

# The cross-border location of a medium-sized shrinking city, at once a potential asset and a factor of fragility: the case of Forbach<sup>1</sup>

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Like several other medium-sized cities that were formerly centres of industry, Forbach suffered the shock of deindustrialisation with the closure of its coal mines at the end of the 1980s. Hence, there are significant difficulties in matters of employment, with an unemployment rate that has risen continuously since 1968, reaching 21% in 2013 in the municipality (as against 12% in Moselle and the Grand Est region). Peri-urbanisation has also overwhelmed the municipality: 53% of households moving out of Forbach in 2013 went to the rest of the urban area, and 26% moved to the rest of Moselle (Migcom, Insee, 2013). The disappearance of scores of industrial jobs and the peri-urbanisation movement explain the migration shortfall of the municipality since 1982. Population ageing is also significant (*figure 1*), and does not compensate for the negative migration flow by natural balance, for the city lost almost 5 000 inhabitants between 1990 and 2013. Those elements prompt us to define Forbach as a medium-sized shrinking city". Indeed, several studies have defined shrinking cities as "urban areas that have experienced falls in population, an economic downturn, a decline in employment, and social problems, all symptoms of a structural crisis" (Martínez-Fernández *et al.*, 2012, *cit. Wolff et al.*, 2013, p. 3). That crisis does indeed

exist in Forbach, where the inhabitants suffer from significantly low resources, with a very low median income (323 euros below the medium income for Moselle) and a poverty rate of 29% (as against about 14% in Moselle and the Grand Est region, and 15% in France). The devitalisation of Forbach city centre and the increase in vacant housing, which went from 10% to 13% between 2008 and 2013 in the municipality, are other markers of that fragility.

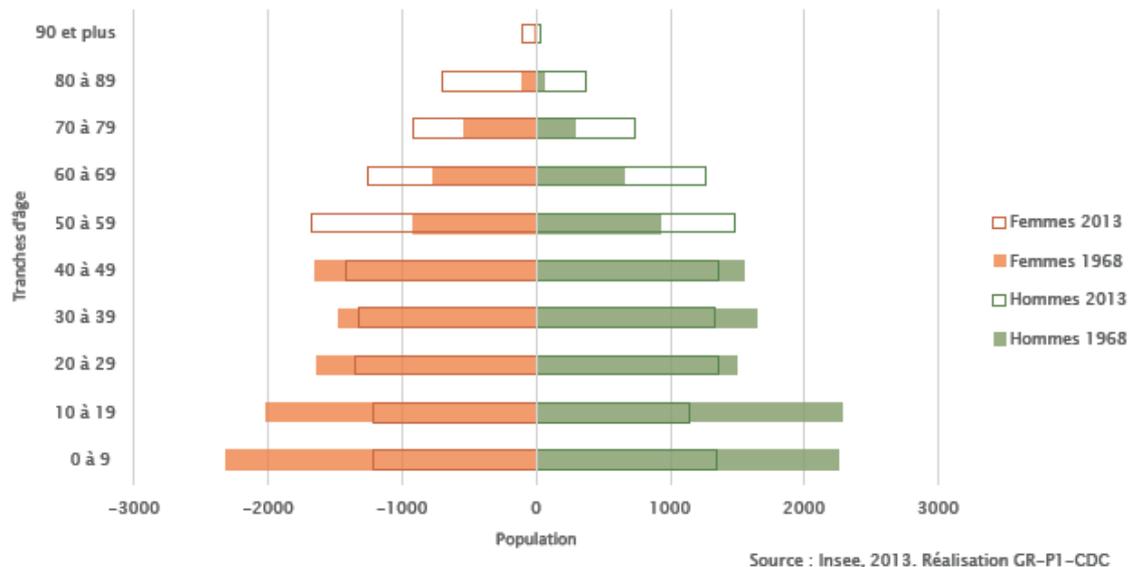
The location close to the border with Germany is another feature of Forbach (*figure 2*). The opening up of borders in the Schengen Area since 1995, and, more generally, the construction of Europe have deeply upset the organisation and functioning of European cross-border areas: "the border area turned through 180° becomes a cross-border territory turned through 360°" (Denert, Hurel, 2000, p. 4), and it is supposed to be a "laboratory of Europe", according to the expression used by Jacques Delors (*ibid.*). We can therefore wonder about this specific location: how is Forbach, a medium-sized shrinking city, affected by that territorial restructuring? Once set in the outer reaches of national territory, Forbach is now near a very dynamic European region, at the crossroads between the metropolises of Paris, Frankfurt, Strasbourg, and Luxembourg.

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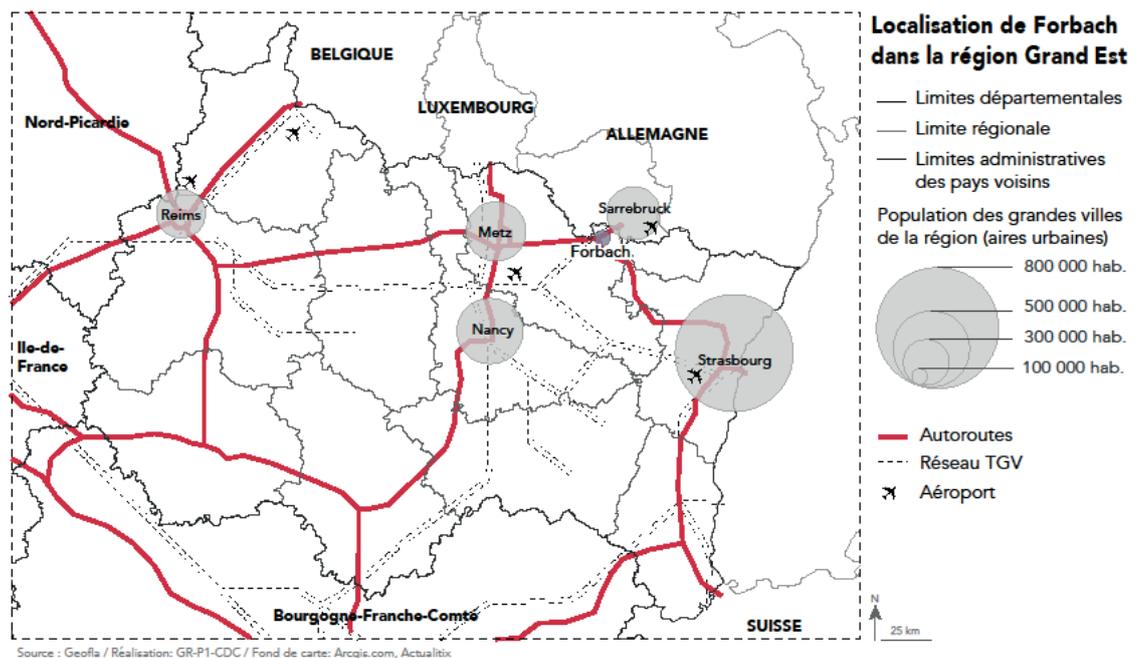
That location could thus be considered an asset for Forbach, in comparison with other isolated medium-sized French cities. However, its relatively limited size and its fragility seem to be impediments to its incorporation into those dynamics. Metropolisation sets up a “law of large numbers” (Tallec, Martorell, 2012) that favours very large cities to the detriment of other

urban territories, especially medium-sized cities (Ascher, 2003). The archipelagic functioning of those metropolises and the “tunnel effect” that they can impose further reinforce that exclusion. Forbach’s border location thus seems to be a potential asset as well as a factor of fragility.

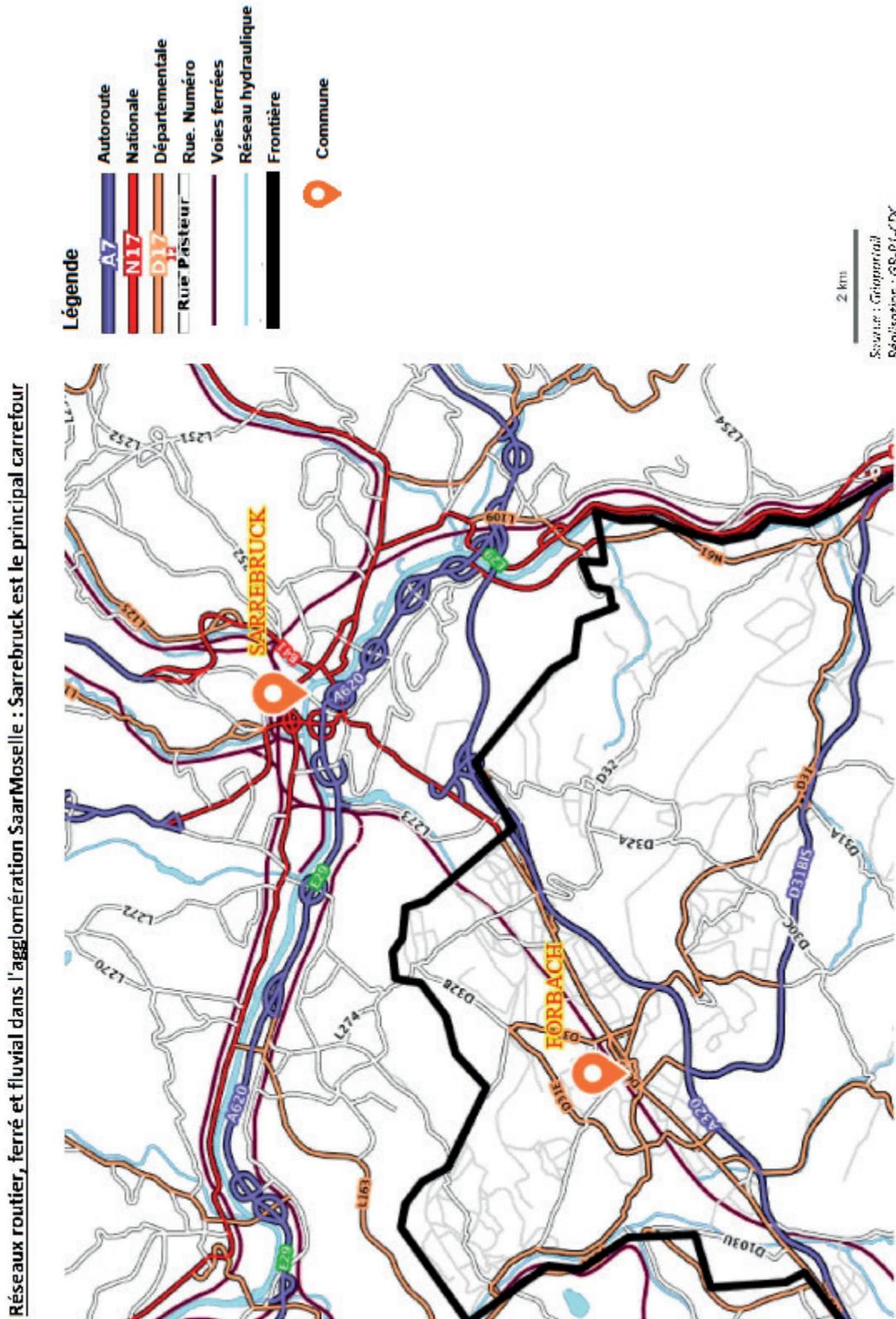
Graph 1: age pyramid in Forbach, 1968-1973



Map 1: Forbach's location in the Grand Est



Map 2: road, rail, and river network in the Saar-Moselle conurbation



## THE AFFIRMATION OF A CROSS-BORDER CONURBATION CENTRED ON SAARBRÜCKEN THAT CONTRIBUTES TO WEAKENING FORBACH

### *Forbach, from a medium-sized cross-border French city to a city on the periphery of a cross-border conurbation*

Since 1990, the very high porosity of the Franco-German border has changed Forbach's relationships with its immediate environs. More accurately, the increased flows between the Moselle and the Saar regions has gradually created a cross-border urban area between Forbach and Saarbrücken, a large German city set just a few kilometres from the border. In that cross-border urban area, Saarbrücken plays the role of central city, which contributes to weakening Forbach's polarity on the French half of the urban area. Saarbrücken has a population that is eight times greater, it is very dense, and it concentrates a range of rare jobs, businesses, and services that bear no comparison with the Forbach offer. On a regional scale, Saarbrücken also invests in territorial marketing, which gives it strong visibility compared with Forbach, a French city that suffers from a negative image and of which the publicity is often limited to the question of the Front National vote. Those various elements could be taken to suggest that Saarbrücken strongly marginalises Forbach on a local scale. The majority of interviews carried out at the beginning of 2017 with local actors such as elected officials and council officers show that Forbach is considered a "suburb of Saarbrücken", which would be the true "life centre" of the metropolitan area.

That affirmation of Saarbrücken as a cross-border regional metropolis also affects Forbach's accessibility. That accessibility is potentially excellent, since Forbach is close to several main European motorways. However, it is Saarbrücken that is truly at the crossroads (*figure 3*). Thus, Forbach quite simply risks being passed through and suffering a "tunnel effect". Similarly, the city is located on the Paris-Frankfurt high-speed railway line, but it seems to be just passed through and captures little flow: fewer than half the TGVs (*Trains à Grande Vitesse* – High-Speed Trains) that link Paris to Frankfurt stop at its station.

### *Cross-border flows that contribute to weakening Forbach*

The affirmation of the cross-border territory places Forbach in an increasingly peripheral situation relative to Saarbrücken, and the increasing flows between the two cities seem to contribute to weakening Forbach in several ways. Removing borders changes the consumption habits of border dwellers : "cities like Saarbrücken, Basel, and Strasbourg lose their status as foreign cities to become the centre city that border dwellers use, drawn by the urban ambience, the bars (...) and international brands for clothing, household appliances (...)" (Bertrand, 2004, p. 5). Several large shopping centres can also be found in the Saar region, close to Forbach. That offer is in clear competition with the French part of the conurbation: the displacement of trade to Germany accounts for 28% of consumption in Val de Rosselle (which includes the Forbach urban area) in 2015 (*CCI Lorraine* - Lorraine Chamber of Commerce and Industry). That offer from the Saar is a factor in weakening Forbach, where devitalisation affects the city centre. Almost 22% of commercial properties were vacant in February 2017. In the city centre's main shopping street (Rue Nationale), vacant properties have continued to increase since 2010, going from 7% to 21% in 2017. More than half the shopkeepers questioned also highlight a fall in the city centre's footfall. By way of explanation, 50% speak of the lack of attractiveness and 35% speak of the German and peripheral offer. As in many French city centres, Forbach city centre has been weakened by the peripheral commercial offer, to which is added competition from German commercial activities. The "search for the exotic" as well as the "border effect", i.e. the persistence of differences between the two countries in relation to prices and to the products available feed that type of cross-border flow for consumption and leisure (Bertrand, 2004, p. 5; Reitel, Zander, 2004).

Another type of flow, the one involving cross-border workers, can be an asset as well as a factor of fragility for Forbach. It can be an asset, for the opportunity to work in Germany widens the employment area for Forbachers, and it may lead to a fall in unemployment locally. At the same time, the Saar, which is one of the German regions in the greatest difficulty, also suffered the shock of the end of the mining industry. Its unemployment rate is low compared to that of Forbach,

but it is one of the highest in Germany (6.6% in 2013, as against about 5% in Germany at that time). The contracts of employment offered are also more precarious than in France, which means that unemployment is kept under control but leaves some workers in difficulty. The possibility that Forbach can benefit from a pull factor due to its closeness to the Saar region is thus one that must be qualified. Moreover, flows of cross-border workers can also weaken the city in a very different way: some researchers have observed that the rise in cross-border work goes together with a boost in urban spread towards often rural municipalities set on the border (Bertrand, 2004). In addition, very few Germans work in France, but some move there to live because of lower property and land prices there (*ibid.*). In Forbach, according to the interviews carried out, such house moves take place more on the periphery. Thus, the increase in the flow of cross-border workers and the arrivals of German households have contradictory effects. They could lead to a fall in unemployment and to attracting new inhabitants, so they may contribute to increasing the centre city's decline.

The closeness to Germany and Saarbrücken thus appears to place Forbach up against additional difficulties relative to other declining medium-sized cities. Peri-urbanisation and the development of the peripheral commercial offer are two elements that weaken some medium-sized cities, but that take on a different dimension and are accentuated in a cross-border context.

## **BOOSTING LINKS WITH GERMANY: A LEVER IN RESPONSE TO LOCAL DIFFICULTIES ?**

### ***Local actors see Forbach's cross-border location as an asset***

The vast majority of local actors encountered state that Forbach's border location is an asset. According to them, the city enjoys very good accessibility that must be showcased to attract businesses to the territory. What is more, that closeness to Germany could also lead to an increase in employment opportunities for Forbachers, thus leading to a fall in unemployment. The border location is

thus seen as an asset in matters of economic development, a solution to employment difficulties.

### ***Cross-border economic development as a priority in policies implemented***

The policies implemented in Forbach have, as priority aims, economic development and job creation, and they near-systematically showcase the territory's border location. Thus, work done to provide support and encouragement for businesses to establish themselves highlights the closeness to Germany. That is the case with Eurozone "Forbach-Nord", a business park that straddles the Franco-German border. It was set up in 1999 with the aim of attracting service industries interested in that location and in the opportunity for cross-border exchanges. Training the local population is another challenge to encourage access to jobs. Here, too, the Franco-German focus is strong, and takes the form of a number of initiatives, like creating posts for language assistants in schools to improve the learning of German. Such an arrangement should lead to raising the language barrier and giving Forbachers access to the German job market. Tourism is another lever of economic development used with a cross-border dimension. For example, the museums set along the border between the Saar and the Moselle regions have come together in a network to improve their visibility and offer itineraries to tourists (Ripp, 2006). Thus, cross-border projects seem to be perceived as a lever in matters of economic development for local actors in Forbach. One of the actors encountered also conjures up a possible revitalisation of the city centre by focusing on a "French-style" commercial offer that could attract Saarlander consumers.

Hence, the levers put in place to respond to the decline that affects Forbach are specific due to that city's border location. In order to have their full effect, those levers call for cross-border use. French and German local actors have come together and are associated in a European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation (EGTC), a structure set up to facilitate co-operation and to overcome administrative barriers (Perrin, 2011). However, its competences are still very limited, and do not allow all obstacles to be overcome in matters of co-operation.

Furthermore, that structure is duplicated by the Greater Saar-Lor-Lux Region, a wider cross-border co-operation area that multiplies scales and interlocutors. Moreover, some cross-border projects are blocked by disagreements between local actors from the two countries, such as the Saarbrücken-Forbach Tram-Train project.

All at once a medium-sized city, a shrinking city and a border city, Forbach is faced with very specific challenges that contribute to weakening it, and that, at the same time, can be used as levers. Forbach is faced with deindustrialisation, the development of peripheral shops, and peri-urbanisation, processes that are common to some medium-sized French

cities but that take on a particular aspect in a cross-border territory where the flows of workers and consumers respond to specific types of logic. The border may have disappeared, but differences in terms of commercial, cultural, and leisure offers exist between the two countries and feed flows that can contribute to weakening Forbach. Therefore, the challenge is to be able to capture some of those flows and to take advantage of the border location in order to respond to local difficulties. That is the objective of policies implemented in matters of economic development, policies that are nonetheless faced with difficulties in matters of Franco-German co-operation.

