Germany	-0.519*** (-6.33)	-0.525*** (-6.78)	-0.533*** (-5.91)	-2.276** (-2.48)	0.810 (0.23)
Social border crossings * East Germany				1.346* (1.93)	

Table 4: (Continued)

	(1) Social border crossing	(2) Commercial border crossing	(3) Social + commercial border crossing	(4) Social border crossing * East–West	(5) Commercial border crossing * East–West
	<i>Hypothesis 6a</i>				
Commercial border crossings * East					
Germany					
Constant	3.399*** (6.16)	4.260*** (7.20)	4.407*** (5.08)	5.190*** (5.17)	–0.561 (–0.39) 4.390*** (5.05)
Variance components					
NUTS-3 level	0.012	0.012	0.012	0.009	0.011
Individual level	4.308	4.305	4.305	4.304	4.305
<i>N</i> (no. of groups)	5062 (105)	4915 (103)	4915 (103)	4915 (103)	4915 (103)
<i>Log likelihood</i>	–10,885.41	–10,567.55	–10,567.52	–	–10,567.44 10,565.77

Note: All models include robust standard errors and only random intercepts (i.e., fixed slopes). Abbreviation: NUTS, Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics. * $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 2: Effect of Social Interaction on Attachment to Europe.



Notes: Marginal effects plot based on Model 4 in Table 4.

displaying the empirical range of values for social interaction and the y-axis showing the predicted attachment. Substantively, these results mean that increased social interaction increases attachment to Europe in East German border regions, in line with the general argument put forward by the literature (Fernández et al., 2016; Kuhn, 2011; McLaren, 2006). In contrast, the negative relationship for Western border regions is somewhat surprising. It could be explained with a ceiling effect for European attachment or with, indeed, negative consequences of more social interaction in contexts where cross-border co-operation (and attachment to Europe) is already rather high. It is equally interesting that we do not find a similar conditional effect for commercial interactions: in Model 5, the coefficient for the interaction effect between commercial interactions and the East–West variable remains insignificant.

This finding might suggest an explanation for why we did not find a direct effect of border residency on European attachment. For East Germany, it seems as if it is not border residency per se but residency in border regions with many *social* cross-border exchanges that is associated with higher attachment to Europe. Hence, transnationalism in some regions might not be favoured by mere commercial exchanges but by social interactions – in our case, more cross-border family visits.

Robustness Test

If living in a border region indeed does not affect attachment to Europe as a form of transnationalism, then one would expect that it also does not affect attachment to one's own

country. We have therefore used national attachment as an alternative dependent variable. This confirms our main results: living in a border region is unrelated to feeling attached to Germany.

Second, some individuals may develop attachments more easily than others. One might therefore also look at the effect of feeling attached to Europe after controlling for national attachment, to test whether individuals feel particularly attached to Europe irrespective of their attachment to their own country. However, whilst individuals who are more attached to Germany also feel more attached to Europe, controlling for national attachment does not modify our main result that living close to a border has no effect on attachment to Europe.

Third, we tested whether the effect of living closer to a border depends on an individual's prior political orientation. Individuals on the right side of the political spectrum may react more negatively to living closer to a border, whilst individuals on the left may increase their European attachment when living closer to a border. However, whilst those on the right of the political spectrum indeed feel less attached to Europe, neither does controlling for this variable change the effect of living in a border region nor is the effect of living in a border region different for right- or left-wing individuals.

Fourth, individuals or regions with more social capital or more trust may develop more attachment to Europe when they are closer to a border. We therefore also used a variable to measure general social trust, notably agreement with the statement that 'People can generally be trusted' on a scale from 1 to 4 and a variable that measures whether people are doing volunteer work in clubs, associations or social services on a scale from 1 to 5. In each case, the main effect is significant, in the sense that individuals who are more trusting and who volunteer more are also more attached to Europe. However, neither are those individuals more attached to Europe who live in border regions and are particularly trusting or are volunteering more nor does the main effect of living in a border region depend on the degree of trust or social capital that exists in this border region.

Fifth, our main calculations use a binary variable to classify regions as border or interior regions. However, one could also measure a region's distance to the nearest border rather than using our dichotomous classification. As we know how far the midpoint of each NUTS-3 region is from the closest border, we also measured the effect of living closer or farther away from a border. However, the distance to the nearest border in kilometres is unrelated to feeling attached to Europe before and after using controls.

IV. Discussion

Border regions provide unique opportunities for cross-border interactions through their geographical proximity to neighbouring countries. It is widely assumed that these opportunities for transnational interaction reduce prejudice and contribute to a sense of community. Evidence from the literature on this relationship remained inconclusive, however, not least because fine-grained regional data was lacking to test it. This article therefore used data from the 2020 German SOEP, merged with regional administrative data and the EB Survey 422, showing that, contrary to expectations, border region residents are not generally more attached to Europe than inland residents (Hypothesis 1 disconfirmed); attachment to Europe is not stronger for individuals living in border regions with a higher education (Hypothesis 2 disconfirmed) or who have lived in a border region for longer

periods (Hypothesis 3 disconfirmed). Considering previous findings on Euroscepticism in Germany being lower in border regions (Kuhn, 2011), our findings point towards an asymmetrical relationship between Euroscepticism and attachment to Europe (i.e., lower levels of Euroscepticism appear to not be linked to higher levels of attachment to Europe), as well as the need to conceptually differentiate between attachment to Europe and Euroscepticism.

We also did not find that the share of cross-border commuters is related to more attachment to Europe (Hypothesis 4 disconfirmed). Whilst the opposite result may have been assumed from the literature on transnationalism, we would like to caution, however, that our variables of cross-border commutes might not be perfect to measure cross-border interaction, as cross-border commuters might not interact socially across the border but rather cross the border for instrumental purposes. Whilst our data shows that East Germans are less attached to Europe than West Germans, we did not find that East German border regions are even less attached to Europe than East Germans on average (Hypothesis 5 disconfirmed). Finally, citizens living in border regions with many social interactions in East Germany are slightly significantly more attached to Europe. In West Germany, instead, a higher share of social interactions in a border region is associated with less attachment to Europe by the respective residents. This is in line with our Hypothesis 6b. It contradicts Hypothesis 6a, however, which expected a general effect of social interaction irrespective of East/West German residency.

Based on these findings, we can formulate the following conclusions for further research: first, living in a German border region does not per se increase one's attachment to Europe. Second, however, living in an East German border region seems to do so when there are more cross-border social interactions, whereas the same is not true for commercial interactions. This finding refutes a general trend and can only partly confirm previous observations by Kuhn (2011), Mau et al. (2008), Stoeckel (2016), Prokkola et al. (2015) and Prati et al. (2019), who all argue that social interactions are key for building regional identities and cosmopolitanism and/or reducing Euroscepticism, but without going into detail in terms of which border we actually look at.

Our results therefore suggest the need to differentiate between different types of borders. They are in line with studies arguing that borders do not necessarily lead to more integration but that they can also be seen as conflict zones and lead to negative responses by the citizens living in these areas. Specifically, the literature suggests that East German regions are less attached to Europe because they reject migration, as they feel they themselves should first be integrated properly into a unified Germany rather than integrating foreigners. Another reason why East German populations are said to be more hostile to foreigners is that their population is more culturally homogeneous due to less historic immigration. In addition, the reunification with West Germany was an economic shock for East Germany, in the course of which many East German companies shut down, leading to mass unemployment (Weisskircher, 2020, pp. 617ff.). It is such 'experiences of societal transformation processes, which explains Euroscepticism' (Kiess et al., 2017, p. 249). Generally, the unemployed tend to be 'against the opening-up of borders' and consider 'the EU a threat to the constitutive community', which may also explain why East German regions, where unemployment is more widespread, are less attached to the EU (Teney et al., 2014, p. 592). For future research, our results thus suggest that there is no uniform border effect on attachment to Europe but that such an effect, if it exists, is

instead conditional on the specific type of border, which can lead to positive or negative effects of border residency on attachment to Europe.

If our findings are generalisable, then they have implications for how attachment to Europe can be increased. First, our results question the idea that fostering cross-border integration via the established channels of Interreg funding leads per se to increased attachment to Europe across border regions. Instead, they point to the necessity of taking the individual characters of the border regions seriously, as well as the attitudes of the citizens living there. Second, our results suggest that interpersonal cross-border experiences may contribute to European attachment in some regions. Hence, in sum, both findings suggest moving beyond an overly optimistic idea of border regions as ‘living labs of European integration’ to instead differentiate why some border regions display stronger European identification whilst others do not.

Although these findings do contribute to our understanding of the complex relationship between residency in border regions and attachment to Europe, some caveats have to be mentioned. First, our study is based on a survey question about ‘emotional attachment to Europe’, which taps into rather general feelings about Europe. It could well be that a differentiated set of questions that reference more concrete advantages (and disadvantages) of EU policies would generate different results. Second, another reason for our non-finding of a general border region effect could be that living in a border region increases identification with or trust in the specific nation across the border and/or the adjacent cross-border region, whilst not increasing attachment to Europe per se. This would imply that cross-national exchange increases attachment to one’s neighbour but not, as commonly claimed, to Europe. Third, our data merely refers to *German* border regions; thus, generalising our findings to other intra-European border regions is speculative. To address these limitations, more detailed survey data with sufficient border region sample sizes is necessary.

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