

Cross-border impact assessment 2017

Preliminary Research 1: Euregional Mindset in Two Euregions



Maastricht University

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The *Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross-border cooperation and Mobility / ITEM* is the pivot of scientific research, counselling, knowledge exchange, and training activities with regards to cross-border cooperation and mobility.

ITEM is an initiative of Maastricht University (UM), the Dutch Centre of Expertise on Demographic Changes (NEIMED), Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, the City of Maastricht, the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR), and the Dutch Province of Limburg.



Euregional mindset in two Euregions

This student research project, undertaken by a group of students from Fontys Hogeschool Venlo, dealt with the awareness of citizens with respect to the Euregions.¹ Further, their knowledge, thinking and emotional attitude regarding the neighbours, institutions, labor markets, etc. is analyzed. This results in the heading 'euregional mindset'. The assumption was that the structure of a Euregion, its general strategic approaches and objectives could have an impact on the specific mindset of the citizens. Do we see big differences in the mindset within and between two different Euregions? In this respect, the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR) and the euregio rhine-meuse-north (ermn) were compared. How do citizens think about the Euregion? What do they know about it and is there a correlation towards the mentioned differences? The aim of the study was to collect some first results in order to stimulate further research.

For this purpose, a survey was conducted in the two Euregions mentioned above to get first ideas on the mindset of the inhabitants. With 204 respondents, the sample size of the survey was relatively small. Therefore, the analysis can only be regarded as a first indication for future research on the topic "Euregional mindset".

Comparing the two Euregions is particularly interesting since they show significant differences. In the first place, there different governance structures are established. In contrast to the ermnn including only partners from Germany and the Netherlands, the EMR includes partners from Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. Whereas in the ermnn two languages are spoken (Dutch and German), the EMR deals with three, Dutch, German and French. Further, in the ermnn politicians from municipalities and districts next to representatives of the chambers of commerce (German Industrie- und Handelskammern (IHK)) are the active stakeholders in the organization. These are members of the Euregional institution that amongst others decide together about European subsidies for cross-border projects. In contrast, the local level does not play a major role in the EMR but the provinces next to the Belgian community and the Zweckverband Aachen.

1. Euregions and European Integration

The Euregio Meuse-Rhine as well as the euregio rhine-meuse-north base their strategies on the Lisbon Treaty. The euregio rhine-meuse-north set up the Vision 2014-2020+ coming into force on the 31st of October 2013.² In spring 2013, the Euregio Meuse-Rhine presented its new strategy EMR2020.³ Both strategies partly cover similar topics but then follow different strategies.⁴ Both Euregions want to promote EU-Integration and want to be seen as dynamic and creative European border regions.

¹ Instead of the term „Euregion“, terms like „Euregio“ or „Euroregion“ can be used. This report uses the term „Euregion“. The term will refer to the institution itself rather than the border-area which is covered by a particular Euregion (cf. Giessen, van der, M. (2014), p.7)

² euregio rhine-meuse-north, http://euregio-rmn.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/2015-03-17_euregio-Vision_Webversion.compressed.pdf (accessed the 01.06.2017)

³ Euregio Meuse Rhine, <http://www.euregio-mr.com/de/intern/pdf/EMR2020-D.pdf>, (accessed the 01.06.2017)

⁴ In detail, the euregio rhine-meuse-north follows an integrated approach. The Vision 2014-2020+ covers the topics agribusiness, industry, logistics, tourism/recovery/culture/sport and labor market/education/languages. In comparison, EMR2020 deals with the themes economy/innovation, labor market/education/training, culture/tourism, healthcare and safety.

Being asked about open borders and the general perception of the EU, the answers of the respondents showed interesting differences between both Euregional areas. According to the survey, respondents in the EMR are more open-minded towards the EU than in the erm. In the EMR, especially the Belgian respondents were most open-minded towards the EU, followed by the Dutch and the Germans. So the difference between the respondents in the EMR and erm is to some extent a result of the fact that in the EMR there are more Europe-minded Belgians. Also in the erm, the Dutch respondents were more in favour of European Integration than the German respondents. As both Euregions just mention to promote the EU Integration but do not set up concrete objectives, it was not possible to make any link between the official objectives of the Euregions and these findings. The general support of European Integration is mentioned in both strategic documents. However, there are interesting research questions for future studies: Are there really differences related to nationality with respect to the general support for European Integration in the Euregions? Or is there a strong correlation between a positive European and Euregional mindset?

In the Lisbon Treaty, it says that deepening the peoples' solidarity while respecting their history, culture and traditions is the key for success.⁵ Both Euregions officially support the exchange of cultural institutions and want to promote the participation in a lively Euregional cultural programme. The respondents of the survey showed rather low interest in the public institutions of the cross-border regions. In both Euregions, the respondents either never or just infrequently make use of the neighbor's cultural establishments and events, such as museums, libraries, sport events and bicycle routes. This could indicate that in both Euregions, inhabitants do not really use the cultural diversity of the cross-border region. Future studies have to take a closer look and discuss the conditions for stimulating cultural exchange.

In addition, in both Euregions, the Dutch respondents are more likely to speak German and French (according to their self-assessment), still just on a moderate level, than the other citizens. Plus, more Belgians than Germans respondents said that they speak Dutch moderately.

The answers to the surveys also showed that in both Euregions, the Dutch respondents said that they read German literature and use German media-like webpages. This is not the case for the German respondents with respect to Dutch (online) publications. Consequently, language skills could apparently lead to – what is not surprising – the use of media/literature of the neighbor and finally to a more positive Euregional attitude.

⁵ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M000>

2. Employment and a cross-border labor market

According to the survey results, there is a correlation between language skills and the perception of the neighboring labor market. Especially the Dutch respondents perceive Germany as a country with attractive employers and are open for cross-border labor, which is less true the other way round. Two reports show that there is indeed a cross border labor market and interestingly it is balanced in relation towards the total amount of employees of both countries.⁶ At the same time, the German and Dutch respondents do not perceive the Belgian labor market as very attractive. Nevertheless, the latest figures (mentioned under footnote 7) show that almost as many Dutch persons cross the border to Belgium for work as to Germany. In relation to the total employees of the compared countries, much more Belgian inhabitants work across the Dutch-Belgian border than Germans cross the border to the Netherlands.⁷ It has to be investigated in further research, how the perception of the neighboring labor market is in fact influencing labor mobility.

There are also interesting differences with respect to the two Euregions: the respondents living in the erm are on average more open-minded regarding an employment in the neighboring country than in the EMR. In the erm, respondents mention interesting branches as a reason to potentially work in the neighboring country. In contrast, the approach to promote sustainability and innovation seems to bring positive effects in the EMR. Here, both terms are frequently mentioned as reasons to work in the neighboring country. In both Euregions, German respondents perceive the Dutch companies as more sustainable (open for green technologies, etc.) than the other way around. Whereas Dutch respondents consider German companies as more innovative in general than the Dutch.

Future research could investigate whether some of the Euregional projects related to certain branches and industries do have an influence on the perception of the labor market and job opportunities.

3. Euregional Cohesion

Do citizens in the Euregions know in which Euregion they live? In both Euregions, about 60% of the respondents knew the correct answer. In addition, the Dutch respondents were better informed than the others. Especially in EMR, 77% of the Dutch, 54% of German and 50% of the Belgian respondents answered correctly. This is striking since the Belgian respondents were the ones with the strongest support for European Integration. In this case, openness for European Integration and open borders is not necessarily linked to a profound knowledge of the own Euregion.

Is the Euregion as an organization known to the citizen? According to this sample, not really. Almost none of the respondents knew individuals working for the Euregion or representing the Euregion, in both border-regions. This is to some extent more surprising in the erm (euregio rhine-meuse-

⁶ From all German employees, around 0,072% of the employees are commuting for a job towards the Netherlands. From all Dutch employees 0,074% of the employees are commuting across the border towards Germany. Next to this there is an amount of people who moved across the border and work in their home country as well as in the new country. (See for more information: PBL (2015) Arbeidsmarkt zonder grenzen, p. 10 and CBS- Internationaliseringsmotor 2016 –III Duitsland, p. 25)

⁷ There are 4800 persons commuting from the Netherlands to Belgium across the border versus 5100 Dutch people crossing the border towards Germany. The percent of Germans crossing the border for work towards the Netherlands is around 0,072%, while 0,39% of the Belgians cross the border towards the Netherlands for work (see reports onder footnote 6).

north) where the municipal politicians play an important role. The Euregions as an organization are not really known to the respondents. Apparently, even the involvement of local politicians (e.g. mayors) in Euregional organizations cannot increase awareness.

Besides, almost none of the respondents attended an event organized by Euregional organizations. Therefore, it will be very interesting to do research on the question how Euregions – as organizations and with their prominent leading figures – reach citizens and whether and how they can promote Euregional thinking by organizing own activities. According to the answers of this Euregional sample, Euregions as organizations are not very visible.

The interviewees were also asked about their perception of Euregional cooperation, their familiarity with Euregional cities/towns, their sense of belonging and whether they feel at home in the Euregion. The results showed that the overall Euregional Cohesion (as a mix of different aspects) is rated a little bit higher by respondents living in the EMR than in the erm. In both Euregions, Dutch respondents express a stronger relation to the Euregion and a stronger Euregional cohesion. In the case of EMR, the survey revealed a significantly stronger perception of Euregional cohesion of Dutch and Belgian respondents than of German. Also in the erm, the answers of German respondents indicate less Euregional affection than their Dutch neighbors.

Comparing the two Euregions, when asked whether they feel at home in the Euregion, respondents from the EMR on average gave lower numbers than in the erm.

Conclusions

This student project has indicated that it is worthwhile to start broader research on the topic of a Euregional mindset. According to the results of this rather small sample, it is interesting to look into the perception of Euregions with the background of different nationalities. The survey indicates that, also in cross-border regions, nationality is still a decisive factor regarding the perception of the Euregion. There are also indications that it is very difficult to find correlations between the different governance structures of the Euregions and the specific mindset of citizens living in these Euregions. One potential reason could be that the Euregion is regarded more as a geographic than a political concept. In future research projects, it would be important to include the question whether the visibility of Euregions (as organizations) and their political figures amongst citizens is really that low. And if yes, it would be interesting to analyze whether this is a problem for the idea of a widespread Euregional mindset.



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