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Covid-19 in the European Union and MERCOSUR: Border Management at Different Scales

Raffaella Coletti

Nahuel Oddone

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About the author(s):

Raffaella Coletti, National Research Council - Institute for the Study of Regionalism, Federalism and Self-Government (CNR-ISSiRFA), Italy.

Contact: raffaella.coletti@cnr.it

Nahuel Oddone, United Nations University - Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), Belgium.

Contact: noddone@cris.unu.edu

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Abstract

Closing borders has always been a typical reaction to pandemics in the history of humanity, and the responses to Covid-19 mark no difference. Initiatives to limit the diffusion of the virus has put the closure of national borders under the spotlight worldwide. However, national scale offers a partial perspective, particularly within the case of regional integration processes, where several actors oversee, or contribute to the daily management of "internal" borders. The article offers an overview of different scales of border management in response to Covid-19 pandemic in the European Union and MERCOSUR, providing a more comprehensive representation of national borders and their management, alongside a state of the art of the integration processes. Whereas in a national and supranational perspective the Covid-19 emergency can be read as a (further) blow to integration scenarios, the vitality of cross-border cooperation at the local scale allows for more optimistic expectations in both the analysed cases.

Keywords:

Borders, COVID-19, European Union, MERCOSUR, cross-border cooperation.

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Introduction

Among the different measures adopted by several governments across the world to control the spread of Covid-19, the closure of national borders was (and still is) one of the most immediate and visible reactions, with unavoidable social and economic effects linked to limited mobility and circulation across national boundaries.

In the case of regional integration processes, national borders which are “internal” to integrated “regions” add an additional layer of complexity to the issue of border management during the pandemic, as decisions and procedures adopted by specific countries affect a wider framework, both practically and symbolically. Furthermore, several actors are involved in the day-to-day operation of “internal” borders: not only States, but also supra-national institutions as well as sub-national authorities are increasingly involved in border governance because of stronger integration (Celata and Coletti, 2011; Coletti and Oddone, 2016; O’Dowd, 2002; Perkman and Sum, 2002). Cross-border cooperation, particularly, is key to addressing territorial dynamics and alleviating regional imbalances and asymmetries by stimulating social cohesion and strengthening human capital in the most neglected areas of integration. As a result, cross-border cooperation can “represent specific forms of innovation in relation to space, places and scales” (Jessop, 2002: 37).

A delicate balance of multi-level governance thus came into play with respect to border management as a response to the Covid-19 outbreak. According to Piattoni (2009) “multi-level governance is a dynamic three-dimensional concept that blurs and problematises three analytical distinctions that have been central to the conventional reflection on (...) modern state: (1) that between centre and periphery, (2) that between state and society and (3) that between the domestic and the international.” (2009: 163). Adopting a multilevel governance perspective is thus crucial for a deeper understanding of borders during the Covid-19 emergency, allowing to avoid simplistic and one-dimensional interpretations. In more practical terms, and particularly within the European Union, multilevel governance represents coordinated action by different levels of governance based on partnership to implement policies (European Committee of the Regions, 2009), and can thus be understood as a “system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at [supranational, national and regional] territorial tiers” (Marks; 1993: 392). To consider initiatives and measures undertaken at supranational as well as subnational scale, alongside national ones, allow to unveil the continuous negotiations and adaptations that take place among different levels of governance, helping to grasp the complexity of borders and border regions in present and future perspectives.

Moreover, this paper assumes that the analysis of responses to the spread of Covid-19 adopted across borders at different scales can offer interesting lenses to look at the state of the art of integration, unveiling strengths and frailties of the process and highlighting the role played by different actors. Regional integration processes have been recently assessed by the literature within the framework of diffused nationalism and growing difficulties experienced by multilateralism (Smith, 2018; Taranu, 2018; Welfens, 2020). The European Union (EU), widely known as the most advanced example of integration worldwide, has been facing several “existential crises” during the last years (Zielonka, 2017), exemplified by Brexit, the migration crisis, increasing economic disparities, frequent lack of political convergence, etc. From this perspective, Covid-19 can be considered the last of a series of emergencies (Casaglia et al., 2020) that have been weakening the integration process and

causing discontent amongst large sections of the population. This discontent has been fueled by a growing number of national-populist parties in Europe, that identifies European institutions in the list of “corrupted” elite to be confronted by the new generation of “people” in power, and nurture sentiments of Euroscepticism (Cima and Guidoni, 2016; Casaglia et al., 2020; Kaeding et al., 2020).

Similarly, MERCOSUR has been facing several crises in recent years, from the decline of intraregional trade to the will of some countries to advance bilateral free trade agreements with third countries not allowed by the Treaty of Asunción (1991), political dissonances and frequent lack of political convergence about the Parliament and the non-economic institutions, geopolitical differences and lack of consensus about the regional common goods, doubts about the results of the process by citizens, among others. Riggiozzi (2020) emphasises that the “coronavirus pandemic is spreading in a region where the political distance among their countries and the lack of leadership limit the possibility of reaching concerted policies in terms of regional health governance” (p. 2). In this context, Porcelli (2020) has raised a key question to get out of the crisis: who are the key stakeholders demanding more regional integration? The need to support a regional project implies active participation of actors willing to demand integration. Who are those actors in MERCOSUR? And what kind of influence do they have on the agenda? These are questions are particularly relevant for the post-pandemic scenarios.

This article assesses border governance in the European Union and MERCOSUR during the first nine months of the Covid-19 emergency (March-December 2020), considering the evolution of measures implemented at different scales (supranational, national, and sub-national). The analysis is mainly based on secondary sources (official documents, research reports, newspaper articles, participation to webinars). Additionally, interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to collect further information and confirm emerging trends. No specific case study is discussed in the article. On the other hand, it adopts a bird’s eye perspective on the numerous initiatives undertaken at both local and regional scales.

By highlighting the role played by supranational and subnational scales alongside the national level in the face of the pandemic, the article will, on the one hand, go beyond the narrow national focus that have often characterised the representation of border governance during the health emergency, to shed a light on the complexity of border management. On the other hand, it will highlight the peculiarities of border regions as crucial sites to explore the state of the art of integration, particularly in the current emergency setting.

Borders, Pandemics and Regional Integration: A Multi-Governance Perspective

The closure of borders has always been a typical reaction to pandemics in the history of humanity, and the responses to Covid-19 mark no difference. (Kinwick and Simmons, 2020; Radil et al., 2020). For some actors, particularly at the local level, the closure of borders is understood as an alteration of a territorial space. During the Covid-19 outbreak, borders acquired relevance as expressions of demarcation and reaffirmation of limits set by the central States. Yet, this vision contrasts with that of local authorities, who often consider

borderline territories as a common space where interdependency and cooperation are the main characteristics.

The understanding of boundaries as “defensive lines” is clearly recognised in geopolitics (Flint, 2017), and critical geopolitics scholars have for long emphasised the use of geographical imaginaries by politics in situations of crisis and insecurity (Dalby, 2003). Kinwick and Simmons (2020) claim that, in the case of Covid-19, specific (pre)conditions stimulated the use of border restrictions to face the pandemic. In particular, they claim that the focus on borders as crucial means of protection from different kind of threats diffusely adopted in the last years has influenced this choice: “the general anxiety around non-state forces at the border has simply been reproduced as a motivated response to the Covid-19 pandemic” (p. 7). This claim is supported by a recent Eurobarometer poll (Eurobarometer, 2020), which highlights the diffused perception of national borders as “crucial for the security of a country” with respect specifically to the threat represented by COVID-19. Casaglia et al. (2020) emphasised the role played by borders in the last decade in the narratives of nationalist/populist parties: for many populist parties, borders are the locus of taking back control (Kallis, 2018). Geographical literature has widely emphasised how claiming control over borders -also in the material form of walls- is a practice often enforced to offer a reassuring world picture, and not necessarily to concretely resolve conflicts, hostilities, or traffic at which they officially aim (Brown, 2010; Jones, 2012; Minca and Rijke, 2019).

Border closures determine peculiar effects when they take place at borders which are internal to supra-national or intergovernmental integration processes. First, because within these frameworks, overcoming the “border effect” and easing mobility and circulation are clearly long-lasting and crucial topics, and limiting this mobility may have a disruptive and complex effect. Second because, despite the focus on national borders and nationally driven management, borders are rarely completely open or completely closed, but in most cases characterized by different degrees of interaction (Raffestin, 2005; Dell’Agnese, 2005) which takes place at different scales. Several actors are involved in different ways in the management of borders, and this is particularly the case within integration processes with supranational as well as subnational authorities playing a relevant role alongside the national governments, and where multilevel governance is thus in play. Based on Perkmann and Sum (2002), Sohn (2015) argues that the concept of ‘cross-border integration’ has been used by many scholars to reflect the multifaceted forms and processes that contribute to the formation of this cross-border regionalism, whether through an intensification of economic transactions between adjoining regions, the development of institutional cooperation, or the restructuring at the level of culture and identity (p. 29).

In the case of the European Union, the material and symbolic creation of a “Europe without borders” has always been an important political goal at supra-national scale, as exemplified by milestones such as the creation of the single market or the Schengen Treaty. A crucial role has also been played by cross-border interaction at a sub-national scale (Coletti, 2010; Celata and Coletti, 2011; O’Dowd, 2002): started in the 1950s as spontaneous exchanges for overcoming the border effect in economically integrated areas in Western Europe, cross-border cooperation practices were soon adopted and supported by European bodies as promising material and symbolic means of integration. Cooperation takes place at different scales (from cities to regions), and different forms of interregional integration (Twin cities, Euroregions, Working communities, etc.) has been developed and studied as relevant contributors to European integration. The European Commission officially started

its financial and political support to cross-border cooperation in 1990, in the framework of the first reform of its structural funds. Over the last three decades, through cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation programs, the Interreg programme has supported collaboration and cooperation networks between regions and territorial actors, with the aim of overcoming border obstacles and seizing opportunities for development that arise from collaboration beyond national borders. European cross-border cooperation takes place both within the borders of the EU, and with pre-accession countries and European neighbourhood countries, even if with specific characteristics and outcomes (Celata et al., 2017). Interreg programme has offered a crucial contribution to the development of paradiplomacy and to the capacity of taking part to EU policy making of subnational authorities. It has also greatly contributed to the creation of an integrated Europe, materially and symbolically.

In the case of MERCOSUR, border relations in the Southern Cone existed before the integration process. Especially relevant are the “twin cities” (also known as sister cities), a pair of urban centers, face-to-face on an international boundary, whose interdependence is many times greater than what those cities have with their administrative reference region or their own national territory. Border family and friendship relations, work, and commercial, cultural, and sportive, and even politics, existed prior to the process of regional integration. In the early days of the regional organization, Pebayle (1993: 224) had already recognized that the border regions of MERCOSUR were too distant “from the attractive and motivating megalopolis not to suffer from a process of peripheral underdevelopment”. This condition has persisted along many phases of MERCOSUR due to the oblivion state in which border areas had been placed regarding the advance of public policies, particularly between its foundation (1991) until the early 2000s (Oddone and Matiuzzi, 2017). According to Dilla Alfonso and Hansen Figueroa (2020), MERCOSUR has taken “late note of this issue and have finally perceived borders as places of passage of goods and people - sociological ‘nonplaces’” (p.16). “Borders are interstate spaces where relationships between local populations and the different levels of the State are condensed. This conception makes it possible to differentiate border lines from border areas. While border lines are the responsibility of national governments, in border areas the competencies are shared or concurrent between national and subnational governments. On the other hand, the border lines refer to a political division that is not necessarily related to the agroecological regions or the historical and socio-cultural characteristics of the border territories. Precisely, this is why it is important to consider border areas as a unit of analysis, when designing and implementing regional integration policies” (Oddone and Rodríguez Vázquez, 2015).

In 2002 MERCOSUR, through the creation of the Border Integration Ad Hoc Group (GAHIF in Spanish), has recognised the need to strengthen formal cross-border cooperation and reinforce the role of border communities. The idea that it would be more effective to develop border regions together was largely accepted by its members, achieving the political convergence required for the establishment of the Advisory Forum of Municipalities, Federated States, Provinces, and Departments of Mercosur (FCCR in Spanish). Unfortunately, this forum has lost political weight and presence. During the XLVI extraordinary meeting of the GMC, MERCOSUR approved the creation of Work Subgroup No. 18 on Border Integration (SGT No. 18 in Spanish). In Article 4 of the Agreement proposal of SGT No. 18, an understanding of cross-border cooperation is made explicit: “cross-border cooperation means any concerted action to strengthen and promote

neighbourly relations between communities or territorial authorities over the jurisdiction of two or more Parties and with the conclusion of any agreement or arrangement necessary for the attainment of such end". In this context, the signing of the Agreement of Linked Border Localities (ALFV in Spanish) on December 4, 2019, aims to improve the quality of life of citizens in various areas such as economy, transit, labour regime, access to health services, education, and culture. One of the first assets designed for the local population is the access to a Border Neighbourhood Transit Document admitted by the States Parties, with the objective of facilitate cross-border transit.

The relevant contribution of cross-border cooperation and paradiplomacy to the integration processes within European Union and MERCOSUR, makes urgent to consider the role played in particular by regional and sub-national actors across borders during the Covid-19 emergency that encourage an exclusive focus on national governments and national borders in exploring the reactions to the pandemic. Quite at the opposite, several authors have highlighted how regions, as well as other subnational authorities, were actively involved in the management, implementation, and formulation of policies in response to the emergency, in coordination with other levels of government; the challenges posed by the emergency have been said to be able to produce long-lasting effects on the multi-level governance system in different countries (OECD, 2020; Bailey et al., 2020). From this point of view, in the next sections we will explore if this activism of subnational authorities took place also in cross-border regions, and what the implication for the wider regional integration are.

Covid-19 and borders in the European Union

In the European Union the integration process - and in particular the creation of the Free Trade Area and the Schengen Treaty - has created a shared European space characterised by the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. However, borders remain a matter of exclusive competence of the Member States, which can suspend free movement for reasons of public order or internal security.

Whereas the free circulation of goods has been always preserved, over the years there have been several cases of unilateral suspension of the Schengen treaty and therefore of the free movement of people. In the past decade, this possibility was used in exceptional cases, as for example security reasons in the occasion of events of international relevance (such as G7 or G20 conferences). The possibility of unilaterally suspending the Schengen agreement has been particularly relevant in recent years, in the face of terrorist attacks (Evrard et al., 2020), the migration crisis, and, more recently, in the public health emergency linked to the spread of COVID-19 (European Commission, 2020a). In March 2020, when the virus began to circulate in some European countries (notably Italy) several Member States had already notified the Commission and other Member States of the reintroduction of controls at their internal borders, based on a perceived threat to public order. As a result of these measures, the European Commission first proposed guidelines (European Commission, 2020b) to continue to ensure the circulation of goods and services in the single market¹; subsequently, the Commission proposed to close the external borders of

¹ Such measures were further developed in the following months, with the implementation and upgrade of Green Lanes (European Commission 2020g; 2020h).

the Schengen area by temporarily “isolating” it from the rest of the world, and to suspend non-essential travel within the territory of the Union for a period of 30 days.

In April 2020 the Commission published a roadmap to lifting coronavirus containment measures (European Commission, 2020c), recommending eliminating travel restrictions and internal border controls in a coordinated manner, particularly in low-risk situations. In May, the Commission prepared some orientations (European Commission, 2020d) to facilitate the reopening of borders and the movement of people². After the acute phase of the pandemic, in June the Commission recommended that Member States remove the restrictions. European countries have reopened borders within the Schengen area in a substantially coordinated manner and have planned to agree and update the list of third countries with respect to which national borders should reopen (EU 2020). However, towards the end of August new data on the spread of the virus brought attention to the differences in border management between the different Member States. In the meantime, European institutions have agreed on several efforts to offer a coordinated response to the health and social emergency and agreed on multiple measures for economic and social recovery of European territories hardly hit by the crisis³. However, the uncoordinated management of national borders continued in the following months, and no full coordination was reached on this issue (European Commission, 2021), despite continuous efforts by European institutions (European Commission 2020e, 2020f).

In the meantime, different kind of reactions unfolded at the local scale. The suspension of Schengen agreement, often decided unilaterally by national governments at one side of the border with no consultation of neighboring countries nor of local and regional authorities located at the border⁴, and the (temporary) re-establishment of border controls have caused inconvenience in the majority of border regions, as already happened in previous circumstances (Evrard et al., 2020), including long lines for border controls and difficult adaptation to the different measures arranged in national territories (e.g. self-certifications, temporary lockdown or curfew, zoning of restrictive measures, etc.). A recent report, supported by the European Union and based on an extensive fieldwork, has summarized the impact of the closing measures in six domains: “cross-border mobility, cross-border workers, users of cross-borders public services, economic activities, social and cultural activities, citizens’ acceptance of border-related measures” (Peyrony et al., 2021: 54; for an overview of social, physical and economic effects of covidfencing in Europe, see Medeiros et al., 2020). Moreover, the suspension of Schengen agreement has made material (again) state borders that have long been forgotten, with impact on a more intimate and profound level for European citizens (Fall, 2020).

The closure of border was shocking for all the involved actors at different scales, from the individual to the European. However, despite the unprecedented nature of the crisis, several initiatives were organised and undertaken at local scale in relatively short term, to

² On the evolution of EU’s measures, see also Lois, 2020

³ For an updated timeline of EU measures in the different fields, please see: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200424STO77802/coronavirus-a-timeline-of-eu-action?xtor=SEC-77-\[COVID-19\]-\[news\]-\[timeline\]-\[EN\]](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200424STO77802/coronavirus-a-timeline-of-eu-action?xtor=SEC-77-[COVID-19]-[news]-[timeline]-[EN])

⁴ See on this regard: <https://cor.europa.eu/el/engage/Pages/covid19-stories.aspx>. For a mapping of the border-related measures taken by Member States, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, see Peyrony et al., 2021.

respond to the specific needs of border communities. For example, agreements were reached between sub-national authorities to ease the circulation at the border, or to provide citizens with adequate information on rules and certifications adopted in the neighbouring country, or to make pressure on national governments to solve specific problems related to the sudden closure of the border (Medeiros et al., 2020). In many cases, cooperation was also aimed at facing the health emergency, with the exchange of medical facility and the transfer of patients across the border to receive assistance in a bordering European country (Martial, 2020a, 2020b; Medeiros et al., 2020) or with the attempt to build mechanism to make this cooperation possible (Weckel, 2020); even if these kind of exchanges required - and were thus made possible thanks to - the existence of European and transnational frameworks, they actually took place on initiative of local and regional authorities at the borders. According to the above-mentioned report, the measures undertaken by cross-border structures during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (spring 2020) can be categorized in the following: "Lobbying and carrying on advocacy activities towards national authorities; Coordination and crisis management alongside local, regional or national stakeholders; Providing information to cross-border inhabitants and commuters; Carrying out surveys to understand the main obstacles and the impact of these measures on local inhabitants; Keeping the cooperation spirit alight in a difficult time; Drafting reactivation/recovery plans" (Peyrony et al., 2021: 112).

However, according to the interviews and secondary sources, different kind of reactions were visible in different European borders; cooperation was easier in border-regions with long-lasting experience of cross-border cooperation. In these cases, personal relations actually facilitated the practice of multilevel governance, with a positive impact on cross-border regions as well as on the general management of the crisis at national scale.

Similarly, cross-border cooperation programmes -Interreg- show different outcomes, but a common effort to overcome the border effect in the reaction to the pandemic was put in place, and cross-border interaction continued fruitfully throughout the health emergency. Despite some unavoidable delays (Interact, 2020), the management structures of the Interreg programs continued to operate since the very beginning of the crisis, both to ensure the necessary support for projects in progress in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic, and to facilitate the possible application of greater flexibility introduced in March and April 2020 in the spending rules of the structural funds to facilitate a rapid response to the emergency⁵. Interviews conducted for this study with representatives of programmes' managing structures have confirmed a full consciousness from local and regional actors of the relevance of a rapid response at cross-border scale. Additionally, starting from the first months of 2020, the various cross-border cooperation programs (at the internal and external borders of the EU) have gradually started programming activities for the period of 2021-2027; also in this case, the needs emerging in the current emergency context are largely taken into account within the programming bodies.

As a response to challenges posed by the closure national borders, as well as to the unequal capacities and resources that border regions were able to mobilise in different contexts, some European Border Regions started pursuing a common strengthening of cross-border

⁵ For an overview of Interreg programmes contributing to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, please refer to the Keep Database, available online at keep.eu. Many examples have been collected also by the Italian Agency for Territorial Cohesion with respect to the 19 Interreg programmes participated by Italy (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2020).

cooperation and a stronger representation of the interests of border regions at European scale. The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) was key in this regard. The CoR was among the promoters of a European Cross-border Citizens' Alliance that published a Declaration on "Cross-Border regions at the heart of tomorrow's Europe" in 2020. The Declaration proposes a new centrality of cross-border regions in European development perspectives, including the recovery policies to address the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the declaration urges EU institutions to "guarantee a minimum level of cross-border cooperation in the case of global, European or regional crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic" (European Cross-Border Citizens Alliance, 2020: 2).

Covid-19 and borders in MERCOSUR

In response to Covid-19, MERCOSUR Member States' decision to close their individual borders was one of the most immediate and visible reactions to avoid the transmission of the virus. This was an exceptional measure never seen before in the democratic history of the countries. The first political responses focused on reducing mobility to lower the contagion rate, both in circulation within national territories and at border crossings. Within national territories, in Argentina and Paraguay isolation and quarantine were imposed as mandatory, while in Uruguay and Brazil more flexible measures were adopted. Nevertheless, the sensation of closure was particularly palpable for citizens along borderline zones.

In the absence of a regional response, responses tended to be individual. Argentina closed its borders on March 16, allowing only the arrival and departure of humanitarian aid flights. The Paraguayan border closure began partially on March 16, with the reduction of immigration control posts, and the prohibition of entry of foreign citizens not residing in the country. Subsequently, on March 24th, the National Government determined the total closure of borders to travelers and the cancellation of commercial and private international flights. Brazil and Uruguay implemented a partial closure of borders. It is also interesting to note, that in the case of Argentina and Uruguay, new governments were inaugurated shortly before the pandemic broke out, posing public health management challenges. Beyond the national individual decisions, as will be discussed later, bilateral responses emerged with the evolution of the pandemic.

MERCOSUR made attempts to intervene in the reaction to the pandemic at a regional scale. The Declaration of MERCOSUR Presidents on regional coordination for the containment and mitigation of the coronavirus and its impact, from March 18, 2020, refers in #2 to "Take into consideration the specificities of the communities residing in border areas, in the process of designing and executing measures applicable to the circulation of goods, services and people, in order to reduce their impact on those communities". This Declaration also proposes prevention and containment measures that seek to minimise the spread of Covid-19 and adopt strategic plans to respond to different socio-economic situations.

Regarding specific measures at regional level, for example, through the Fund for the Structural Convergence of MERCOSUR (FOCEM), MERCOSUR approved an additional USD 16,000,000 for the Plurinational project "Research, Education and Biotechnologies applied to Health" that was allocated to a coordinate answer against Covid-19. These resources are non-reimbursable and do not charge financial interest. Another example is the non-

refundable cooperation project proposed by Social Institute of MERCOSUR (ISM in Spanish) to create and support a sanitary mechanism of shared supervision in the internal terrestrial borders of MERCOSUR, which was approved at the Meeting of Ministers of Health (RMS) and countries are currently coordinating its financing and implementation. "Cooperation in health policies in border areas must contemplate both: the prevention of contagion outbreaks or care for patients affected by the disease and, in addition, it must offer protection against other conditions that may arise from situations of increased vulnerability from of confinement (Stavile et al., 2020: 109). In this context, the strategic dialogue between ISM and the PAHO/WHO South America Program seeks to promote a sanitary mechanism of shared supervision in the internal terrestrial borders of MERCOSUR.

Borders management remains a responsibility of national government, so national authorities decided closing borders without coordinating it at regional intergovernmental level at MERCOSUR. Challenges in border management included aspects such as guaranteeing supply and food security through distribution channels, which has been a key and delicate issue in the context of the pandemic. Despite time constraints and relative cost increases, products crossed borders with minor difficulties. The main issue was regarding the mobility of people that was almost completely forbidden. This has caused significant difficulties in the daily lives of the populations of the border twin cities, where there is a strong cross-border trade and the use of public services without differentiating the side of the border on their supply and quality. "Covid-19 lockdowns have brought this everyday exchange to a halt, leaving frontier economies like Ciudad del Este caught between a rock and a hard place. Worried that a rapidly spreading virus in Brazil is bound to cross borders, officials from Paraguay to Argentina and Uruguay are doubling down on border security. Increased militarisation of the Triple Frontier border comes as commercial and trade associations in the area call for a controlled opening of international traffic. At a crossroads defined by transnational exchange -Ciudad del Este is the world's third-largest free-trade zone, with Brazilians generating 95 percent of its commerce- the ramifications of long-term restrictions on mobility are ripe for speculation" (Ross, 2020).

This situation has led many local and provincial governments to demand from their central state the recognition of their particularity as a border area. Border areas were also active in claiming specific interventions from national governments, in particular in areas where cross-border flows are intense. This is the case of Paraguay, due to its role in cross-border trade, as well as in some provinces of Argentina. One of the Paraguayan government's proposals to solve the economic crisis of border areas, especially in Ciudad del Este, Encarnación and Ponta Porá, was to expand online commerce and deliver to the border line. However, the Federal Revenue of Brazil stated that the border closed by the neighbouring country prevents the declaration of purchases and any product delivered at the border would be considered illegal. For instance, the Argentinian province of Misiones took advantage of the situation caused by Covid-19 to request a differentiated tax scheme from the National government that would benefit all the companies based in the province.

Currently the need to promote an orderly and gradual opening of the internal borders of MERCOSUR is observed, as well as the establishment of a shared supervision health mechanism that guarantees human mobility. However, the initiatives undertaken so far are again mainly at national or sub-national scale, producing bilateral agreements. As an example, the agreement to create the Binational Technical Commission between Rivera and Santana do Livramento (Brazil-Uruguay) with the objective of building an indivisible epidemiological health unit for COVID-19 cases, which was later replicated between the

cities of Artigas and Quaraí, and Bella Unión and Barra do Quaraí (along the same national borders between Brazil and Uruguay). Both experiences can be understood as polity restructuring following the multi-level governance developed by Piattoni (2009).

In fact, the border between Brazil and Uruguay is considered one of the most stable borders in MERCOSUR, where bilateral cooperation has always been effective. Rótulo and Damiani (2010: 26) highlight the persisting necessity of suitable local institutional capacity to properly manage a paradiplomatic cooperative agenda, by analyzing the institutional space for local, border actors within the scope of the New Agenda for Border Cooperation and Development bilateral cooperation framework engendered by Brazil and Uruguay. These countries were the only MERCOSUR member States that closed the border by mutual agreement, on March 22 and 23, 2020 respectively, with the establishment of the necessary protocols for the transit of local people, safeguarding the binational character of the area (IPEA, 2020). Under the request of Uruguay, the Binational Sanitary Action Treaty was reactivated, making it possible to install sanitary barriers between the two cities (Rivera and Santana do Livramento), respecting the binational life. This Binational Treaty establishes a particular consultation system through Binational Advisory Commissions on Border Health convened ad hoc. Due to Covid-19, the IX Meeting of the Binational Advisory Commissions on Border Health took place. This Commission, in June 2020, due to a new outbreak of Covid-19, Santana do Livramento and Rivera teams installed a Single Health Epidemiological Unit, including the Binational Emergency Operations Center (COE in Spanish) (see the Memorandum de Entendimiento entre la República Oriental del Uruguay y la República Federativa de Brasil de Cooperación en materia de Salud en el marco de la Comisión Binacional Asesora de la Salud Uruguay - Brasil para la Creación del Centro Binacional de Operaciones de Emergencia from June 2020). According to Tailanian (2020) bordering tends to foster the harmonization of national systems at different level to contribute to the regional integration process. SGT No. 11 (Health), for its part, proposed the creation of an Epidemiological Observatory of MERCOSUR Borders (OEFM) in October 2020.

Covid-19 evidenced the need to address specific issues, areas, and social agents to verify the way in which MERCOSUR would actually be operating and to what extent it would influence the cultural practices of social actors in border territories (Jaquet, 1998; Grimson: 1998). As Matos Lemões' (2020) states, the activation of bilateral dialogues through the border committees were limited to the exchange of epidemiological information even when local authorities were looking for greater steps of cross-border cooperation. Covid-19 offers the opportunity to evaluate the 'stock of local capacities', particularly of human resources, work infrastructure, and financial capabilities, as well as the intergovernmental dialogues to border answers, in the whole process of MERCOSUR. What emerges is a vitality of relations at a national bilateral level as well as at a sub-national scale, with a limited role of intergovernmental institutions in the specific issue of border governance. Nevertheless, the cross-border cooperation chapter maintains a growing interest in the evolution of MERCOSUR's regional process, particularly from a bottom-up perspective. It is necessary to consider that due to the pandemic, borders are no longer seen as the starting points for regional integration and instead, become barriers that protect them from dangerous neighbours. This situation recalls the hypotheses of conflict of the dictatorships' era during the seventies in Latin America, something that MERCOSUR itself tried to overthrow.

Conclusion

In the first half of 2020 border closures -in the form of the suspension of existing free circulation agreements- started as a reaction to the rapid diffusion of the virus worldwide. Within the European Union and MERCOSUR closures were nationally driven and uncoordinated, with the aim of limiting the virus' circulation and likely to offer a sense of political efficiency in managing the situation.

In the following phase, whereas in the case of the European Union efforts tackled the need for a coordinated border management together with health, social and economic emergency, MERCOSUR's border management depended on the initiative of single Member states. Moreover, the attempts put in place by the EU with respect to border management were not fully effective, as Member states continued to adopt unilateral suspension of Schengen agreement as a reaction to the evolution of the contagion at least throughout 2020.

Covid-19 has posed unpredictable challenges. Still, the uncoordinated management of the borders at national scale as well as the timid response of regional institutions in the early stages of the spread of the virus, have offered images of confused and fragile integration processes, threaten by not-always-convergent national interests. In the European Union, this kind of representation was promoted and appropriated by Eurosceptic movements flourishing across the European territory in the last decade; in MERCOSUR, at the beginning of the pandemic, political differences have emerged comparing the different national answers. Nevertheless, with the evolution of the pandemic, MERCOSUR President Meetings' help to erase the most rigid positions and foster different forms of regional cooperation.

In this framework, the vitality of cross-border interaction, especially in the first months of the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, confirm the inaccuracy of representation based exclusively on nations and national borders, and urge us once again to embrace the complexity of borders and to exploit the potentialities of border regions as crucial sites to gain a deeper understanding of social and political processes.

Indeed cross-border initiatives and contacts flourished in both analyzed cases, despite -or in reason of- the difficulties in border mobility experienced during the pandemic. Both in the case of the EU and MERCOSUR, several spontaneous initiatives took place, driven in particular by local and regional authorities with a vast experience of cross-border interaction, and daily and friendly relationships across the border. Moreover, in the EU, cross-border entities at sub-national scale such as Interreg Programmes Managing Authorities never suspended their activities, to support the implementation of cross-border projects and to plan future initiatives (aimed also at post-crisis recovery). In the case of MERCOSUR, FOCEM has allocated resources to a scientific coordinate answer to Covid-19 in MERCOSUR and ISM is currently working on the development of a governance mechanism to coordinate health border actions, the mobility of patients and looking for strategies related to the recovery phase focused on youth employment in border areas.

Moreover, both in the European Union and in MERCOSUR sub-national authorities were active in claiming the recognition of their specific status of border areas and in asking for specific intervention at national and supra-national scale in support of their specific situation, not only during the emergency but also in a long-term perspective. In this regard, it is important to remember that cross-border integration also "stems from the strategic

behaviors of actors who seize the opportunities offered by the opening-up of borders” (Sohn, 2015: 30).

These cross-border interactions and claims, in both the analysed cases, are particularly relevant, as they illustrate the existence of solid cross-border integration at local scale and potentialities of exchanges and cooperation. Cross-border interaction not only offered a very practical support to citizens at the border, but in doing so, positively affected other scales in a virtuous circle. In the case of the European Union, member states and the EU as a whole benefited indeed from local and regional initiatives, that allowed to overcome the “border effect” induced by the suspension of the Schengen Agreement. Moreover, cross-border cooperation in the health sector (including transfer of patients and medical equipment) contributed to a cohesive European response, even in a phase where this cohesion was difficult to reach at international and European scale. In the case of MERCOSUR, the pandemic undoubtedly increased the awareness of the importance of coordinating border actions and ensuring social cohesion in border areas as a way to overcome the territorial gap. “Health policies and social cohesion are key elements for territorial balance and comprehensive protection of the human being in border areas. Strengthening cooperation and integration of health services to homogenise public policies on both sides of the border is a requirement of socio-territorial balance” (Rhi-Sausi and Oddone, 2009: 85). Overall, in both regions, cross-border cooperation, with the active collaboration between sub-national authorities across the borders, proved to be an instrument capable not only of favoring -materially- the processes of regional integration, but also of confirming -symbolically- the image of cohesive territories (Celata and Coletti 2011), even in the face of difficulties. From this point of view, whereas in a national perspective the crisis produced by Covid-19 can be read as a further blow to the state of the integration, the vitality of cross-border cooperation at local scale allows for more optimistic expectations in both the analyzed cases.

It is too soon to assess the long-term impact of this trend on multi-level governance systems. However, an important indication will come from the role that local and regional authorities will play during the recovery phase, particularly in cross-border regions. From this perspective, by confirming the crucial role played by sub-national authorities during the pandemic in border regions within cross-border governance and paradiplomacy, the analysis emphasises the opportunity to spearhead these integration actions during the recovery phase, through specific attention to cross-border policies, tools, and practices. Since regional integration processes give local and regional stakeholders a wide range of opportunities for action across national borders, boundaries between domestic and regional recovery are also trespassed. Through cross-border cooperation for post-pandemic recovery, “governance highlights the nature of collaboration of different actors to better address public problems” (Aguilar, 2006: 119), and the multi-level governance approach fosters intergovernmental and social innovation through strengthening project and management capacities of local border authorities and Member States within regional integration processes. The translation of these principles into practice will depend on balancing local, national, and intergovernmental/supranational forces, interests, and management capacities around borders management.

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