



Summary: Ex-post analysis of the Reintroduction of Border Controls at the Internal Border effects on the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (PREMIUM-Study)

Cross-Border Impact Assessment 2025



1.1 Dossier X: Ex-post analysis of the Reintroduction of Border Controls at the Internal Border effects on the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (PREMIUM-Study)

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INTRODUCTION, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The Schengen Area, created by the 1985 Schengen Agreement, abolished internal border checks among 29 participating countries and became a cornerstone of European integration. The Schengen Borders Code, as amended in May 2024, allows an exceptional reintroduction of internal checks. Although framed as temporary, these new provisions have real-world consequences for cross-border regions. Germany and the Netherlands are among the countries that have utilised this possibility, setting up controls within their borders at various times. Consequently, the research focuses on the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, a Euroregion within the Dutch, German, and Belgian borders. Spanning the



Belgian provinces of Liège and Limburg, the Dutch province of Limburg, as well as Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Rheinland-Pfalz, this region boasts a considerable number of students, workers and tourists who traverse national borders on a daily basis relying on integrated transport networks and streamlined administrative practices.

These measures, though compliant with the revised Schengen Borders Code, interrupt the previously frictionless flow of people and goods. Therefore, our research assesses the impacts of the reintroduction of internal border controls around three main research themes: **European integration**, **Socio-Economic Development** and **Euregional cohesion**. Under these research themes, some related research questions were: are the measures proportionate and necessary under EU law, given the circumstances? How do local citizens perceive these new measures? Did the daily life of commuters, students, and businesses in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine change?

Table 1: Research themes, principles, benchmarks, and indicators for assessing the cross-border effects

| Theme | Principles | Benchmarks | Indicator |
|---|---|---|--|
| European Integration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Schengen Borders Code calls for an open Schengen Area ● EU Law: freedom of mobility (TFEU 1992, Article 21(1)) ● EU Law: lack of internal borders (TFEU 1992, Article 67(2)) ● Benelux Union (1948): free/open market ● Non-discrimination (European Charter of Fundamental Rights (1950) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949)) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Open borders facilitate free movement ● Mobility in a cross-border region versus a non-border region ● Mobility when unilateral or bilateral controls ● Benelux open border: laboratory of the EU ● The control mechanism at the border controls | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legal analysis: proportionality test (focus on cross-border territories requirement) ● How do Member States (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands) define 'cross-border regions?' (transposition of SBC rules) ● How are the Benelux rules relevant in this respect? ● How is mobility different/equal in the Euroregion versus non-bordering regions? ● What are the non-discriminatory practices at border controls? ● What are the results of border controls? How many people get stopped and sent back? |
| Sustainable Development/Socio-Economic Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cross-border 360-degree labour market & economy ● Cross-border goods and services market and economy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tourism ○ Education ○ Trade ● Internal market & functioning of Schengen | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Visions & Strategies as formulated by and in Euroregions (EMR 2030, for example) ● Visions & Strategies of border provinces/regions ● Benelux open market ● Economic situation of the area. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ GDP ○ Economic disadvantages due to the border. ● Access to goods and services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How have the incentives to work across the border been impacted? ● UM as a case: how does border control impact students and employees? ● Has cross-border commuting been delayed by controls in practice? (traffic jams etc) ● How are border-area-based businesses impacted? (e.g. border supermarkets and cross-border shopping?) |
| Euregional Cohesion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Territorial cohesion (TFEU) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cohesion Policy of the EU | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the concerns at Euregions? |

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|--|--|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good cross-border governance & cooperation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ERDF Funds • Perception of the EU • International police cooperation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are border control activities coordinated? (e.g. Germany-Netherlands) • What is the impact on double cities/enclaves? • Coordination or cooperation within the Benelux Union? • How is institutional trust affected between countries? Are there differences between NL-DE and NL-BE? |
|--|--|--|--|

Methodology

To answer these questions, we conducted an ex-post impact assessment combining legal and documentary analysis, as well as an online survey targeting Maastricht University's students and employees as a case study. Finally, during a field trip on the *Drielandentrein* between Maastricht, Liège, and Aachen, the team conducted a series of semi-structured interviews collecting passengers' experiences and feelings.

FINDINGS

European Integration

The legal analysis pointed out that both the Netherlands and Germany followed the procedural steps required under the SBC for notifying the EC and limiting controls to a "serious threat to national security." However, neither state published detailed risk assessments or lists of approved border crossing points, as Articles 25 and 28 demand, hindering independent scrutiny of whether less intrusive measures were considered. Observations along the A60 (Winterspelt) and A2/A76 corridors showed that German checkpoints often diverted all cars into inspection zones but selectively waved through German-registered vehicles while targeting those with Eastern European plates, raising concerns about equal treatment. In practice, these controls appear arbitrary, unpredictable, and lacking uniform criteria, thereby undermining legal certainty and citizens' trust. Moreover, regarding the survey, there is a positive perception of the Schengen Area. Most respondents expressed positive views about the Schengen Area, many considered it an essential component of the EU's identity. While most survey participants did not experience severe restrictions, emotional reactions, such as

uncertainty, annoyance, and alienation, were widespread. These are significant in a region where integration and mobility are daily realities.

Thus, the empirical results show that European identity remains a challenge to be tackled by European institutions.

Socio-Economic development

The online survey revealed that 84% reported no significant hindrance to their daily cross-border routines, for work, education and other services. Short-term economic activity and service access do not seem to be affected by the controls. Nonetheless, 37.5% of the respondents reported that their desire to shop or leisure across the border may have been impacted. This hints at how soft barriers may be forming in people's minds, potentially reducing cross-border economic interaction over time. The field trip interviews provide further nuances. Apart from time loss caused by border controls, none of the interviewees reported a major impact on their daily lives, nor did the commuters. Passengers crossing for tourism aligned with the same answers.

Therefore, we could understand that the border control procedures as they are currently conducted, considering their intensity, frequency and location, do not have a significant impact on the socio-economic development of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine. However, the reported reduction in cross-border leisure and shopping interest suggests that symbolic or anticipatory effects may still arise, which, over time, could undermine regional economic development.

Euregional cohesion

Interviews and survey data indicate that most respondents identify first with their city or region, second with their nation, and last with Europe as a whole. Although a strong "Euregional consciousness" persists, the symbolic erosion of Schengen's openness poses a long-term threat to collective institutional trust. When border checkpoints appear to single out certain nationalities or lack clear communication, citizens perceive a fragmented governance framework rather than a unified Euregional community. In this context, the ad hoc, discretionary manner in which Dutch and German police apply checks contradicts the principles of transparency and equal treatment, potentially undermining social solidarity and willingness to collaborate on broader Euregional projects or even undermining a sense of belonging to a European project. These discrepancies also raise legal concerns under the Schengen Borders Code. The variation in enforcement practices

between the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium suggests that coordination mechanisms are either underutilised or insufficiently implemented.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, free movement endures practically, yet controls introduce emotional and symbolic costs that threaten long-term cohesion. Arbitrary and unpredictable controls generate unease and erode trust in the Schengen ideal, revealing a fragile emotional connection to Europe despite strong local identities. Legally, both the Netherlands and Germany complied with procedural requirements, but limited transparency and a lack of publicly available risk assessments cast doubt on the necessity and proportionality of these measures. To maintain Schengen's legitimacy, future extensions of controls must be justified with unambiguous evidence, and authorities from all three countries should harmonise procedures and communicate openly with border communities whose daily lives hinge on a tangible sense of borderless belonging.

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

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