

## **National isolation or regional cooperation? The media debate on border closures during the Covid-19 crisis in Luxembourg**

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**Abstract:** Having been initially confined largely to China, East Asia and Italy, the Covid-19 crisis swept quickly over Europe in March 2020. Luxembourg was among the many small continental European states with high rates of infection. In the absence of a common European Union response, national responses to the crisis varied strongly. Decisions on the closing of borders and the limiting of cross-border movements have become a symbol of a newly found unilateralism. Luxembourg took the rare decision not to close its borders and disapproved of the restriction of cross-border movements by neighbouring states. The paper argues that this is the result of its size and economic policy which, in the context of EU integration, has led to strong interdependencies and social networks within the cross-border region. This argument is based on an analysis of the pre-Covid-19 situation in Luxembourg as a cross-border metropolitan region and how local newspaper articles can open a window to understand how the disruption caused by the pandemic reconfigured Luxembourg's borders with its neighbouring European states of Belgium, France and Germany.

**Keywords:** border, Covid-19, cross-border metropolitan region, European Union, interdependence, Luxembourg, Schengen, shelter theory, small state, vulnerability

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### **Introduction**

During the first wave of Covid-19 in Europe, and especially from March to May 2020, many of the most affected states – in terms of both high infection and high mortality rates – were small states (Baldacchino, 2020). This is also true for Luxembourg, which was in the top ten most affected states on both accounts for many weeks. Aside from this problem, small states in addition face specific challenges by virtue of their size (Baldacchino, 2018). Academics usually focus on the limited military, diplomatic and administrative capacity of small states and their specialised economies; but Thorhallsson had already argued in 2018 that modern risks such as cyber-attacks or pandemics should be taken into account (Thorhallsson, 2018a). The Covid-19 crisis does indeed show that pandemics pose specific challenges to highly interdependent non-island small states.

This article focuses on Luxembourg, which is a relatively uncontested case of a small state. The most important criteria for defining small states is usually population. While the exact thresholds vary widely between authors, the cut-off point is usually at 1.5 million inhabitants or above. With its 600,000 inhabitants, Luxembourg falls squarely below these commonly used thresholds (Armstrong & Read, 2000; Easterly & Kraay, 2000; Thorhallsson, 2018a). Economically, the country punches above its weight, though, with by far the highest per capita GDP in the European Union in 2019 (Eurostat, 2020).

The case of Luxembourg exemplifies the specific challenges that a pandemic poses to economically strong, non-island small states. It allows asking why Luxembourg was one of the few European states that chose *not* to close its borders and why it was opposed to the introduction of border controls by neighbouring states.

The paper argues that Luxembourg's stance on border controls or closures during the Covid-19 crisis was influenced by its smallness and its specific geographic and economic situation. In order to demonstrate this, the first section provides a conceptual framing of Luxembourg's situation as a small state and presents the *objective* reasons why border closures were a threat to Luxembourg. The second section provides a short overview of key developments during the Covid crisis with regard to the Luxembourgish border. The third section demonstrates that the objective factors outlined in the first section did indeed feed into the *subjective* perception of policy-makers and the public discourse on borders and motivated Luxembourg's own decisions and reactions to other states' decisions regarding the Luxembourgish border.

### **The question of borders and interdependent small states**

The field of small state studies traditionally has a strong focus on the concepts of 'vulnerability' and 'lack of capacity' of small states compared to larger states. In this context, the vulnerability of small states is often diagnosed as the lack of a strong military to defend against external threats or the dependence on foreign trade and over-specialisation of the economy in a small range of sectors that risks amplifying economic crises (cf. Alesina and Spolaore, 2003; Thorhallsson, 2018a). The lack of capacity can also refer to a limited diplomatic or administrative resources (Thorhallsson, 2018a). However, Thorhallsson (2018a, pp. 21-22) also argues that vulnerabilities and threats tend to be perceived in traditional terms, while there are other potential vulnerabilities – such as pandemics, cyber-attacks or interruptions of supplies – that ought to be analysed. He also argues that small states are generally more vulnerable to coercion or the decisions of external actors: “whether or not a small state prospers depends not so much on the actions taken by its government, but on the regional and global processes and foreign actions” (*ibid.*, p. 22). In the case of the Baltic states, for example, Russian offensives in the cyber security and energy sectors illustrate the non-military security vulnerabilities of small states and vulnerabilities that stem from sectoral dependencies (Bladaitė and Šešelgytė, 2020).

Shelter theory argues that small states can compensate for their lack of capacity and cover for vulnerabilities through alliances with larger states or by joining international organisations. International organisations can provide three types of shelter: firstly, they provide political shelter from military attacks, diplomatic support and international law that protects small states from (some) unilateral decisions by larger states. Secondly, they provide economic shelter by forming larger, more stable markets. Thirdly, they provide societal shelter through interactions with other individuals and ideas (Bailes, Thorhallsson & Thayer, 2016; Thorhallsson, 2018a). One potential provider of military shelter is the US, as in the case of Iceland until the mid-2000s; or the Atlanticism of Sweden (Bailes & Thayer, 2016; Thorhallsson 2018b; Thorhallsson, Steinsson & Kristinsson, 2018). The EU itself provides weaker military shelter, but should perform particularly well as economic and societal shelter, as it provides closer integration than the average international organisation, its laws are more easily enforceable on member states, and it provides for a larger market, labour mobility and open borders in the Schengen area. Bladaitė and Šešelgytė (2020) emphasize the importance of the EU in the provision of economic shelter for the Baltics, for example. In addition, as a result of the free movement of persons within the EU and the open borders following the

Schengen Agreement, the EU can provide extensive societal shelter. According to Thorhallsson et al. (2018, p. 542),

due to their size, small states also run the risk of cultural, educational and technological stagnation unless they forge connections to the outside world. Through societal shelter, small political entities avoid isolation by maintaining constant social and cultural relations with their neighbours and their wider region, thus ensuring that they are part of the region's wider cultural and ideological developments. This is one strategy that small societies use to make up for their lack of indigenous knowledge.

It is worth noting, though, that a study by Panke (2020) sheds doubt on whether all small states use regional organizations for shelter. Panke argues that some small states, such as Iceland or the smaller ASEAN members, indeed appear to turn actively to membership in regional organizations as a means to obtain political, economic or military shelter. However, this is not systematically true for all small states, possibly because of the often limited administrative capacities of small states that may make compliance with the obligations of membership difficult.

Luxembourg, however, is very active in regional integration and a member of multiple organizations. What makes Luxembourg an interesting case study of border closure during the pandemic is precisely how it used the opportunities – such as its sixty-year membership of the EU and longstanding membership of the Schengen area before the Covid crisis – for economic and societal shelter and how these opportunities were, quite suddenly, transformed into risks and threats during the epidemic when the EU ‘shelter’ was undermined by a return to unilateralism. Borders are a key issue in that transformation, and a prime example of the hidden vulnerability of a small state that suddenly becomes again exposed to the decisions of others.

In the case of Luxembourg, the literature on small states has to be combined with other concepts, such as the notion of a cross-border metropolis or cross-border metropolitan region (CBMR). A CBMR experiences a high level of cross-border flows of workers, goods and information as a result of a high concentration of services and industries (Sohn, 2014). This results in increasing economic and social interdependence (Herzog, 1991). Occasionally, this phenomenon can be accompanied by cross-border political cooperation. However, metropolitan areas often experience legitimacy gaps even when they are located within a single state, as they often do not correspond to one clear level of government. Decision-making and accountability can be fragmented (Grove, Baker & Bafarasat, 2020). Competition for influence between different cities within the region or between different levels of government can result in competing cooperation projects (Sohn and Reitel, 2016). When decisions taken by the central state(s) disrupt cross-border regions, the legitimacy problem is exacerbated. This was the case during the Covid crisis, where border closures were primarily decided at the national level.

Borders play a specific role in the formation of CBMRs and can influence their functioning (Sohn, 2014). For example, economic differentials across the border (e.g. unemployment rates or currencies benefitting the main city) can promote the development of the cross-border region, while cultural differences such as language can hinder it (Sohn & Licheron, 2018). Dörry and Decoville (2016) argue that national logics still delay integration in terms of public transport networks, despite increasing cooperation over recent decades.

CBMRs can take different shapes, such as double cities, multiple smaller cities that are closely interconnected or a city with a large cross-border hinterland (e.g. Alegría, 2009; Buursink, 2001). In addition, not all CBMRs experience convergence across the border. Sohn (2014) argues that a low level of convergence across CBMRs is indicative of a ‘centre versus periphery’

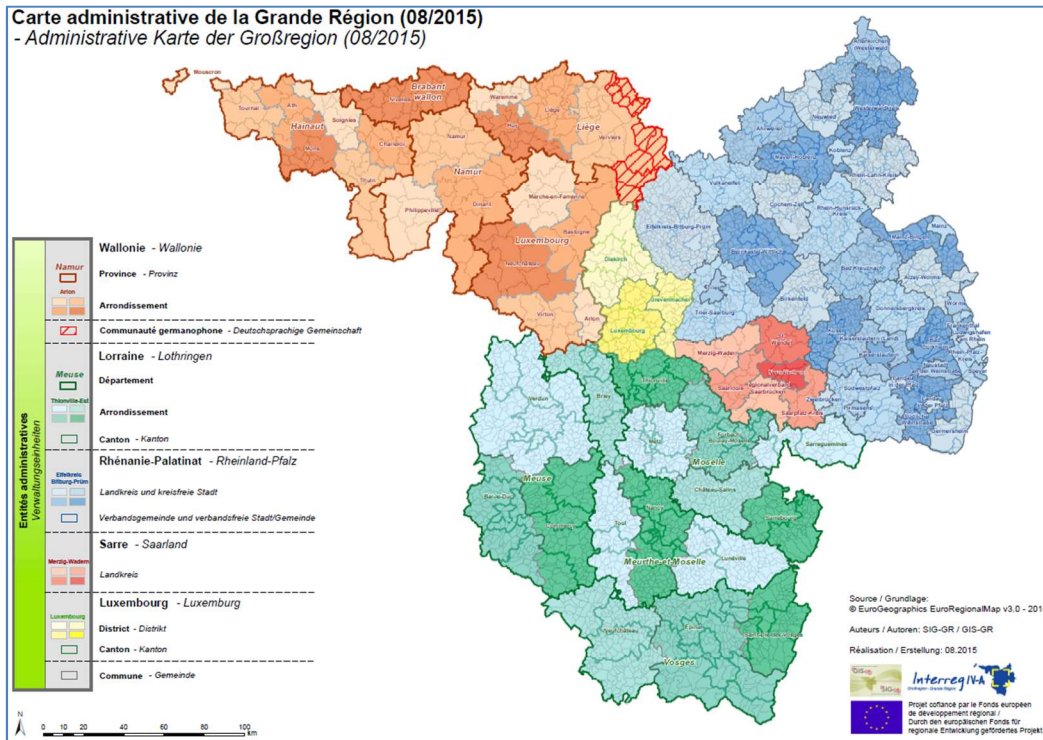
relationship, while high levels of convergence indicate a higher level of political integration. The emergence of cross-border regions and CBMRs is facilitated by the Schengen Agreement that foresees the free circulation of people as well as by funding programmes for cross-border regions such as INTERREG (Nelles & Durand, 2014).

CBMRs are not specific to small states and can just as well manifest along the borders of large states. However, the presence of EU institutions, a strong financial sector and high tech businesses has transformed Luxembourg into a CBMR in the course of recent decades (Reitel, 2012; Sohn, 2012). The creation of a research-focused university with one of the highest levels of internationalisation in the world in terms of staff and students has further contributed to these dynamics (Powell, 2014). While these economic developments might have led to a shortage of skilled employees on the small national labour market, the permeability of borders in the Schengen area has reduced the importance of the size of the state (Nelles & Durand, 2014). There were 127,000 cross-border workers commuting to Luxembourg in 2009 (Sohn, 2014). In 2019, there were already roughly 200,000 (Hesse & Rafferty, 2020).

A high level of functional integration and moderate institutional integration of the region have led to a centre-periphery relationship that allows the centre (Luxembourg) to benefit from its comparative advantage over the periphery (Sohn, 2014). Thus, on the one hand, the emergence of the Luxembourgish CBMR was facilitated by the removal of border controls under the Schengen Agreement; while the persistence of different political, regulatory and social regimes across the borders have maintained differentials that can be exploited. Luxembourg benefits in two ways from this phenomenon: firstly, it can use its higher wages to attract skilled labour from the surrounding countries without having to bear the cost of education, certification and training. Secondly, the availability of cheaper housing and the lower costs of living in the neighbouring regions reduce the pressure on the Luxembourgish housing market (Hesse & Rafferty, 2020). In addition, the CBMR of Luxembourg has experienced some political integration, for example through the creation of the SaarLorLux partnership in the 1980s, which later expanded into the Greater Region comprising Luxembourg, Wallonia, Lorraine, Rhineland-Palatinate and the Saarland (see [Figure 1](#)). More specific cooperation projects such as the QuattroPole (City of Luxembourg, Metz, Trier, Saarbrücken) or Tonicités (Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Longwy, Arlon, Metz, Thionville) emerged as well (Nelles & Durand, 2014) (see [Figure 2](#)). On the whole, the EU has functioned as a particularly strong shelter for Luxembourg: the permeability of borders has compensated for some of the challenges of a small market; and the EU's decision-making rules have protected this small state from any largely unilateral decisions taken by its larger neighbours.

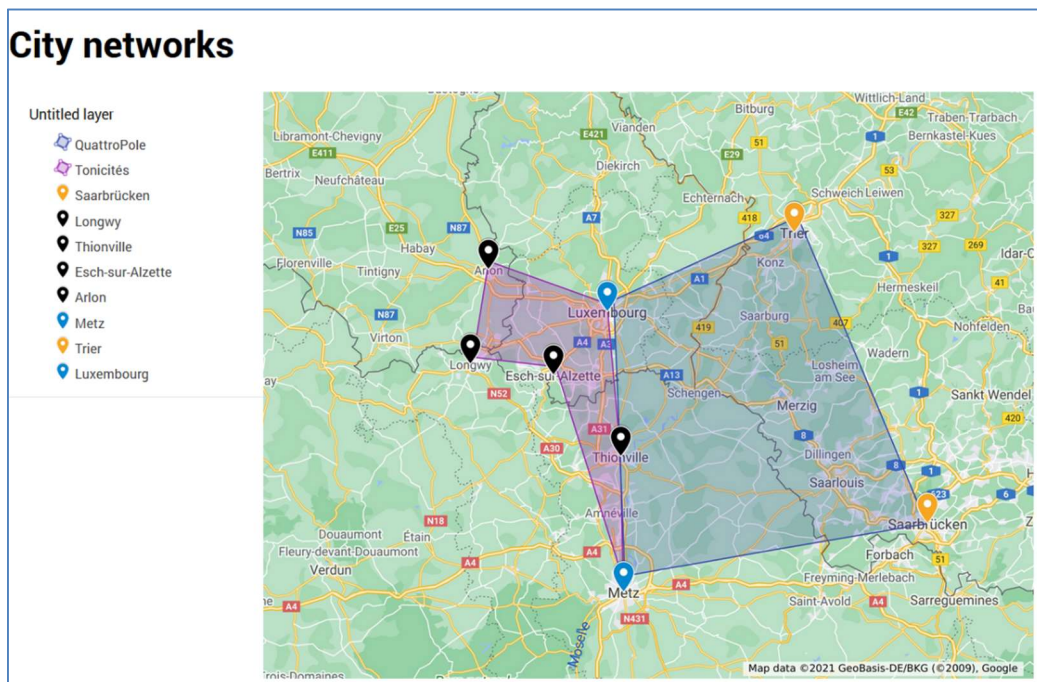
However, this system has come under stress in recent years – even before the Covid crisis. Wille and Nienaber (2020) argue that the EU has increasingly experienced ‘rebordering’ phenomena over the past decade. In addition to the emergence of populism and nationalism that resurrect borders in the discourse and in the minds of people, the migration crisis had already led to a temporary suspension of the Schengen rules and the reintroduction of border controls by some member states (Yndigegn, 2020). The 2020 Covid-19 crisis brought the fight to the Luxembourgish border.

**Figure 1: Map of the Greater Region. (Legend is in French and German.)**



Source: SIS-GR, [https://www.sig-gr.eu/fr/cartes-thematiques/administration/carte\\_administrative\\_grande\\_region.html](https://www.sig-gr.eu/fr/cartes-thematiques/administration/carte_administrative_grande_region.html) ©EuroGeographics EuroRegionsMap v.3.0 – 2010.

**Figure 2: City networks. (Cities marked in blue are part of both the Tonicités and the QuattroPole networks. Cities in orange are only part of the QuattroPole, and cities in black are only part of Tonicités.)**



Source: Google Maps.

Due to the economic model dependent on open borders, we expect the border controls and closures during the Covid crisis were perceived as a major threat by Luxembourgish politicians and the media. Below, we shall briefly outline the Covid-19 situation in Luxembourg in the early months of the crisis (March-May 2020) and the decisions taken by neighbouring countries on border management.

### **Covid-19 and the Luxembourgish border**

Luxembourg largely managed to avoid Covid-19 until mid-March 2020. But then, the slow drop of individual cases suddenly turned into an exponential rise of infections that went from several dozen, to over a hundred to over two hundred infections per day. By the end of May, Luxembourg had recorded around 4,000 infections and 110 Covid-19 related deaths (Hesse & Rafferty, 2020) and had been among the top ten most affected countries in a world for a number of weeks. The government declared a state of emergency on 18 March 2020 and proceeded to impose strict measures of social distancing on the population, including the shutdown of most businesses and non-essential economic activities, remote teaching at schools and university, and restrictions on social gatherings and the circulation of persons (Högenauer, 2020a, b).

The closure of non-essential activities and the strong encouragement of remote working wherever possible meant that the commuter streams were strongly reduced, but essential activities (supermarkets, pharmacies, hospitals, the police...) had to continue. Unfortunately, shops and hospitals also heavily depend on cross-border workers. In fact, the medical sector of Luxembourg had benefitted immensely from the competitive advantage offered by relatively higher wages and better working conditions and thus had recruited many cross-border workers, while neighboring regions were struggling to retain medical staff (Rtl.lu, 17/10/2020). This meant that around 70 percent of employees in the medical sector were cross-border workers in March 2020 (Tageblatt, 12/03/2020; Reporter.lu 17/03/2020).

In this context, Luxembourg chose to keep its borders open and free of controls in order to allow the unimpeded influx of its essential cross-border workforce. However, the airport was closed for passenger travel for over a month and the national airline concentrated on freight, and especially the import of medical products. In contrast, most European countries followed national reflexes and closed their borders (Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2020; Wille & Weber, 2020). In most cases this was done in a relatively ineffective way, namely after the virus had already started spread domestically. For Sommarribas and Nienaber (2020), borders introduced only by one side represent an imbalance and a demonstration of power to protect those on the inside from harmful elements and to keep undesired elements (like the virus) out.

Germany suspended the Schengen Agreement and reintroduced border controls to Luxembourg between 16 March and 15 May 2020 (Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2020). Both the original decision and the extensions of border closures were unilateral decisions, not even discussed with the Luxembourgish government in advance. Belgium closed all internal borders from 20 March until June 2020, and France extended border controls that had already been introduced in 2019 to combat terrorist threats (*ibid.*). This made it impossible to cross the border from Luxembourg into Germany, Belgium or France except for valid reasons: such as work.

The Covid-19 crisis posed two border-related challenges to Luxembourg: Firstly, due to the great need for cross-border travel, it was clear from the beginning that Luxembourg would not be able to shut its borders at an early stage to lock the virus out (Hesse & Rafferty,



2020). Secondly, Luxembourg crucially depended on other states to keep their borders open for commuters. While Germany, France and Belgium all allowed cross-border workers to commute to Luxembourg, the introduction of border controls created considerable disruptions. For example, Germany closed many border crossings to Luxembourg and only kept a few open which would be controlled by the police. This considerably complicated cross-border traffic, and created some consternation, as Germany originally planned to close all border crossings in Northern Luxembourg (Tageblatt.lu, 19/03/20). The Luxembourgish government had to intervene in order to ensure that this part of the country would not be cut off from Germany. The border controls generally created delays at the border. Finally, while work-related travel was permitted, there was always the risk that France, Germany or Belgium might change their policies and block off workers. The negative example of the Czech Republic that closed the borders to Czech doctors working in Germany (Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2020) and the French decision to requisition medical staff in some regions (i.e. to forcibly draft medically trained staff residing on its territory into its health service) raised the specter of Luxembourg's cross-border medical staff being blocked or requisitioned by another state. In addition, the border controls separated many cross-border families (Wille & Weber, 2020).

As a result, the EU's strong political shelter suddenly collapsed under the onslaught of unilateral national-oriented decisions. The EU could not prevent this and impose uniform action, as infection control remain a national competence and there was no political will on the part of most national governments to give up national control over pandemic-related measures. Even at the time of writing (in October 2020) EU member states have only been able to agree on how to color risk areas in the EU on a map, but not on a common approach to testing, travel restrictions and quarantine measures for travelers from these regions. As a result, the economic shelter of a large and unimpeded market has also been compromised.

Luxembourg's CBMR was built on the assumption that national borders in the Schengen area are permeable. And so, one would expect that public discourse in Luxembourg would tend to reject border closures and controls and to criticize neighboring states who resort to them. The following section examines the strength of this criticism as noted after a critical scan of newspaper coverage, its main themes and how the border issue was framed.

## **Luxembourg's perspective on borders in times of Covid-19**

### *Methods*

In order to establish how the border question was perceived in Luxembourg, all relevant newspaper articles from 1 March to 31 May 2020 published in the Luxembourgish newspapers *Tageblatt* and *l'Essentiel* were collected. The Luxembourgish daily newspaper market is traditionally dominated by German-language publications. *Tageblatt* was chosen as a source because it is the second largest German-language newspaper in Luxembourg (Reporter.lu, 7/06/2019). The largest German-language newspaper (*Luxemburger Wort*) unfortunately has a very limited search function that was impractical for this project. In addition, *l'Essentiel* was chosen as it is the largest French-language daily newspaper in Luxembourg (Presse- und Informationsamt der Luxemburger Regierung, 2013).

1 March was chosen as a starting point, because it provides data on the two weeks that preceded the French, German and Belgian decisions to restrict cross-border movements. We can thus see if there were already major debates within Luxembourg on whether the country should close its borders. Actually, the first relevant articles in *l'Essentiel* and in *Tageblatt* were only published on 12 and 15 March respectively, which suggests that the starting point of the data collection was sufficiently early to include the key debates. The end point (31 May) was

chosen because it allows us to continue to collect data for two weeks after the German border controls were lifted (which was the key bone of contention). The data shows indeed that the debate was starting to fizzle out during that period. After May 2020, a number of restrictions on cross-border movements continued to apply or were reintroduced when the infection numbers rose again (e.g. quarantine rules, requirements to have an up-to-date test...); but, in the absence of border closures and border controls, these measures were less disruptive.

In the first instance, articles were collected by searching for borders in general within the timeframe (search for 'Grenze' or 'frontière'). The results were then filtered manually to retain those articles that discussed the situation along the Luxembourgish border (i.e. the borders with Germany, France and Belgium). 38 *Tageblatt* and 37 *l'Essentiel* articles were retained. A qualitative analysis of the articles identified the positioning on the border closures and the precise arguments that were made.

### *Findings*

The analysis of the press articles shows that the general economic and geographic situation of Luxembourg did indeed shape the discourse on borders. The themes and frames that were used as well as the general attitude displayed in the articles, reflect the highly interdependent nature of the CBMR.

A general, quantitative overview over the media coverage shows that borders were a salient issue for Luxembourg. Despite the limited resources of Luxembourgish newspapers, *Tageblatt* and *l'Essentiel* published 38 and 37 relevant articles respectively between 12 March and the end of May: on average one every second day. What is even more remarkable is that the articles fall into two groups: those that are factual and voice no opinion on border closures (e.g. articles on where to find the relevant forms), and those that criticize the French, German and Belgian decisions to restrict cross-border travel. There are no articles that advocate border closures or tight border controls. The overwhelming majority of these articles – and almost all the criticism – focus on Germany's border policies. The reason for this is that Germany's border policies were perceived as particularly disruptive in both economic and social terms and that the way they were introduced and prolonged was marked by extreme unilateralism (*Tageblatt.lu*, 1/04/20; 15/04/20). The Belgian rules also received some criticism for being particularly stringent, in that they prohibited cross-border visits to shops and petrol stations and thus forced the residents of border towns to travel longer distances to do basic shopping in their own country (*l'Essentiel*, 7/04/20; 7/05/20).

Media coverage was initially neutral, possibly because the spread of the infection rose so quickly that it outpaced the public discourse, or because the rapid tightening of internal measures eclipsed the border question. Thus, most of the articles until 16 March were neutral in tone and merely informed citizens of the facts, i.e. that certain borders were being closed, that commuters needed permits, and where the relevant forms could be found. These articles generally emphasized that the German, French and Belgian border regimes all allowed commuters to pass. A first slightly negative perspective emerged in *Tageblatt* on 16 March with reports on the disruption of cross-border social life of citizens (e.g. daily visits to a swimming pool in the other country) and on 18 March concerns about traffic jams at the borders as a result of the controls. *l'Essentiel* reported on 16 March already concerns of the Luxembourgish government that Germany had informed them extremely late of their intention to introduce border controls and that it would be difficult to get all the forms for the commuters ready. On 20 March, Luxembourg was alarmed by German plans to block all but seven border crossings, and with the fact that all border crossings in the North of Luxembourg would be closed. Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn had to plead with the German government to ensure



that two northern crossings would remain open. On 22 March Asselborn then complained that there was a marked lack of solidarity in Europe and especially in Germany, and that Germany even complicated the repatriation of Luxembourgish citizens. As a result, from late March to the end of May, public discourse was dominated by positive frames of cross-border life that emphasized solidarity, interdependence and social integration, that contrasted with negative frames of border controls as unilateral, socially and economically disruptive and almost hostile (Tageblatt.lu, 23/03/20; 30/03/20; 1/04/20; L'Essentiel, 23/03/20; 1/05/20; 5/05/20). Luxembourg's openness towards its surrounding regions and their mutual interdependence was increasingly perceived as under threat.

One political factor that played a role in the rejection of border closures was Germany's extremely unilateral approach. These actions came across as oblivious to almost seventy years of common European integration and many decades of Schengen membership. On 1 April, Tageblatt reported in an editorial that Germany had started to set up the border checkpoints on 12 March under cover of darkness. When German authorities asked about pictures circulating on social media the next day, they claimed that these were not border controls, but controls in the border area for the purpose of combatting illegal migration. For German cross-border commuters and Luxembourgish employers, this was a moment of great uncertainty, as it raised the question of what was really happening at the border. According to Tageblatt, the decision-making of German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer was not just unilateral, but so secretive even towards the German public that the Luxembourgish Prime Minister Xavier Bettel announced that borders would stay open after consultation with the German Chancellor, while the German Interior Minister was already actively closing them. As a result, a day after Bettel's announcement that Angela Merkel had assured him that the border to Germany would remain open, it was closed.

For Tageblatt, this was "more than just a slap in the face". As 70 percent of employees in the health sector come from abroad, it is 'not about the definition of solidarity', but "about life and death. And the German government does not even inform the Luxembourgers." Tageblatt describes Bettel as feeling visibly desperate, let down and powerless after this move; he seemed extremely stressed and tense during those days and later when he was asked about the possibility of France drafting cross-border medical workers into its health service. He would repeat several times that French President Macron had promised not to do that; but, at the same time, he was clearly aware of the fact that the medical sector of the French neighbouring region was understaffed, and that such a course of action would be very tempting. As a result, Luxembourg did in fact try to convince cross-border workers from the medical sector to relocate to Luxembourg for the duration of the crisis to remove them from the reach of other states.

The issue was thus framed both in terms of strong (inter)dependencies and of small states being at the mercy of large states. The Tageblatt editorial of 1 April also emphasized that Luxembourg was more connected across borders than any other EU member state, and that the German approach amounted to 'punishing' it for tearing down borders and allowing people from dozens of nations to work side by side. In conclusion, it called the German approach a 'shame' for Germany and Europe.

Unlike Tageblatt, l'Essentiel did not focus on the lack of information provided by the German government, but it also portrayed the German decision to close its borders in negative terms. Articles focused on traffic jams, local protests on both sides, uncertainties for cross-border couples and families and the disruption to the Schengen regime (e.g. l'Essentiel 16/03/20; 5/05/20; 7/05/20; 9/05/20).

From the perspective of shelter theory, this was the moment where the political ‘shelter’ that the EU was meant to provide from unilateral decisions evaporated into thin air and took the economic shelter of a large market and open borders with it. It is this unilateral decision without warning by a big state that was supposed to be a close ally that created not just misgivings towards the German approach, but genuine ‘angst’. If close allies were willing to take unilateral decisions without warning, then anything was possible. Luxembourg’s relationship with France had been very good pre-Covid-19 because of the personal friendship of Bettel and Macron; and France never really took decisions harmful to Luxembourg during the Covid-19 crisis. Nevertheless, Luxembourg suddenly lived in fear that France might prioritise the care of its own citizens to the point where it might be willing to make the medical sector of another country collapse. It also pushed Luxembourg to emphasise its solidarity with its neighbours; for example, by accepting intensive care patients from France (Tageblatt.lu, 23/03/20) or allowing cross-border workers to get tested in Luxembourg. As Luxembourg’s testing capacity was several times higher than that of its neighbours, this arguably contributed a lot to infection detection in the CBMR.

In addition, the role of the Schengen agreement in providing economic and social shelter became clear during this period. A number of the articles emphasize the not just the importance of commuters to the economy and the health sector, but also how ‘normal’ patterns of daily life like cross-border shopping, family visits, excursions, sports activities or meetings with friends were severely disrupted. They also emphasize the mobilization of local people in response to these disruptions.

As a result of these fears, border closures were framed as discriminatory and a breach of EU law (Tageblatt, 23/03/20; l’Essentiel, 9/05/20), and Europe Day was used to actively demand their end. From a more positive angle, Tageblatt and l’Essentiel also highlighted the existence of joint initiatives to remove border controls and the fact that the German hinterland was also closely tied to Luxembourg both socially and in economic terms. As Asselborn pointed out, it is difficult to find work in the German Eifel region, which is why people commute to Luxembourg (Tageblatt.lu, 8/04/20). The mayors of Rosport and Ralingen sent a joint letter to the Minister-President of Rhineland-Palatinate (Tageblatt.lu, 7/04/20). Three mayors from the tri-border region around Schengen held a symbolic ceremony as a reminder of the Schengen Agreement (Tageblatt.lu, 15/04/20). The Minister-President of the Saarland demanded to have the border between Remich and Nennig reopened (Tageblatt.lu, 18/04/20; l’Essentiel, 9/05/20) and local politicians and residents planned demonstrations (l’Essentiel, 7/05/20).

Schengen was repeatedly framed as an achievement, for example as “the greatest achievement of Europe, for which we are envied world-wide” (Tageblatt.lu, 23/03/20; also 8/04/20). In social terms, articles emphasized the close cooperation of communes in Germany and Luxembourg, such as with the joint provision of sport facilities and playgrounds in Rosport and Ralingen. The mayors on both sides emphasized how this disrupted not just common services, such as sewage provision, but also local trade and family ties (Tageblatt.lu, 7/04/20). Commuters reported on their negative bureaucratic experiences at the border (8/04/20). Married couples living across the border could not visit each other until a relaxation of the German rules at the end of April (l’Essentiel, 18/03/20; Tageblatt.lu, 20/04/20), and the custody arrangements of divorced couples had also been de facto suspended. Children could not visit their parents across the border and vice-versa (Tageblatt.lu, 10/05/20). As 9 May, Europe Day, approached, the activities to celebrate Schengen intensified. Many flags of EU member states in Luxembourg had been put on half-mast to mourn the death of Schengen; and a protest was planned in Echternach, with the participation of around 50 regional politicians from

Luxembourg and Germany to highlight the difficult situation for the cross-border friendship. Other protest actions took place in Palatinat, in the tri-border region and at border crossings (Tageblatt.lu, 7/05/20; 10/05/20; l'Essentiel, 5/05/20; 7/05/20).

The German decision to lift border controls in mid-May was greeted with a universal sigh of relief in Luxembourg. Asselborn argued that “this decision will not just bring concrete improvements for the citizens and businesses on both sides of the border, but is also an important signal in terms of the gradual reinstatement of the Schengen Agreement.” This would also remove the traffic jams and complex commuting routes caused by border closures and border controls (Tageblatt.lu, 13/05/20; also 14/05/20).

Another remarkable element in this period is the *absence* of certain themes. Thus, none of the articles really has the question of whether Luxembourg should close *its* border and protect *itself* at heart. In the few articles that mention this question in passing, it is summarily dismissed by the government which points out the dependence of Luxembourg on cross-border workers in general and on medical personnel in particular. The only political party that seriously contemplated this option was the small populist right-wing ADR (e.g. l'Essentiel, 12/03/20; 14/03/20; Tageblatt.lu, 17/03/20; 23/03/20).

This is closely related to the absence or outright rejection of another frame that has been used by many other countries, namely the general notion that closing borders could protect a country from the infection. None of the articles in that period presents this argument; indeed, a few explicitly question it (Tageblatt.lu, 23/03/20; 1/04/20; 7/04/20). For example, former Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker argued that the virus does not stop at borders (Tageblatt.lu, 10/05/20).

Finally, the two newspapers report on the question in very similar terms. The main difference is that the French-language l'Essentiel covers the French and the Belgian dimension a little more than the German-language Tageblatt. However, the situation there was seen less critically, because these countries did not physically close most of their border crossings, but merely resorted to more frequent checks.

## **Conclusion**

The example of Luxembourg illustrates why Thorhallsson (2018a) was right to suggest that a pandemic might be another example of the vulnerability of small states, and one that is currently more realistic for Western European small states than more conventional military threats.

One could argue that Luxembourg was facing a lack of capacity in at least two other highly relevant areas in pre-Covid-19 times: the supply of (skilled) employees to sustain a growing economy and the provision of affordable housing to accommodate a growing workforce. However, these two shortcomings were masked by the opportunities of being also a territorially small state in the European Union and a Schengen area that made borders permeable. Thanks to the absence of border controls and physical obstacles in the Schengen area, the potentially negative effects of small size were mitigated and Luxembourg could use its competitive advantage of higher wages to attract both skilled and unskilled labour from the surrounding Belgian, German and French regions. In addition, those employees that could not or would not face the soaring housing prices in Luxembourg could relocate to the neighbouring states and commute from there. As a result, Luxembourg experienced a rapid rise in cross-border commuting and a growing social and economic interconnectedness with the neighbouring regions.

The Covid-19 crisis disrupted this pattern: Luxembourg could opt not to close its borders to protect its way of life, but it could not prevent other states from closing their own. As a result, anyone could easily *enter* Luxembourg from the neighbouring states, but whether they would be able to *leave* again was a different question. Despite the fact that cross-border workers could continue their commute, border closures caused delays and disruptions due to the limited number of open crossings and the necessary physical checks. In addition, the inflexible and highly restrictive nature of the German rules disrupted not just the social life of the cross-border region, but separated married couples, parents and children for several weeks.

This is reflected in the public discourse in Luxembourg, where open borders were generally framed in positive terms (solidarity, friendship, etc.) and border closures in negative terms (economic disruption, social disruption, lack of solidarity, etc.). The unilateral nature of decisions had an additional negative impact on the perception of border closures in that it amplified the angst with regard to an uncertain future where neighbouring states might be willing to take hostile decisions with immensely negative effects on Luxembourg as a small state.

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