

The development of COVID-19 in the border area of the Netherlands, North Rhine-Westphalia and Belgium

Summary

At the request of the Province of Limburg (also on behalf of Gelderland and Overijssel), the Staatskanzlei of the Land North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, we conducted both a qualitative and a quantitative study to gain insight into whether significant differences exist in the distribution of COVID-19 in the Netherlands, North Rhine-Westphalia and Belgium. Attention was paid to how these differences relate to the different policy measures. We, euPrevent, GGD Zuid Limburg, Gesundheitsamt Düren and Maastricht University, also investigated the question of whether the virus distribution in the border region differs from the distribution within these three countries.



Six research questions were put to us, which formed the basis for our report and to which extensive attention is devoted in the report. Below, we briefly summarise the conclusions for each research question:

1. *Are there significant differences in the spread of COVID-19 in the Netherlands, North Rhine-Westphalia and Belgium?*

The general picture is that differences between the countries are mainly due to differences in national measures and the extent to which these were followed up within the countries.

2. *How did the virus spread in the border region and did it deviate from the domestic pattern of spread?*

In the different countries, the dynamics of COVID-19 was mainly determined by the level of measures active within a country and the variant of virus that was dominant at that time. There seems to be no difference between the border area and the rest of the country.

3. *Is there a significant cross-border dimension to the spread of the virus in the border region?*

Based on expert judgement, a relevant cross-border dimension seems to be limited with respect to the spread of COVID-19. Also, based on the maps (in the report), there appears to be little or no evidence of impact on cross-border spread of COVID-19.

4. *Are there differences in measures between the Netherlands, North Rhine-Westphalia and Belgium that have led to significant differences in the spread of the virus?*

Distinguish between behavioural measures for residents on the one hand, and public health measures on the other (in particular testing and source and contact investigations on both sides of the border).

It is not possible to make a distinction between behavioural measures on the one hand and public health measures on the other, and then determine which measures led to a significant difference in the three countries. However, the conclusion can be drawn that by and large the measures taken by the countries were effective to some extent.

5. *Is closing the border an effective measure to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the border region (effective measure of infectious disease control)? What other unintended health-related effects can border closure bring?*

The maps show that there were times when the borders were open, but there is a clear difference between the countries. Closing borders seems to have had little or no effect on the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This is also shown by research among 10,001 citizens of Limburg. People who visited their family, friends or acquaintances in Germany or Belgium frequently turned out to have fewer antibodies against

COVID-19 than those who did not make such visits but could have done so. This result also suggests that the role of border traffic in spreading is limited.

6. *What could the countries learn from one another? Are there possibilities to combat the virus more effectively in the border region?*

There is enough interest in cross-border cooperation, but at the moment there are still too many obstacles to structurally embed it. Structures such as euPrevent and EMRIC show that there are certainly possibilities, but that everything still stands or falls with personal commitment and project-funding.

Based on this study, we go on to list seven recommendations, which are explained in the report.

1. Closing the border does not seem to be an effective measure to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the border area. It seems much more useful to target measures more effectively at regions, regardless of borders.
2. In order to fight pandemics in the border region more effectively, it is important that the Netherlands, NRW and Belgium develop structural forms of cooperation.
3. It would be desirable to have legislation and regulations to make it possible to properly manage and monitor a pandemic in a border area.
4. It seems that the travel of citizens to foreign destinations beyond bordering regions has a greater impact on the spread and introduction of COVID-19 than border traffic. It is advisable that this is examined more explicitly, not only as a country, but also at EU level.
5. To date, there is little research available on the effects of individual measures and the effects of the measures in general on the course of a pandemic. Additional studies, focusing on comparable data and comparable measures, seem desirable.
6. It is strongly recommended that a set of comparable indicators, using the same methodologies as far as possible, is developed between countries or at EU level.
7. It would be desirable if the special character of border areas could be given more attention in national policy, so that professional regional cooperation across borders is also facilitated via national policy centres.

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