

Open Borders and Attitudes Towards Migrants in Intra-EU Border Regions

Extended Abstract

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Migration plays a significant role in shaping contemporary societal dynamics, politics and policies. It affects the migrants themselves, who may face discrimination to varying extents, but also the communities in the regions they migrate to, which might be increasingly discontent with certain types of migrants and migration in general. The attitude towards different groups of migrants and how they are perceived varies, based on factors such as political beliefs and migration motivations (Fleming et al. 2018; Bye et al. 2023).

The perception of migrants depends significantly on the contact and interaction between the local communities and the migrants. Positive interactions, such as professional interactions in a workplace environment or in cross-border regions, are related to higher levels of migrant acceptance (Vergunst 2009; Betts et al. 2023). The latter is especially the case if the border regions include easily permeable borders for the majority of the population. Since the implementation of the Schengen Agreement in 1995, EU internal borders have become highly permeable, allowing for the free movement of people and goods. These “open border” regions are shaped by cross-border economies, with countless people regularly crossing the internal EU borders for work, shopping or leisure activities (González-Gómez and Gualda 2020). As regular interactions with other cultural groups can lead to greater acceptance towards migrants (Allport 1979), one could assume that residents of these border regions also exhibit higher levels of migrant acceptance.

However, most surveys that contain data on migrant acceptance, such as the European Social Survey, are on a national scale. This means that the data are not precise enough to distinguish border regions within the countries. As an alternative, election results can serve as an indicator, given the established link between anti-migrant sentiment and right-wing voting (Indelicato, Martín, and Scuderi 2023). Therefore, this study uses national election data from EU countries to answer the following research question.

- *How does cross-border interaction within intra-EU border regions shape attitudes towards migrants, as reflected in regional patterns of right-wing voting?*

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Allport’s Contact Hypothesis (1979), which suggests that increased interaction between cultural groups, such as, in this case, EU nationalities, leads to improved attitudes towards outgroups and greater acceptance of migrants. Later extensions (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Wright et al. 1997) show that even indirect or institutionalised contact can reduce bias under cooperative conditions. Complementing this, cross-border theory (Perkmann 2007; Brunet-Jailly 2022) describes how border permeability and institutional support can transform peripheries into integrated transnational regions.

The Cross-Border Survey (Cross-Border Cooperation in the EU, 2020) provides insights into how the factors underlying cooperation between countries in intra-EU border regions are perceived and practised, revealing a mixed picture. Based on the survey, for this research, European Schengen borders were classified into high, medium, and low cooperation. With the increasing popularity of nationalist and right-wing populist parties across Europe, “us versus them” narratives frame migrants and minorities as threats to national identity, security, and economic interests (Aktas 2024; Greven 2016; Jedinger and Burger 2020). However, regions benefiting economically from migration or EU integration, like intra-EU border areas, might resist these narratives. Altogether, this leads to the following hypotheses:

In regions with high levels of cooperation, other cultures and migrants are perceived as less threatening. Right-wing parties are thus less popular.

In regions with low levels of cooperation, stereotypes are reinforced and outgroups are perceived as a threat. Therefore, right-wing parties are more popular.

Data

For this research, Right-wing party popularity is used as an indicator of attitudes towards migrants. Freely accessible election results from national elections in EU member states between 2010 and 2019 serve as the main data source. The data used is on the communal or NUTS 3 level. In the end, 11 countries were selected, with countries being excluded based on criteria such as border controls (eg, Romania, Bulgaria), extreme remoteness (Finland-Sweden border) or the lack of open EU land borders (eg, Greece, Ireland). Countries where most territory qualifies as a border area were excluded, too. Germany was further divided into East and West to account for persistent sociopolitical asymmetries. After removing incoherent and exceptionally small regions, the dataset comprises 17,480 valid regional observations.

To ensure cross-national comparability, national parties were grouped according to their European Parliament affiliations into Right-wing, Centre-right, Centre-left, and Left-wing categories, following McElroy and Benoit (2007), McElroy and Benoit (2012), and McElroy and Benoit (2010). Election results were aggregated into three chronological rounds (E1–E3) and combined (All). Demographic controls include population density, share of residents aged 65+, intra-EU migrant population, and non-European-born population, derived from Eurostat’s GEOSTAT raster datasets. Border regions were identified following the EU’s NUTS 3 border region delineation with a 25 km buffer. Using the Cross-Border Cooperation Survey (2020), border regions were classified into high (C1), medium (C2), and low (C3) cooperation groups based on perceived socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic differences.

Methods

This study employed a spatial and statistical approach combining ArcGIS for geographic data processing and Stata for statistical modelling. Election and regional boundary data were spatially joined in ArcGIS. Border regions were identified via 25 km buffers around international

borders, with binary indicators distinguishing border and non-border areas. Population-related raster data were aggregated to NUTS 3 regions; population density was log-transformed to correct skewness, and other demographic indicators were expressed as population shares.

To test for spatial clustering in right-wing voting, Global Moran’s I was computed in ArcGIS using z-scores of right-wing vote shares per country. OLS regression was applied to assess whether border regions significantly differed in right-wing vote shares relative to non-border regions. Country fixed effects were included to control for unobserved national-level variation. Robustness checks and sensitivity analyses were conducted to evaluate model stability, including unweighted models, exclusion of outliers (based on Cook’s distance and standardised residuals), and systematic omission of control variable groups. Finally, a residual hot spot analysis was performed to gain a better understanding of how well the model fits and to detect whether the model’s residuals were spatially clustered.

Findings

The results reveal that border proximity significantly influences right-wing support, but the direction depends on the quality of cross-border cooperation. Moderate cooperation (C2) regions show significantly lower right-wing support ($\approx -4.5\%$) than national averages. This suggests that regular, meaningful contact reduces anti-migrant sentiment. Low cooperation (C3) regions exhibit higher right-wing support ($\approx 4\%$), reflecting tensions from limited or unequal interaction, leading to a more negative perception of migrants. High cooperation (C1) regions show a small positive but statistically weak relationship with right-wing voting ($\approx 0.5\%$), implying that in highly integrated regions, border effects diminish. The demographic controls behaved as expected.

% of Right-Wing votes	Coefficient	P > t
BorderC1	0.556	0.000
BorderC2	-4.482	0.000
BorderC3	3.911	0.000
Overlapping Borders	0.323	0.472
Schengen Border	1.989	0.000
Swiss Border	5.337	0.000
% Born in other EU	2.560	0.049
% Born outside EU	3.550	0.000
Ln Population Density	-0.538	0.000
% Population above 65 (country variables)
Constant	16.339	0.000

Table 1: Robust Weighted Regression, Excluding Outliers

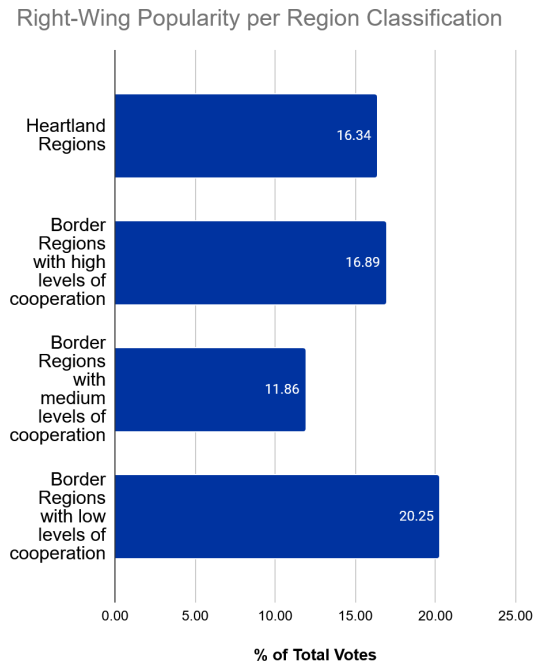


Figure 1: Right-wing Popularity per Region Classification

Residual analysis revealed spatial clusters of unaccounted variance, such as Poland's east-west divide and the Dutch Bible Belt, suggesting local cultural and historical factors persist beyond border effects.

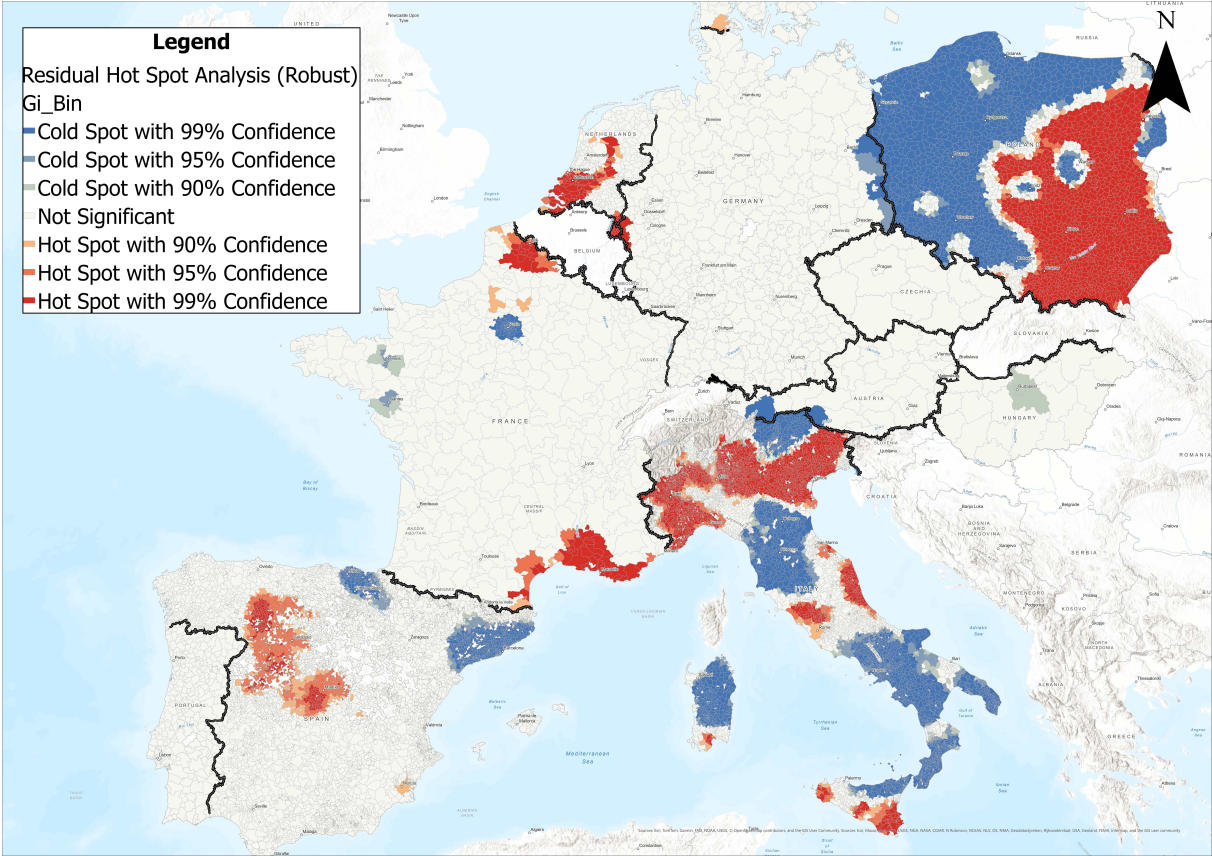


Figure 2: Residual Hotspot Analysis of the Robust Weighted Regression, Excluding Observations Flagged as Outliers or Influential

Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of how regional integration and cooperation within the EU can shape attitudes towards migrants. It shows how important tailored cross-border policies that promote meaningful integration and economic interdependence are in light of the acceptance of migrants and other cultures.

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