Maastricht University

Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross border cooperation and Mobility / ITEM

Cross-Border Impact Assessment 2022

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Dossier 6: Border residents' perceptions of the 'border' and 'identity' after the COVID-19 crisis: how do we establish it?

Sander Kramer
Dr. Math Noortmann

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1. Introduction

Border regions have a particular character, especially due to their location compared to less peripheral areas and their proximity to national borders and neighbouring countries. During the COVID-19 crisis, the (territorial) borders between EU member states were reinstated. This has probably affected residents' perceptions of the border. Especially in a cross-border region like the Meuse-Rhine Euregion – which advocates a 360° perspective on cross-border collaboration, living and working – it is important to gain deeper insights into these perceptions. This cross-border impact assessment report comments on these aspects by way of a follow-up to the 2020 and 2021 research dossiers on the corona pandemic. In addition, it serves as a basis for future research on border-resident identity.

The question of whether – and if so, to what extent - there is a link between living in a border region and developing a border-regional or (trans)national identity has increasingly become the subject of academic debate.[1] Border regions are, by definition, territorial areas where similarities and differences between 'this side' and 'the other side' of the border become more visible. These differences may be of a socio-cultural and economic nature, of a historical and religious nature and may include differences and similarities in language, architecture and infrastructure. These differences and similarities can lead to cooperation and conflict, attraction and rejection, mobility and immobility. The question of how border residents perceive themselves and their fellow residents on the other side – and of which factors are involved in this perception – is complex and not easy to answer. Identities are dynamic, and borders are increasingly less static. With growing globalisation, can one still speak of a specific border region or cross-border identity at all? How are identities formed and how do they change, e.g. due to cross-border crises such as Covid-19 or the recent floodings?

These questions, among others, will be discussed below. Three difficulties should be emphasised in this type of research, which can be divided into three conceptual sub-questions: 'What is identity?'; 'What is a border?'; and 'How relevant is the determination of a border identity?'[2] These too will be discussed in more detail below.

2. 'Us' vs. 'the rest': ambivalence in identity formation

Although *prima facie* a clear distinction, the distinction between the local, the regional and the national is difficult to make, in that one person's nation can easily be considered another person's region. Likewise, one person's 'national language' may be another person's dialect. This complicates distinguishing separate identities – in which language plays a central role. After all, what separates 'us' from 'the rest'? This is further complicated by the fact that there is not one, unambiguous term to adequately capture this type of identity: should we call it a 'border identity', a 'border-region identity' or a 'cross-border identity'? The absence of such a term to designate the national, regional or local level – identity-wise – carries the risk that the terms 'national', 'regional' or 'local', when used,

[1] D. Laven and T. Baycroft, 'Border regions and identity' 15 *European Review of History* 255, 255.
[2] D. Laven and T. Baycroft, 'Border regions and identity' 15 *European Review of History* 255, 256.

introduce a qualitative/hierarchical distinction between what are essentially the same identities (although applied to geographical units). This is different, for example, when distinguishing ethnic or religious identities. The main objection to the use of such terms is that one risks acceptance of the primacy of the nation as a building block or the relegation of other identities to a lower/less valued status, when in fact there is no fundamental qualitative difference between these levels of identity. Why should a national identity prevail over a local identity? Merely because of the perception of a centralised nation state?

Given that they are rooted in geographical distinction, such identities could more appropriately be described as 'spatial' identities. At the same time, these identities may be geocultural or geopolitical, in the sense that spatial identity is usually linked to a political (or administrative) entity and/or to some culturally defined group. Thus, identity manifests itself as a multidimensional concept, whereby its multi-dimensionality does not equal national, regional, local or any other territorial concepts. Identity can also be defined culturally, religiously, politically, economically, which can transcend administrative units. This will be explained in more detail below.

3. The concept of 'border': if the territorial boundary separates us, does the conceptual border connect us in terms of identity?

The term 'border' is a central element in 'cross-border identity' or 'border identity'. What is a 'border'? In other words: what separates us from 'the others'? What creates different identities? The term 'border' is defined in the literature as ‘they are at once gateways and barriers to the “outside world”, protective and imprisoning, areas of opportunity and/or insecurity, zones of contact and/or conflict, of co-operation and/or competition, of ambivalent identities and/or the aggressive assertion of difference.’.[3]

This definition reflects the versatility of the 'border'. Which element prevails seems to be determined by the perception of the 'border'. It also follows that identities are ambivalent, which is discussed in more detail below. Also, the 'border' is described as something that separates us from the 'outside world', from the 'other(s)'.

In general, (territorial) 'borders' are not always clear, nor are they uncontested. Even a globalising world, characterised by regionalisation, still has its conflicts about borders. In that context, it can be argued that borders – even in a European single market without internal borders – have not disappeared or become obsolete. Just think of the reinstatement of physical (territorial) borders in combatting the Covid pandemic.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the concept of 'borders', borders can be *broadly* classified into three categories: territorial borders, functional borders and conceptual borders.[4] Territorial borders refer to the places of entry (at sea, on land and in the air) where a state exercises its sovereign powers.

[3] J. Anderson, L. O'Dowd, 'Border, border regions and territoriality: Contradictory meanings, changing significance', *Regional Studies* 37, n.º7 (1999): 593-604, 595.
[4] A. Geddes, 'Europe's Border Relationships and International Migration Relations', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 43: 4 (2005): 787-790 (789-790).

Also, territorial borders may refer to borders of provinces, municipalities, federations of states, federal states, regions, etc. within a nation state which also have the power to restrict entry. Functional boundaries refer to the places where the conditions of admission to the labour market, the welfare state and national citizenship are specified. In contrast, conceptual boundaries pertain to sets of concerns about notions of belonging to and the identity of various communities (e.g. transnational, national or subnational) as well as the (conceptual) dividing lines between ethnic and linguistic groups, cultures or classes. In particular, it is this categorisation of 'borders' that will be discussed in this opinion paper. Linguistic and ethnic borders, for example, can easily override national (territorial) borders. As will be shown below, a 'border' can rather be understood as a dynamic and multidimensional concept. The question is which border we draw where in establishing our identity, and can such a thing as a 'border identity' exist? How does a Hindu woman with Dutch nationality, a German father, a mother from Limburg (NL) living in the Basque Country define her identity?

Furthermore, territorial and conceptual borders rarely coincide. In this context, minorities are often assigned a 'bridging function' in cross-border collaboration and cross-border conflicts.[5] Whether these minorities can fulfil this function depends partly on broader geopolitical constellations (i.e. beyond bilateral relations between the states concerned). In this context, narratives about a common past and myths – concerning the foundation of nation states – play an important role in the formation of national identities. Here, language acts as an essential component of identity, shaping underlying perceptions of the 'self' and the 'other' as well as attitudes towards minorities. Especially in periods of fundamental geopolitical change, transformations seem to occur over time.

Further difficulties arise in defining and conceptualising borders. In the course of European history, borders have shifted, requiring the rethinking of not only the conception of border areas, but also of their – territorial, functional or conceptual – location.[6] Relatively rarely does a territorial border constitute a clear dividing line between groups in terms of culture, ethnicity, religion or language. On the other hand, territorial borders do seem to have an effect on conceptual borders. Communities that once shared a dialect, a language or the same ethnicity may develop differently from the group that ended up on the other side of the border due to separation by a territorial boundary. The Ripuarian language variety, for example, spoken in both southern North Rhine-Westphalia, eastern South Limburg and the eastern part of the province of Liège, is such a language variety/community separated by territorial boundaries.

In addition – apart from the question to what extent political/administrative, religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic differences play a role in identity – the sense of proximity to the border may have an effect on the identity assumed.[7] Clear-cut, long-standing and uncontested borders often lead to a reduced sense of being a 'border area' in their hinterland. While nation states play a role in the perceptual differences between border and non-border regions, border regions can also be seen as regions where different dimensions of social interaction play a central role. Perceptions of the neighbouring country and the border region depend on specific types of cross-border activities and associations with the

[5] B. Busch, 'Shifting Political and Cultural Borders: Language and Identity in the Border Region of Austria and Slovenia', *European Studies* 19 (2003), 125-144, 125.
[6] D. Laven and T. Baycroft, 'Border regions and identity' 15 *European Review of History* 255, 257.
[7] See e.g. M. Schack, 'Regional identity in border regions: The difference borders make', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (16) 2001, 99-114.

neighbouring country. The less important state borders become as markers of territoriality and control, the more other types of borders can become visible.

Given the above, a – uniform – cross-border conceptualisation of 'border' and 'identity' seems particularly difficult to achieve. The number of historical, political, ethnic, cultural, religious and social variables in Europe is enormous, and the types of borders vary considerably. This model will not be able to include all border regions in Europe. So, from the perspective of European integration, can one speak of a European identity of border regions? This will be discussed in the section below. Incidentally, it should be noted here that, in addition to a European identity, another cross-border identity could be considered, e.g. Euregional identity.

4. Towards a European identity for border regions? Finding what unites Europeans, shunning what divides them?

What does 'Europe' mean to its citizens, especially its mobile European citizens? Research findings demonstrate that, among residents of border regions, 'Europe' does not do very well as an identity reference.[8] This seems to lead to the paradoxical situation where those who experience the process of European integration the most in everyday life – i.e. the mobile European citizens – identify as 'Europeans' the least. This identity reference seems to be a situational concept, i.e. shaped by the situation, context and circumstances in which the border residents in question find themselves. In other words: shaped by what matters to them in terms of direct experiences with European integration.

As part of the ideal of a borderless Europe and the European integration process, freedom of movement is an essential feature that should foster a sense of community and European identity.[9] Developments such as the refugee crisis, the Covid pandemic, and the floodings (especially in the Belgian, German and Dutch border regions) seem to have put this sense of community and European identity to the test. Until now, there has been little to no research that has carried out a baseline measurement (e.g. pre-covid) of this European or Euregional identity. Therefore, this (ongoing) dossier aims to assess ex-post the impact of these drastic developments on 'border identity'.

5. Identity models: dynamic tension and hybridity

A considerable amount of academic literature is devoted to models aimed at establishing an 'identity'. The question that arises here is to what extent these models are suitable for determining a 'cross-border identity', or a specific 'border-regional identity', quite apart from the question of how these two concepts of identity should be conceived.

[8] M. Bruter, 'On what citizens mean by feeling "European": Perceptions of news, symbols and borderlessness', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, January 2003, 3 and literature cited.
[9] T. Cierco & J. Tavares da Silva, 'The European Union and the Member States: two different perceptions of border', *Revista Brasileira dePolítica Internacional* 59 (1) 2016, 2.

An often-mentioned model in this context is the 'imagined community', developed by Anderson.[10] In this model, 'the nation' is described as the way it is conceived in the minds of those who identify with it. Anderson argues that, due to the enormous size of a nation, it is inevitable that one does not know all of one's fellow nationals, but one nevertheless belongs to a national community that is 'imagined'. This imagined community does not stop at the territorial borders of a nation however; it can also concern (a) religion.[11] Thus, this imagined community can take many forms and even cross borders. This model of the 'imagined community' can also be applied to spatial identities – e.g. national identity – whether these spatial identities are local, regional or supranational. Besides cultivating its identity through centralised political programmes or cultural hegemony, an imagined community can also emerge from 'shared' histories, experiences, memories or stories that represent a shared (imaginary) past – or even a collective imaginary future. Besides allowing one to feel a member of more than one community, borders in themselves, like spaces, can also be imagined and thus be part of how other spatial identities are perceived. Territorial borders, in themselves, can thus play a central role in forming such an 'imagined community'. Where differences in, say, wages and/or prices are determined by territorial borders, these borders seem to become more prevalent in the minds of those living near them. Cross-border crises – e.g. floodings or the Covid pandemic – and the fight against these crises also seem to contribute to greater prevalence of territorial borders in the minds of border residents. As such, 'the border' – for border residents – becomes an integral part of imagined local and/or regional landscapes and increasingly serves to delineate regional identities**.**

Regarding Anderson's model of the 'imagined community', the question is to what extent it is appropriate for revealing the identities of particular areas as border regions. Criticism arises particularly of his emphasis on the nation (and nationalism) rather than the region (or other forms of community). A potentially more useful model at sub-national level is the work of Weber.[12] Although his work also shows a particular focus on the formation of national identity, the local and regional levels take a central role in this process. Indeed, Weber sees the nation as emerging through the erosion of the local and regional by the centre.

Other *top-down models* may be more sophisticated, in that they attribute the monopoly of identity formation less exclusively to the national state and give more control to the local and regional levels, sometimes as mediators between the local/regional and the national. One can also take local cultures as a starting point and the ways in which local or regional particularities are elaborated into national identities. For example, Wilson argues that the potential conflict in border regions stems from the fact that ‘projection of its “own” national culture may be at odds with the lived experiences of a variety of its populations’ when close to a border.".[13] On the other hand, there may be no such tension if it involves a minority on the other side of the border.

Local or regional cultures – and not only cultures, by the way – can thus serve as a source of representations for the formation of national identities, or conversely as a basis for local or regional identities that may or may not be compatible with national identity and are not imposed by the

[10] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* Verso 1983.
[11] D. Laven and T. Baycroft, 'Border regions and identity' 15 *European Review of History* 255, 258.
[12] E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France, 1870-1914,* 1976.
[13] T.M. Wilson, *Sovereignty, Identity and Borders: Political Anthropology and European Integration*. In: L. O'Dowd & T. M. Wilson (eds.), *Borders, Nations and States: Frontiers of Sovereignty in the New Europe.* 1996 Aldershot: Avebury, 199-219.

national centre. An alternative theoretical approach to the latter type of bottom-up model of identity formation is Somers' analysis.[14] Somers discusses the role of narratives about local cultures that serve as the basis for identities, whereby 'agents adjust their stories to fit their own identities, and .. . they will tailor "reality" to fit their stories'.. Stories assign meaning to cultures and cultural practices or forms, which will vary from place to place within a nation, reflecting specific local conditions.

The 'imagined community' mentioned above can be influenced by an extensive range of everyday practices and objects as reflections of national identity. This contributes to the fact that relationships within the local-regional-national images and narratives can shift significantly towards the national. Consider the colour of mailboxes and recognition signs on public buildings, the shape and colour of license plates on cars, the language of signage, the letterhead and details on public documents and identity cards, the range of newspapers, magazines and other types of merchandise in shops. These conditions are part of the landscape and clearly distinguish the (national) landscapes on both sides of the border. One of the most notable examples of this phenomenon is the television news and weather forecast that focuses entirely on events on one side of the border but ignores the rest of the region (i.e. the other side of the border). Indeed, someone living in Maastricht will receive information about the weather in Groningen but not about the weather in Lanaken (B), just across the border.

In this context, Sahlins' work is noteworthy as he proposes a model to describe the relationship between different types of spatial or geopolitical identities in a border region.[15] Sahlins considers identity at village, county, regional and national levels and demonstrates how all of these levels interact regularly and simultaneously in two different ways. The model is based on the study of local rivalries between villages, with the two 'rivals' located in different provinces, regions and nations. First, there may be overlap, where a local identity is maintained alongside regional and/or national identities. Second, such identities also exist in a hierarchy of opposites, where one identity is opposed to another neighbouring identity, whether at the local, regional or national level. In this way, multiple identities sometimes overlap and sometimes oppose each other. Here too, the individual's perception plays a central role: the way in which a particular identity is perceived at a given moment depends on the context. Identities can thus simultaneously overlap and oppose each other, depending on the specific moment, while the proximity of a national border can add an extra layer. Sahlins' model too has its limitations, in that it needs to be nuanced, particularly with regard to the hierarchy between opposing identities.

A common denominator among these scholars is the growing awareness that identity is characterised by hybridity, i.e. that identities cannot be divided along rigid lines, meaning that there is no single 'identity'.[16] This implies that, on the 'border' between two identities, there is a grey area where two different identities overlap or merge, with the possibility of becoming a hybrid identity. Hybridity occurs not only between different geopolitical identities (i.e. the local, regional and national levels), but also in terms of cultural, ethnic or religious identity, provided that such groups are large enough to have a shared sense of self as a separate group. Thus, any attempt to delineate the 'identity' of border residents seems to be in pursuance of an underlying (political) goal.

[14] M.R. Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society*, 23 (5), 605-649 2005.
[15] P. Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees,* University Of California Press, 1991.
[16] D. Laven and T. Baycroft, 'Border regions and identity' 15 *European Review of History* 255, 268 and literature cited.

6. Conclusion

The concepts of identity and border seem to have manifested themselves as multidimensional concepts – by definition – in which territorial borders may play a role. The above allows us to reflect on the nature of the process of identity formation at different levels, especially at the margins of the major European states. Given the above, it seems particularly difficult to achieve – uniform – cross-border conceptualisations of 'border' and 'identity'. There are simply too many territorial, historical, political, ethnic, cultural, religious and social 'borders' in Europe, and these types of borders vary considerably, making it impossible to fit all actual border regions in Europe in one model.

Also, the above demonstrates the limited value of models of identity formation, as well as the tension that persists in the search for 'identity'. In addition, it highlights the dangers inherent in attempts to determine overarching explanations or identities. Common ground in the identity debate is the growing realisation that identity is characterised by hybridity, i.e. that identities do not allow themselves to be divided along rigid lines. This means that, on the 'border' between two identities, there is a grey area where two different identities overlap or merge into one hybrid identity, i.e. the 'multiple identity concept'. Rather, the concept of 'identity' should be approached in a (social) constructivist way, which holds that identity is (partly) constructed by (social) processes and by the situation, context and circumstances in which the border resident in question finds themselves.