

# Integration in Practice: France and Germany (June 8, 2006)

## Abstract

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Taking the border region between Alsace (France) and Baden (Germany) as an example, this article describes French-German integration on the local level, where cross-border cooperation is common in many areas of life.

## Source

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### Cheese from France, Canned Goods from Germany

Cross-Border Commuters between Alsace and Baden Are Part of Normal Life

New cobblestones are being laid in the market square in Neuf Brisach. And the memorial stone for the victims of the World Wars is being remounted. The dead who are commemorated here have names like Charles Koch or Joseph Heinrich. The streets of the Alsatian border town are empty. Only very few people and hardly any cars are in sight. A wedding party has gathered in front of the Church of Saint Louis. "Au Bon Marchand" is written on the façade of a building; the lettering is weathered. The tour guide says, "All the young married couples leave. The great master-builder Vauban built Neuf Brisach this way, and it's stayed this way for 300 years. That's why all the young people leave." Functional single-family homes are not allowed to be built in Neuf Brisach's city center since it is under historic protection. Massive fortification walls surround the city center; the strip between the ramparts has been planted with greenery.

Young French families look for apartments and houses in the surrounding communities. Many Germans who work in Freiburg or Karlsruhe also build single-family homes there. For the tour guide in Neuf Brisach, the Germans who live in Alsace have long since become part of normal life. "Yesterday we were enemies, today we're friends," he says, and then adds, "If the Israelis and the Palestinians got along with each other like the Germans and the French, then that would be a great achievement." After the Second World War, cross-border cooperation along the Upper Rhine between Switzerland, France, and Germany came to a virtual standstill – almost all the bridges over the Rhine had been destroyed.

Today there are countless organizations that are supposed to contribute to improving cross-border living. The Upper Rhine Conference and the Rhineland Council have pride of place here; at the lower level, three "Eurodistricts" have been created (Freiburg/Center South Alsace, Strasbourg/Ortenau, and Basel). Additionally, almost every association has its own cross-border organization. The debate on streamlining this organizational plurality has been stalled for years.

For Maurice Zimmerle, mayor of Neuf Brisach, the Rhine, which separates his city from its German sister city of Breisach, and which caused wars and resentment for centuries, is no longer a border. "The Rhine is a means to an end; we are living with each other and for each other," he said. The only sources of irritation are the trivialities that sometimes complicate everyday German-French life, like the fact that French firefighters cannot connect their hoses to those of their German counterparts. The mayor knows from experience that problems can also arise from differing building codes. "In France, a ceiling only has to be 20 centimeters thick, but in Germany it has to be 40 centimeters," he says.

German-French normalcy can be observed in the small community of Volgelsheim. Situated behind an

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old barracks is a small housing development consisting of yellow, blue, and red homes. Toddlers play on the residential street, the *Rue des Oiseleur*. Hervé Piernot stands in front of his house, discussing something with his neighbors. He is one of 90,000 cross-border commuters in the Upper Rhine region: Piernot does field work for a Swiss company in Basel, but he lives with his German wife and his son in Volgelsheim. His wife is a civil servant in Germany. Every day, he commutes to Basel, and she drives to Freiburg. “The real estate here is cheaper, it’s less expensive to build; in Freiburg, I wouldn’t be able to get a single-family home of this sort for 200,000 Euro,” Piernot says, pointing to his yellow house. He has been living in Volgelsheim for eight years. The only place in Europe with more cross-border commuters is Luxembourg, with its neighbors, Belgium, France, and Germany.

The cross-border flow is not the same everywhere. In the southern Palatinate (Regio Pamina), about 16,000 French citizens commute to factories in Rastatt or Wörth. The high real-estate prices in Strasbourg are the reason why a lot of French citizens move to the German border region. And in Regio Trirhena, the “Euroregion” surrounding the triangle of Freiburg, Mulhouse, and Basel, the cross-border commuters are mostly French citizens who work in Germany or Switzerland. About 30,000 people commute from Alsace to Baden; 800 alone come to the town of Breisach every day. Additionally, 25,000 Germans commute to Switzerland for work. About one-third of the German cross-border commuters who live in France and work in Germany do so to save money. The number had increased steadily after the Euro was introduced, but it leveled off about a year ago. Today, roughly 15,000 German nationals live in Alsace; 11,000 people with French passports live in Baden. Almost fifty percent of the German cross-border commuters from Alsace work in manufacturing in Germany. Because about 68,000 commuters from Alsace work in northwestern Switzerland, southern Palatinate, or Baden, the unemployment rate in Alsace is lower than in other parts of France. “Except for cheese, wine, and fish, we buy all our groceries in Germany,” says Hervé Piernot. On weekends, Germans living in France and Frenchmen stand in line at discount supermarkets in Germany.

The barracks next to the housing development in Volgelsheim are being renovated. Piernot says that there is great interest in the apartments. “A lot have already been sold.” But coexistence between incoming Germans and local French citizens doesn’t always work as well as it does in his housing development. He explains, “Some people don’t want to assimilate. They send their children to kindergarten in Breisach and don’t even take advantage of the opportunity to have their children learn both languages in the French kindergarten here.” In Frankfurt, Stuttgart, or Berlin, on the other hand, parents spend a lot of money to send their children to multilingual kindergartens. According to a 1997 poll – whose results are still basically valid – only fourteen percent of Germans who relocated to Alsace speak fluent French. The higher the education level, the better the linguistic abilities, and the fewer the conflicts with local residents. Leftist German intellectuals who buy farmhouses in Alsace and, as the Alsatians often tease, wear berets to bed, are the minority here. “When I came to Breisach from Normandy, I was surprised to discover how pronounced the language barrier still is,” said Emilie Dumaine, who advises cross-border commuters at Infobest. Bilingual school instruction has been compulsory in Alsace since 1990, but it only became compulsory along the so-called “Rheinschiene” [“Rhine Axis”] in Baden-Württemberg’s border region in 2003. The French government has done more for bilingualism than the German federal government or, for a long time, the state government of Baden-Württemberg. The German and French labor markets still aren’t sufficiently permeable. The “Eures-T” cross-border network has tasked itself with changing this and making life easier for cross-border commuters. But when a German who is living in France becomes unemployed, there are still numerous bureaucratic hurdles with both employment offices. “There are a lot of Germans who view their house in France as nothing but a place to sleep and who do everything else in Germany. Of course, that doesn’t go down too well with the Alsatians,” says Dumaine.

Piernot also thinks that some Germans reject the French lifestyle too vehemently. “In France we sometimes mow the lawn at five minutes after 6 pm; we are a little more tolerant that way. Many

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Germans can't understand this and get annoyed straight away." He says that anyone who wants to understand the German mentality should drive through the housing development in Alcolsheim. That's the one with the orderly German single-family homes. Piernot uses his right hand to draw the equally-sized housing lots in the air, marking each picket fence separating the properties with a pointed "tack!" as he draws them.

Alcolsheim is an Alsatian farmers' village. When you drive along the speed-bumped main street and see the small manicured farmhouses, you suspect that the village community is intact here. The housing development is at the edge of the Alcolsheim town limits. The cars parked in front of the homes have license plates from Freiburg or Karlsruhe. "Einfamilienhaus zu verkaufen" ["Single-family home for sale"] is written only in German on a "for sale" sign. "It's those villages that grew rapidly. Whether the owners are German or French doesn't really matter. More significant is the classic conflict between villagers and newcomers who want the comforts of a big city," says Thierry Uhrin of "Sivom du Pay de Brisach," the local association of communes. By now real estate prices are starting to converge, he says, the relocation boom from Germany is over.

The Alsatian town of Alcolsheim and the German town of Brisach are about five kilometers apart. More than eighty percent of the small city was destroyed in the Second World War. In the 1950s, it became a pioneer in efforts to improve German-French relations. Oliver Rein, the newly elected mayor, says that even back then 97 percent of Brisach residents voted for a united Europe. "We see ourselves as an integrated region; that makes our area unique." He goes on to say that the introduction of the Euro made economic integration even more intense and that numerous Inter Regional (InterReg) projects supported by the EU have been undertaken with Neuf Brisach. There are about six hundred of these projects on the Upper Rhine. Their efforts aim at cross-border cooperation, for instance, through the founding of tri-national courses of study or through cooperation between German and French hospitals. "Germany and France have grown a lot closer here, especially in the past few years. Soon we will be signing the "Eurodistrict" Treaty. Sometimes it's a problem, however, that so few students are still interested in exchange programs with France. Nowadays it has to be at least New Zealand."

Source: Rüdiger Soldt, "Käse aus Frankreich, Konserven aus Deutschland. Die Grenzgänger zwischen dem Elsaß und Baden gehören zur Normalität", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 8, 2006, p. 4.

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