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Cross-Border Integration through Contestation? Political Parties and Media in the Swiss–Italian Borderland

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, regional integration across an international border took place through political contestation. Although the crisis has been interpreted as leading to a revival of state borders, we show its differentiated impact on cross-border relationships at the heart of Western Europe, namely the Swiss–Italian borderland. A database encompassing over 1,800 articles published in 11 different print and online newspapers over two years (2010–2012) allowed an analysis of the role played by political parties and the media as drivers of contestation. Our quantitative and qualitative analyses trace processes of both re-bordering (“Switzerland vs. Italy/the EU”) and de-bordering (that is, integration across the border) through discourses prioritizing “the region.” The wider implication from this study is that borderlands are subject to the same push-and-pull-factors as states but that, additionally, a third dimension is present. Ignoring this intra-state center-periphery dimension means not fully capturing borderland dynamics, all the more so if political entrepreneurs skillfully seize spatial contention to advance their own conception of regional identity distinct from that of their nation-state.

Introduction

It has become a commonplace to state that globalization and Europeanization have contributed to West-European borders losing their “frozen character” consolidated between the 19th and the 20th centuries. One of the main consequences of this is the growing importance of cross-border relationships (van Houtum 2000; Jacobs and Varro 2014; Popescu 2008, 2011). Several institutions and actors contribute to the increasing salience of borderlands as new geographical scales (e.g. Minghi 2002; Blatter 2001). Among them, political parties, and especially regionalist parties, play crucial roles (Agnew 1997; Agnew and Brusa 1999; Keating 1998, 2013). Yet the function these actors fulfill is far from uniform: although they are often against their national center, they are not always in favor of more cross-border interaction. At the same time, however, acting regionally might help their cause even if it means supporting an actor on the other side of the

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state border. Further hindering the task of generalizing is the fact that the actions of regionalist parties are context-dependent, with socio-economic, cultural, political, and institutional dimensions interacting. In particular, political parties are meant to play their public role in linking up with the mass media, including the digital media, which are themselves increasingly reaching across national borders (e.g. Castells 2008; Sassen 2006, 338 ff.).

Accordingly, our aim here is to contribute to the debate on “the shifting geography of Europe and especially the radical reorganization of the geographical scale of various kinds of social activity” (Smith [1995] 2003, 227). Empirically, we investigate the Swiss–Italian borderland, comprising Canton Ticino and Northern Italy (Figure 1). Both components of that region have been marked by a strong presence of regionalist parties since the early 1990s (Mazzoleni 2005; Biorcio 2010), and given that Italian is spoken throughout that borderland and both Switzerland and Italy are part of the Schengen zone, the border only presents a minimal obstacle to the flow of goods, persons, capital, services, and information (Leimgruber 1991, 2004).

Our interest is also driven by a particular concern for cross-national relations in the wake of the economic and financial crisis of 2008 (Bickerton 2011; Murphy 2013). That event has had the double effect of (a) re-emphasizing the national scale, thereby putting a strain on cross-national relations in general, while also (b) closing the ranks within functionally highly integrated supranational areas such as the Eurozone (of which only Italy is a member). Both processes we would expect to result in less, or less intense, cross-border relations between Eurozone- and non-EU-non-Eurozone regions.

However, our argument here is that a combination of political contestation *across* the border and political regionalism *within* each borderland component have in fact lead to *more* integration. In other words, arguing with each other forces actors to respond to the other side, thereby contributing to a shared terminology, converging frames, and

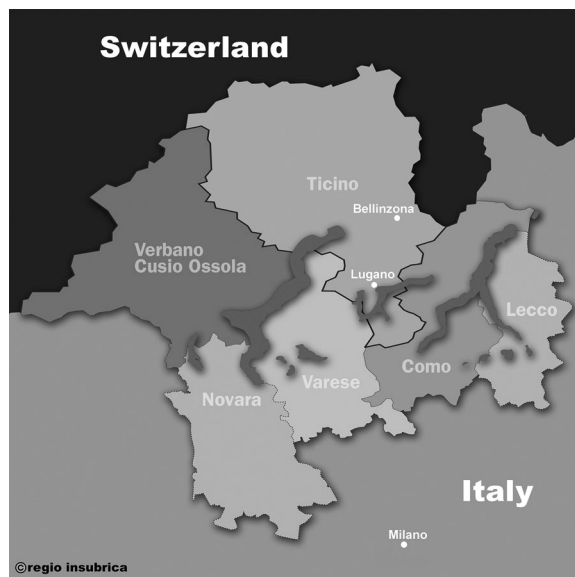


Figure 1. Map of the Ticino–Northern Italy Borderland.

even similar solutions being advocated *vis-à-vis* their own national center. The next section describes current insights into borderlands, cross-border relations, and political regionalism. Section 3 introduces the Swiss–Italian borderland and analyses our conjectures using an original media article dataset. Section 4 discusses these findings before we conclude.

Theoretical Framework: Borderlands, Regionalist Parties and the Media

It is no coincidence that at the same time as the (primarily European) nation-state has come under the double “threat” of supranational integration and internal decentralization, devolution, or even federalization (e.g. Bartolini 2004), different disciplines, such as political geography, political science, sociology, and anthropology, have coined new concepts to give expression to what happens below as much as between nation-states (e.g. Leresche and Saez 2002; Anderson, O’Dowd, and Wilson 2003a; Brunet-Jailly 2011; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012). Given an increasing flow of goods, persons, capital, services, and information, state borders are losing their function as demarcating lines separating different jurisdictions, and we are moving towards increasing complexity (Paasi 2002; Newman 2003, 2010). Hence, although in the literature the notion of “scale” often remains an ambiguous concept (Herod 2011), we can clearly observe a process of institutional and political rescaling (Keating 2013). Nothing marks this changing nature of the nation-state better than the presumed ubiquity of cross-border relations that redefine territories located in a complex web of intra-state, cross-border, intergovernmental, and supranational dynamics (e.g. Newman 2003; Popescu 2011).

Although scholars generally agree that various institutions and actors are involved in these dynamics, who is actually responsible for driving such processes and how they come about remain largely unexplored questions. Thus, in an attempt to gain more systematic insights, we propose to focus on three elements: borderlands, regionalist parties, and the media. Let us first explain why we chose these three before we move on to hypothesize interactions between them.

To begin with, studying borderlands as “territorial containers” (Taylor 1994) giving meaning to social interaction furthers our understanding of the *kind* of changes nation-states are undergoing. By their very nature, borderlands span at least two states, so they are the most likely places to reveal changing patterns of sovereignty (Kratochwil 1986; Sassen 2013). In assessing cross-border relations, scholars have so far focused on *institutions* (broadly speaking) such as national histories, regional and local experiences, functional integration between neighboring states and territories, and the formalized cooperation of multiple levels of government (e.g. Blatter 2004; Brunet-Jailly 2004; Perkmann 1999). However, while such political cross-border relations have been epitomized as the “trademark” of European integration, *socio-economic* cross-border integration is more complex (Lundquist and Trippel 2013, 3–4). This may be so because collaborative strategies in this domain are less obvious, possibly raising suspicions, misunderstandings and even contention (Sidaway 2001). Challenges to cooperation may arise from national and international pressure (e.g. security issues, immigration control, the financial crisis) or from conflicting territorial logics advanced by regional and local actors (Popescu 2008; McCall 2013). In that way, borderlands themselves become the sources of conflict, defined by the type and goals of actors within them.

This is precisely why the institutional perspective needs to be complemented with a focus on the political *actors* shaping and defining borderlands. This focus already exists for intra-state regionalism, both in political science (e.g. De Winter and Türsan 1998; Elias and Tronconi 2011) and political geography (e.g. Agnew and Brusa 1999), but is only scarce as regards borderlands (see however de Oliveira 2002; García-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaría 2013; Malloy 2010). That lacuna is all the more surprising as regionalist parties play a crucial role in shaping dominant geographical scales and are thus best placed to make use of borderlands as political opportunity structures (Keating 1998, 2013; Jeffery 1996, 2008). Naturally, then, our focus should be enlarged to include regionalist parties as key political entrepreneurs of the “politics of scale” (Agnew 1997, 102; Cox 1998; also Delwit 2005; De Winter, Gomez-Reino, and Lynch 2006; Elias and Tronconi 2011; Hough and Jeffery 2006). As “children of the centre-periphery divide” (van Haute and Pilet 2006: 303), these parties adopt rescaling strategies in order to boost their electoral constituency, press for policy changes, and/or gain office (De Winter and Türsan 1998). But even if regionalist parties emphasize “the regional” at the expense of national or inter-governmental scales, we should be careful in generalizing to the borderland level. For mobilization strategies aimed at re-bordering can be framed as an opposition either by the periphery against the national center (Bartolini 2004, 252) or by one region against another, on the other side of the border, thereby emphasizing one’s own particularities (*our* region vs. *their* region). Nevertheless, if a regionalist actor on that other side of the border acts in the same way, the two regions can end up strangely united again.

The best way to empirically capture these various strategies and their effect is by assessing communication flows (Salmon, Fernandez, and Post 2010), for two reasons. On the one hand, Sassen (2006, 344) suggests that the complex imbrication of the digital and the non-digital brings with it a “destabilization of older hierarchies of scale and often dramatic rescalings.” If true, media channels should reflect these rescalings, for unlike party manifesto or organizational data, communication is by definition public and represents information already mediated. On the other hand, parties themselves need to rely on the media to disseminate their creed and mobilize their followers. Hence, assessing how they are perceived and present in a borderland’s media space is an indicator of the success and salience of their messages. In other words, given a borderland with regionalist actors on both sides, how do newspapers, radio and TV channels, internet sites and discussion forums contribute to structuring the space around the border: by re-bordering, de-bordering, or both?

Surprisingly, even if cross-border communication is the object of an increasing academic literature (Brüggemann et al. 2009; Wessler et al. 2008; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Lang 2003), enquiries into the particular role played by the media are rare. For instance, territorial politics underlines how regionalist parties resort to the media in following a “tribune strategy” (Seiler 1982; van Haute and Pilet 2006, 305) when they are in opposition. But we do not know how this then resonates on the other side of the border. Especially lacking are enquiries into territorial issues related to cooperation and contention, including electoral competition, where the media facilitate or obstruct cross-border relations: By shaping imagined communities, including regional communities (Morley 2000), they may either enhance or smoothen controversies surrounding cross-border issues (McCall 2013). So although some scholars argue that the media tend to enhance national borders, for instance through stereotypes (e.g. Ashuri 2005), the media can also contribute to re-shaping belongings and meanings across borders

(Horga 2007). Moreover, given their definitional proximity to the national border, the media of peripheral regions also communicate *beyond* it, thus potentially contributing to an integrated borderland public sphere.

These three elements—borderlands, regionalist parties, and the media—are connected in two important ways. On the one hand, all borderlands (and borders in general) are social constructions, that is the product of “a set of important ideologically inspired practices” (Agnew 2002; see also Filep and Wastl-Walter 2006). The media and political parties, and regionalist parties in particular, are key drivers of this construction in that they politicize identities and voice regional interests (Agnew 1997). Furthermore, regionalist parties are not only directed *against* the center, or at least against a center in the unitary-centralist understanding of the state, but also and always a movement *for* creating a new regional space (Keating 1998). In this sense, regionalist parties contribute to constantly reshaping the construction of various scales and the hierarchy among them. The media, in turn, allow them to reach their not-yet followers and exert pressure on other political actors (e.g. Semetko 2006).

On the other hand, borderlands also have an important structuring effect on regionalist political parties, not least through their particular media situation. From the point of view of borderlands as “new centres,” the question then arises how territories of a different scale (regional, cross-border regional/borderland, national, international, and supranational/European) condition political action. As stated above, looking at regionalist parties and the media should allow us to better understand borderland dynamics, for it is they that have the most to gain from territorializing political competition. But territory, in representing a “container” to be filled with social meaning (Taylor 1994; Sack 1986), is a two-edged sword: in publicly and repeatedly emphasizing the regional space as a universe of its own (factual or desired), regionalists may seek alliances that cut across nation-state borders, which implies a trans-national dimension to political discourses. Yet these discourses are in turn heavily marked by exclusivist symbols—“our land,” “our people,” “our jobs” etc.—that are anything but trans-national. In short, the existence of two instances of cross-border scalar contention (regionalist parties on each side of the border) can result in a *re*-bordering as much as in a *de*-bordering: *re*-bordering means the re-emergence of the barrier role of borders (Andreas 2001), either within states, between them, or both at the same time; while *de*-bordering refers to the already mentioned loss of structuring capacity of state borders (Paasi 2002; Newman 2010). Again, it is through analyzing media output that we are best able to trace the intensity and frequency of such rivaling claims.

In sum, conceptualizing regionalist parties as acting not only in a national, trans-national, and European but also in a *cross-national* political space (the borderland) allows us to look for particular alliances that cut across Europe’s nation-state borders. Such alliances may be temporary and superficial, but to understand what they are and do, we must first know they exist at all, which is why turning to media outputs is necessary. Hence, a cross-border approach to political regionalism emphasizes the role of political *actors* within the—ambivalent and changing—discursive meanings of borderland (Anderson and O’Dowd 1999). Borderlands do not emerge by themselves: they are, like the borders along which they are constructed, man-made and -unmade. Hence, for the political dimension of borderlands, political parties are the primary actors that fuel or dampen public demands for more or less cross-border activity, and the media are their sole instrument to reach beyond their membership. In other words, what needs to be looked at is the

specific role of regionalist (and other) parties in a given borderland to frame public issues and thus contribute to a (re)territorialization of politics at the margins of the state, but at the potential core of a (new) borderland (Agnew and Brusa 1999).

Because scalar configurations are heavily context-dependent and thus need careful empirical examination (Gualini 2006, 896), the method adopted for testing all these conjectures is a single-case study. The attempt to show how borderland contention actually works thus focuses on the area including Canton Ticino, in Southern Switzerland, and Northern Italy. The story told below involves a European borderland molded by intense economic, cultural, and social transborder interactions (where, most notably, Italian is spoken throughout) over many decades (Leimgruber 1991). Recently, rising disputes have involved supra-national as well as inter-governmental scales (the Schengen area and Swiss–Italian treaty negotiations, respectively), but also intra-state and cross-border relations in which two regionalist parties, one on each side of the national border, are directly involved: the *Lega dei Ticinesi* in Switzerland and the *Lega Nord* in Italy. As we will see, not only the decline of the importance of national borders but also the consequences of the financial crisis at the end of the 2000s have generated new political opportunities for regionalist parties. These parties have been particularly successful at structuring “competing visions of the relevant geographical scales at which politics should best be organized” (Agnew 1997, 101; cf. also Elias and Tronconi 2011), although their visions remain highly controversial. The next section introduces and analyzes that particular borderland in more detail.

The Swiss–Italian Borderland

Over the past few decades, several Swiss borderlands have been involved in institutional collaboration, based largely on regional initiatives (e.g. Blatter 2004; Leimgruber 2004, 130–144). One of these collaborations has occurred in the cross-border region between Italy and Switzerland, where socio-economic linkages are an important legacy of the 19th century. The Swiss–Italian borderland as defined here encompasses the whole of the Swiss Canton Ticino and the North of Italy, in particular the three provinces immediately adjacent to the state border on the Italian side: Verbano-Cusio-Ossola (VCO), Varese, and Como. According to Baud and van Schenkel’s terminology—useful because it allows for a comparative graduation in the intensity of borderland activity—Ticino and the three Italian provinces constitute the “border heartland” where “social networks are shaped directly by the border, depend on it for their survival, and have no option but to adapt continually to its vagaries” (Baud and van Schenkel 1997, 221). However, a borderland involves both various territorial extensions (and deviations from the borderline) as well as different jurisdictions, thus assembling regional, national and supranational scales. Figure 2 displays the two most important supranational contexts for that particular borderland: the European Union (EU), of which only Italy is a member, and the Schengen area (where persons can move freely), in which both Italy and Switzerland take part, the latter as an associated member.

Background

This borderland is exclusively Italian-speaking, which has significantly facilitated cross-border integration, but economically asymmetric. Since the 1950s, thousands of North-

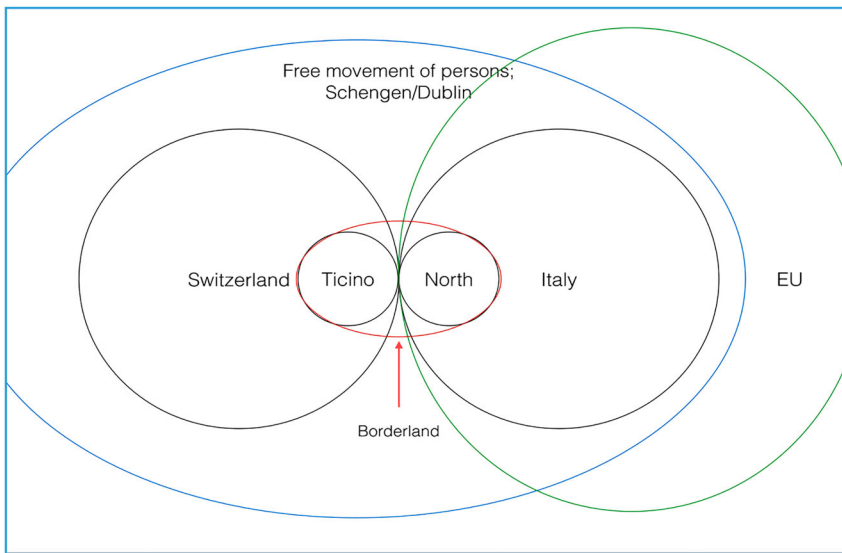


Figure 2. The Context of the Ticino–Northern Italy Borderland.

Italians have started to cross the border on a daily basis to work in Ticino. Some Italians have also contributed, with their money hidden from the Italian tax authorities, to the development of the third-largest financial center of Switzerland (that is, after Zurich and Geneva): Lugano, the largest city of Ticino. Italians also represent the largest non-Swiss community residing in this canton. But although the flow of workers is unidirectional since wages are much lower in Italy, economic integration has also enhanced policy cooperation. In the 1990s, a cross-border platform emerged involving Ticino and the three neighboring Italian provinces in the form of an association named *Regio insubrica*, through which local and regional institutions engage in specific cooperation projects concerning topology, climate, linguistic heritage, and socio-economic give-and-take (Leimgruber 2004, 140).

On top of all this, in the 2000s a further de-bordering occurred. The free-market rules introduced by the bilateral agreements between the EU and Switzerland have strengthened the integration of the cross-border labor market. This increased economic competition, mainly in Ticino, and the influx of comparatively cheaper labor has seen unemployment rise. Moreover, over the past years globalization and international pressure have contributed to trouble established cooperation patterns in the Swiss–Italian borderland (Schuler 2014). The financial crisis of 2008 has led to an even bigger flow of Italian workers into Ticino, numbering 60,000 in January 2014, that is 25% of the entire workforce in this canton. Politically, this has led to the reinforcement of the cross-border divide—there still *is* a border, after all—by emphasizing several distinct historical features.

These features include divergent paths in national state-building and European integration. Italy has a centralist, “Napoleonic” legacy leaving little power to regional and local institutions, although the devolution of the 1990s increased subnational authority (Keating 1998). Switzerland is an example of non-centralized federalism in which cantons (and local governments) benefit from strong autonomy, although foreign policy

largely remains a national prerogative. Also, while Italy was one of the founders of the European Community in the 1950s and currently 60% of Italians, including Lombards, feel like “European citizens” and support the free movement of persons (Eurobarometer 2012a, 4–8, 2012b, 156), Switzerland has remained outside the EU. Moreover, since the 1990s several referendums on European integration have seen Ticino to be the most Euro-sceptic Swiss region (Mazzoleni and Pilotti 2015).

In all this, opinions of the EU by Ticino’s (Swiss) residents appear to be strongly overlapping with their perception of Swiss–Italian cross-border affairs. In other words, Europeanization is increasingly seen as a threat for regional prosperity. But across the border, in Italy, the exact opposite is the case: here, the open border meant better-paid, easily accessible jobs without having to fully emigrate. We next discuss what this meant for how “territory” was used politically in that particular borderland by regionalist and other parties.

Regionalist Contention and the Politics of Scale

In 2008, a controversy arose between Switzerland and Italy; regional and especially regionalist parties have developed a politics of scale aiming at reinforcing their presence in the Swiss–Italian borderland. In other words, that controversy was used as an opportunity to rescale political discourses in favor of the agenda of regionalist parties.

It all started with the financial and economic crisis of 2008, which contributed to further shaping the mentioned “spiral of opportunities and threats” (Tarrow 2011, 159). Under the pressure of increasing public debt, the Italian government launched an exceptional campaign against Switzerland, and in particular Ticino, accusing it to be a “fiscal paradise” for Italian tax evaders. Through the inclusion of Switzerland on a financial blacklist, coupled with the domestic offer of amnesty, the Italian government tried to convince Italian citizens to repatriate their money placed in Swiss banks, mainly in Lugano. The European Commission and the OECD put further pressure on the Swiss bank account secrecy (Emmenegger 2014). The consequences of these disputes for Swiss–Italian cross-border relations were particularly strong, challenging Southern Switzerland as a destination for Italian money.

Swiss–Italian border relations then became prey for multi-scalar diatribes. In 2009, cooperation between Ticino and the Italian areas reached an all-time low, as the *Regio Insubrica* suffered from contention over the meaning of the border (Torricelli and Stephani 2009, 24). Many political attacks on the Italian government could be observed in Ticino, targeting in particular the labor market. Besides a stigmatization of the Italian government, criticism of the influx of Italian workers grew steadily, voiced especially by the Swiss People’s Party and the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, Ticino’s regionalist party. In 2010, a far-reaching anti-Italian commuter campaign labeled “Balairatt” was launched by the Ticino branch of the Swiss People’s Party, the strongest party of Switzerland claiming to defend its independence. The campaign framed the growing presence of Italian workers as a threat to Swiss welfare.

During the electoral campaign for the Ticino cantonal elections of spring 2011 and the Swiss federal elections of autumn 2011, cross-border controversies became a subject for almost all political parties in Ticino. One month before the cantonal elections, the parliament of Ticino unanimously accepted an initiative put forth by Ticino’s Christian

Democratic Party, asking the government of Switzerland to renegotiate the 1974 agreement on fiscal paybacks (*ristorni*), which is a share of the tax levied on the salary of Italian workers employed in Ticino but resident in Italy. These paybacks were to become the most crucial issue in the borderland. However, because it was based on an international agreement, that dispute also involves the national and inter-governmental scales.

In June 2011, the government of Canton Ticino decided it would withhold half of the fiscal paybacks due for 2010, that is, pay the Italian government only 28.4 million Swiss Francs. With this unprecedented decision, the Italian-speaking Swiss region effectively blackmailed its own national government (with whom the inter-governmental obligation to pay the full amount lay) as well as neighboring Italy (recipients of the money) into renegotiating the terms of the 1974 agreement. This decision, in turn, was possible only thanks to the political success of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*.

The *Lega* presented the Swiss government as unable (or at least unwilling) to defend the specific interests of Ticino. Founded at the beginning of the 1990s, the *Lega* has become more and more powerful in shaping Ticino's political agenda. In fact, the *Lega* has developed a multi-scalar politics based on three frames: a local and regionalist strategy within the national landscape ("Ticino first!"), a national re-bordering claim ("Switzerland first!"), and a tactical cross-border alliance with the Italian regionalist party ("regions first!"). At the peak of its success, in April 2011, the *Lega* gained an additional seat in the cantonal government through an electoral agenda focused on cross-border controversies and "peripheral" protest against the Swiss government. It portrayed all supranational empowerment (e.g. European integration) as a threat to Switzerland's and, above all, Ticino's welfare (Mazzoleni 2005).

Cross-border controversies have also had a prominent place in the regional and local elections of May 2011 and May 2012 in Lombardy, where North-Italians working in Switzerland form a significant share of the population. The fiscal paybacks from Ticino are an important source of revenue for local governments there. Of course, one of the main roles in the election campaign was played by the *Lega Nord*, the regionalist party strongly present in Northern Italy: in 2010, the *Lega Nord* led two regional, 14 provincial and 350 local governments (Biorcio 2010, 77). However, during the mentioned cross-border controversies, the *Lega Nord* played a contradictory role: it defended the Italians "having to work" in Switzerland, while also entertaining friendly relations with the Swiss anti-Italian commuters-party, the *Lega dei Ticinesi*. Its discourse on cross-border issues was thus no less ambivalent than its politicization of North-Italian identity (Agnew and Brusa 1999).

And even though their opponents underlined the contradictory posture of these regionalist parties, both Leagues successfully put forth claims for a shared "cross-border regionalism" in which each region would defend its own interests (Scott 1999). For both regionalist parties, the Swiss-Italian agreement was less a financial gain for the North-Italian regions than benefitting the central powers in Rome. Also, in blaming their respective central governments for their anti- or un-regional policies, both regionalist parties have sought to minimize their divergences while at the same time enhancing their visibility in the borderland. Both were capable of managing this "contradictory" posture: while claiming to fight "the establishment," both parties have been involved in government coalitions at local, regional, and, in Italy, also at national scale (Mazzoleni 1999; Biorcio 2010, 81ff.).

In sum, when campaigning within their respective regional arenas, both parties have successfully pursued a multi-scalar discourse using cross-border controversies. These disputes are framed ambivalently: on the one hand, they provide for a *re-bordering process* when pitting “the Swiss” against “the Italians” as geographical containers for communities of persons. On the other hand, however, both parties stress the regional scale as *sui generis*, thereby also creating a new opportunity for cross-border politics. In playing to the heterogeneous interests of their respective constituencies—including small and medium-sized enterprises, skilled as well as un-skilled workers—that ambivalence becomes a condition for electoral success. We now turn to how this plays out in the media landscape.

Towards Cross-border Political Communication: Method and Results

As we have seen, regionalist parties are not the only ones shaping the public agenda. Cross-border controversies also imply the emergence of conflicting territorial logics in which institutions, other parties, voters, and the media are involved. As can be guessed from the asymmetric map (cf. [Figure 2](#)), the Ticino–Lombardy borderland’s informational space is characterized by a higher salience of Italian issues within the media of Ticino because of the much bigger size of Italy and the penetration of Italian national TV and newspapers. However, until the 1980s the Swiss Italian-speaking TV channels had largely been accessible in Northern Italy; only new European licensing regimes introduced in the 1990s and 2000s meant that residents in Italy could no longer watch Swiss TV. Nevertheless, the internet has offered new opportunities to transcend the national border (Salmon, Fernandez, and Post 2010). The question thus arises how the borderland’s media landscape has contributed to the mentioned controversial issues. Is its role shaped by re-bordering, de-bordering, or by both at the same time? What role does it accord to the different political parties, and in particular the two regionalist parties? Which are the dominant scales linked to cross-border controversies in its coverage?

In order to answer at least some of these questions, we undertook a quantitative content analysis (e.g. Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998) of the borderland’s print and online media. Quantitative analyses allow the uncovering of regularity and trends, which is our main goal here. More particularly, we observed how various cross-border issues have been dealt with in all the main print and online newspapers of the borderland (all are written in Italian) and how they have covered political events happening on each side of the border. Three newspapers plus two online portals are Swiss (*Corriere del Ticino*, *Giornale del Popolo*, *La Regione*, *Ticinonews.ch*, *Ticinonline.ch*) and three plus two are Italian (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Giornale*, *Lombardianews.it*, *Laprovinciadico.com.it*). We also included the only bi-national news website (*Infoinsubria.com*) in our data collection process. Within these publications, we searched for keywords directly related to the mentioned cross-border controversies:

- The fiscal paybacks from Ticino/Switzerland to Italy;
- The inclusion of Switzerland on the Italian blacklist of fiscal paradises;
- The Italian amnesty for tax evaders;
- Double taxation for Italians working in Switzerland; and
- The anti-Italian commuter workers campaign launched by the Swiss People’s Party in Ticino (“balairatt”).

The period covered by our observation started on July 1 2010 and ended on June 30 2012 and led us to select over 1,800 print and online news articles. In a second step, we undertook a textual analysis which permits the researcher to emphasize the dialogical components of a discourse (see Fairclough 2003). The goal was to trace political cross-border communication, trying to understand how the political actors themselves relate to each other—either directly, when meeting face to face for the purposes of a common event or interview, or indirectly, through the media. This matching of the quantitative with qualitative approach should increase our confidence in both the internal (through context sensitivity) and external (through statistical regularity) validity (cf. Mahoney and Goertz 2006).

Unsurprisingly, we find that the salience of any given controversial issue depends on the national border: the blacklist concern is stronger in the Swiss media, where 21.8% of articles covered primarily this issue, than in the Italian one, where only 15.5% focused on this (cf. Table 1). For the Italian tax amnesty, salience thus measured is inverted (24.7% in the Italian vs. 8.8% in the Swiss media outlets). Nevertheless, a surprising symmetry appears with regards to the fiscal paybacks, which are the main concern in both the North-Italian and the Swiss media as well as on the unique bi-national (and cross-border) news website (covered by between 34.8 and 36% of all articles). A double logic is thus present in borderland media coverage: the national frame is still working with most of the controversial issues, while only coverage of the inherently bi-national concern (Swiss taxes on the salaries of Italian workers residing in Italy but commuting to Switzerland) results in cross-border media convergence.

How is this convergence on fiscal paybacks linked to political parties? We would expect that the Italian media are more interested in Italian parties, while the Swiss media would be more concerned by Swiss parties. But our results partially contradict this expectation (cf. Table 2). The most salient party within the North-Italian media is not an Italian party, but the *Lega dei Ticinesi*: 61.1% of all their articles in our sample are directly related to this party. The North-Italian media places the *Lega Nord* in second place, just before Italian center-left parties—however, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* still gets double the attention of the *Lega Nord* and center-left parties combined. By contrast, in the Swiss media the Swiss center-right parties receive most of the attention when covering borderland controversies, whilst the *Lega dei Ticinesi* only comes second. However, in the third position already emerges the *Lega Nord*—with double the salience of the Swiss People's Party. These results clearly highlight a cross-cutting relevance, on both sides of the border, in that a party's prominence in the borderland is not so much determined by its national origins but by its regionalist appeal, shaping an at least virtually integrated regional cross-border public sphere.

Table 1. Issue Salience in the Borderland Media

Issue	Ticino media	Bi-national media	North Italian media
Commuter worker fiscal paybacks	35.7%	36%	34.8%
Double Taxation	22.3%	19.3%	9.2%
Switzerland on the Italian blacklist	21.8%	28%	15.5%
Italian tax amnesty	8.8%	6.0%	24.7%
Anti-commuter worker campaign <i>Balairatt</i>	7.7%	6.5%	15.2%
Transborder association <i>Regio insubrica</i>	3.8%	4.2%	0.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<i>N</i>	1023	336	466

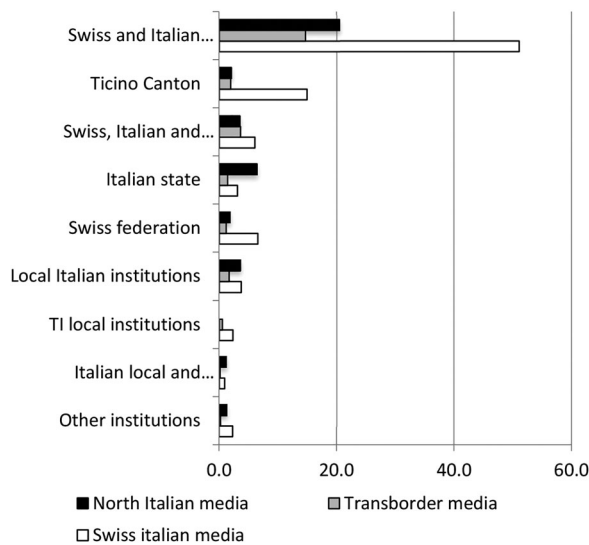
Source: Research Observatory for Regional Politics (OVPR), University of Lausanne.

Table 2. Party Salience in the Borderland Media

Issue	Ticino media	Bi-national media	North-Italian media
Swiss left-wing parties	2.7%	0%	0%
Swiss center-right parties	31.9%	13.5%	5.6%
Swiss People's Party of Ticino	9.3%	5.4%	1.9%
Lega dei Ticinesi	28.6%	51.4%	61.1%
Lega Nord	19.2%	21.6%	16.7%
Italian center-right parties	0.5%	0%	0%
Italian center-left parties	7.7%	8.1%	14.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%
<i>N</i>	182	37	54

Source: OVPR, University of Lausanne.

These cross-border integration tendencies seem to be confirmed by a qualitative textual analysis. Hence, in our selected news articles, cross-border convergence emerges also because actors—political parties, business associations, trade unions—on both sides discuss with each other about the same controversial issues in the same media outlets. Discussions are often “simultaneous,” because (on websites at least) opinions are shared and debated by the actors on either side of the national border almost immediately; discussions which in turn are covered by the regional media on both sides. The logic of communication is equally cross-cutting, because actors speak not only in the context of their respective regional and/or national setting—they also emphasize cross-border or transnational alliances, mainly between the two Leagues. For instance, several North-Italian media outlets covered a TV-debate aired on the Swiss-Italian public channel on April 13 2011, when the leader of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, Giuliano Bignasca, discussed with a *Lega Nord* MP, Jonny Crosio, who also owned an architecture office in Ticino. “Lombardianews” covers the different integrative logics as follows:

**Figure 3.** Institutional Salience in the Borderland Media

Source: Research Observatory for Regional Politics (OVPR), University of Lausanne

[There was] no willingness on the part of Bignasca to dispute the fiscal paybacks in respect of the tax rules required by [the Italian] Finance Minister Tremonti—if anything, the money had to be sent directly to Municipalities without making them pass through Rome—as he demanded an agreement on banking secrecy to exclude Switzerland from the blacklist of countries (...). Bignasca shared Crosio’s opinion on the distance from Berne and Rome of the two border regions and even more so the line to follow: a solution could come only from the two Leagues.

However, the regional media are not simply recipients of the cross-border strategies of the two regionalist parties. As [Figure 3](#) shows, the interplay of institutional scales covered by the borderland media around the various controversies highlights the *intergovernmental* scale as being dominant, particularly in the Swiss-Italian media. The combination of national and European institutions also achieves a high degree of salience in the regional media on both sides of the border. This confirms that cross-border aspects, both through regional and national institutions, represent crucial scales in order to cover these controversial issues beyond virtual re-bordering trends.

Discussion

Studying the Swiss–Italian borderland has highlighted how increasing market integration has created not only new opportunities for “spaces of flow” ([Castells 2008](#)), but also given rise to controversial issues with a huge potential to divide the regions on each side of the border. Between 2009 and 2011, the Ticino–Northern Italy borderland became the scene of international, supranational, and inter-regional disputes. The cross-border controversies and the successful rescaling strategies adopted by regionalist parties within that borderland highlight two general trends that are worth further study: *de*-bordering (that is, integration across the border) and *re*-bordering (both inter- and intra-state) through discourses prioritizing “the region.”

De-bordering

In this article we were first of all interested in knowing the actors, events and policy issues at the heart of what might have become a dis-integration process of this particular borderland. Nevertheless, through cross-border contestation also a certain functional alignment—or a “*de*-bordering,” for [Blatter \(2001\)](#)—has taken place. The weakening of national borders produced by the parallel processes of Europeanization (e.g. the Schengen area with its free movement of persons) and globalization has set in motion changes that are not only economic and social—with a growing integration of businesses and labor—but which have also laid the ground for an “information space.” From both sides of the border, in real time, multiple media outlets tell us what is happening and allow actors—politicians, representatives of associations etc.—to reply to positions from across the border with an immediacy that has traditionally been proper to domestic politics only. The proliferation of web portals—both old and new media titles—has strengthened this process. Of course, in our specific case this process is further facilitated by the common language spoken on both sides of the border. But not always does linguistic commonality permit the overcoming of cultural demarcation and contested meanings in European borderlands ([Anderson, O’Dowd, and Wilson 2003b](#)).

For all these reasons, the strengthening of the border between the two countries is only a partial consequence of the highlighted borderland controversies. The other is a *rapprochement* of the two regions at the expense of attachment to “their” national territory, seen in the way in which the various criticisms leveled at national inaction reveal a borderland integration of the public sphere. In feeling mutually neglected, the borderland becomes more closely integrated. Such integrative processes—in the public sphere and as regards regionalist parties, strategies, and discourses—suggest that in the future cross-border relations will become even more important.

Re-bordering

Nevertheless, the international border remains an important element of public discourse, not least because it delimits electoral competition. But even the symbolic re-construction of national borders is unable to limit cross-border flows of goods, persons, services, capital and—least of all—information. Our analysis of the Swiss–Italian borderland controversies shows how, somewhat paradoxically, cross-border contention can lead to further integration. This is primarily due to interwoven communication flows. While we expected an increased re-bordering as a by-product of contention (“Swiss vs. Italians”), the effect is more complex, highlighting also a heightened integration of the borderland (“periphery vs. center”).

Contributing most to the integration of our borderland are the two “regional” party systems, that of Ticino and Northern Italy, which have come to resemble one another more than they do their respective national systems. The success of the two *Lega* parties testifies to that process. Thus, not only has a territorial dimension been added to—and at times even superseded—the classic left–right axis, but the changes unfolding are more profound still: through a “re-territorialisation” of politics (Burgess and Vollaard 2006, 4), we are witnessing a further withering away of the nation-state dimension to democracy in favor of subnational *as well as* transnational identities (Bartolini 2004, 381; also Arts, Lagendijk, and van Houtum 2009).

At the same time, however, new borders are erected and old ones re-discovered. For not only are the nature and function of *international* borders contested (again), but also those *within* the Swiss and Italian states. The two Leagues share quite a few positions: first and foremost, protest against their respective “centers,” Berne and Rome. Both Leagues also play a central role in defining the importance of the political agenda linked to themes of “their” territory. And both Ticino’s financial center and small businesses in Northern Italy are in trouble. Against this background, the idea of an economically thriving borderland serves as a welcome alternative to the role of mere periphery. To the inter-state dimension of re-bordering is thus added an intra-state dynamic.

The Economic Crisis and Political Re-scaling

More generally, our findings confirm the ambivalent impact of the sovereign debt crisis on the politics of rescaling (Keating 2013, 6). In the 1970s and 1980s, after a period of economic growth, several instances of peaceful cross-border cooperation in West European borderlands began to develop (Kaplan and Häkli 2002). Then, in the 1990s and 2000s, specific conflicts occurred under a general trend of devolution and decentralization: On the one hand, it emerged that political regionalism had used European integration to

fight against national centralization; on the other hand, cross-border resistance against inter-national agreements occurred (Minghi 1994). However, “borderlands tend to remain potentially marginal and would be most sensitive to any general economic crises in Europe” (Minghi 2002, 42–3). Therefore, if the crisis of 2008 has reinforced the national scale (Bickerton 2011, 416; Kiamba 2013; Vradis 2014), the question now arises how it favors the emergence of new border concerns related to economic issues, and how this impacts the politics of borderlands.

Our study has highlighted two aspects. The first concerns territorial scales: we have seen them used as very practical expressions related to the *framing* strategies of political actors in order to “shape a particular mental map or world view that is persuasive and politically powerful” (McCann 2003, 174; Minghi 1994, 2002). Hence, Ticino and Northern Italy are not just political-administrative districts, but special areas for a special people with special economic needs. More broadly, depending on the “color” of the regionalist ideology and the peculiarities of a given context, this strategy includes the above-mentioned de-bordering (e.g. “the Basque Country”) or re-bordering (e.g. “Flanders”) of existing inter- or intra-national divisions.

The second aspect related to political rescaling concerns cross-border alliances. Given an economic crisis, regional actors are hard-pressed to look for alternatives and may find them on the other side of the border. Mutual learning can also take place nation-wide (cf. Hombrado 2011) or on a European scale. What is more, the common strategies and values shared by two regionalist parties may favor an alliance or at least a scalar convergence in the borderland of which they both form part. These parties are territory-dependent but share the strategy of a regionalist framing of cross-border issues. In other words, intra-state regionalism may also express a political cross-border regionalism partially in contrast to an exclusive re-bordering strategy (Popescu 2011).

Conclusion

Our goal in this article was to illustrate how cross-border contestation arises in an economically, culturally and socially highly integrated European borderland in times of economic crisis. We were interested in answering the question as to how political parties claiming to represent their respective region make use of the media to rescale politics. The case of the Swiss-Italian borderland was chosen as an example of cross-border cooperation moving towards an all-time low. Studying two years of print and online public discourse has allowed us to conclude that next to typical national concerns (amnesty for the Italians in Italy, Swiss bank account secrecy in Switzerland), the issue of fiscal paybacks—by definition involving the movement of money *across* the border—is equally often debated on both sides of the border. As regards political actors, the Swiss regionalist party figures most prominently in the North-Italian media, while the Italian regionalist party comes third in the Ticino media; together, these two parties account for some three-fourths of the bi-national media coverage, so they clearly dominate the agenda.

Although it is difficult to argue that this borderland provides an integrated public sphere, from our findings we can still infer that, somewhat paradoxically, regionalist parties, in linking with media coverage, contribute to a *de*-bordering, in that they partake in discursive integration across the border, as much as to a *re*-bordering. This

latter phenomenon comes in two variants: across the national border, pitting Switzerland against Italy/the EU, and within their respective nation-states, opposing the needs of “their” region to the (in)actions of national governments. Although these outcomes are context-dependent, our analysis thus confirms how borderlands epitomize contradictory meanings and a changing significance, as do other territories (Anderson and O’Dowd 1999), but with the added significance that they have the potential to further decrease the importance of traditional nation-state thinking if giving rise to an alliance of regionalist parties across the border. By territorializing political competition, that is by putting “place” squarely onto the political agenda, regionalist parties—if successful—thus lead to both an *increased* and a *decreased* importance of borders. “Region” is not by chance an ambiguous concept with fuzzy borders (Agnew and Brusa 1999) that allows for varying scalar strategies. Ranging from nationalist and populist to peripheralist and—most novel—“borderlandist,” actors enter alliances across the nation-state border to better “defend” the intra-state border against their national center.

Having merely outlined one case and even that one over only two years, the task for future research will be to compare the findings presented here with other instances of regionalist borderlands. For example, what happens if two different languages are spoken on each side of the border: does that impede cross-border alliances? Or what is the impact of more balanced economic situations on regionalist contention? How do other parties react to territorializing the political agenda? These and related questions remain to be explored.

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