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## **Euroregions, Their Influence on the Development of Polish and Czech Borderlands**

### **ABSTRACT**

Euroregions, their influence on the development of the Polish and Czech border. The Polish-Czech borderland is a system of characteristic social realities and a place where two different cultures meet. The emergence of Euroregions creates opportunities for faster development of border areas and their integration. Cross-border cooperation is located in various frames of the borderland life that affect the everyday life of residents, i.e., in the spheres of the economy (cooperation between entrepreneurs), communication (expansion of the infrastructure and infostructural network), culture, sport and tourism, ecology, education and science (research, joint implementation of EU programmes), combating all crime, and warning and assistance in states of disasters and crises (e.g., in case of a flood, fire, epidemic threats). The research presented in the publication shows that there is still a need for a lasting good functioning of the Euroregions existing on the border of Poland and the Czech Republic. Keywords: Euroregion, borderland, cross-border cooperation, attitude, lifestyle

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lifestyle, attitude, cross-border cooperation, borderland, Euroregion

### **INTRODUCTION**

The formation of Euroregions is based on institutionalised cross-border cooperation in the determined areas of the European Union countries. Its main aim is the equitable development of the territories, improvement of humans' living conditions,

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promotion of contacts and cooperation of local communities. On the territory of Poland, local and regional public and private sector institutions, as well as non-governmental organisations, are involved in the cooperation within the Euroregions. Such institutionalised forms of cooperation operate, among others, on the border between Poland and the Czech Republic.

The Polish-Czech borderland is a system of characteristic social realities and a meeting place for two different cultures. These borderlands consist of separate but, simultaneously, territorially adherent countries of a similar socio-political structure and economic potential. Poland and Czech almost simultaneously made efforts to integrate with the European Union, successively introducing certain changes, including on its borderlands, and mutually adjusting to community standards (Róg, 2013).

The border areas of our interest spread on a large space, and their particular parts are characterised by their own history, different geographic and economic conditions, and climatic and soil factors that influence the state of agriculture in these regions. People's everyday life is directed by conditions and circumstances determined by the infrastructure of the areas on both sides of the border. The Polish-Czech borderland has industrial centres, rural areas, service centres, and smaller economic infrastructure. There are factories there, including heavy industry, the energy industry and industries such as textiles, clothing, machinery, glass, ceramics and food. Progressing structural changes in the economy of border areas also cause the transformation of the employment structure of the population – the employment especially increases in the service sector, although inhabitants also find work in sectors including agriculture, hunting and fishing. A certain threat to development may be the domination of industrial production (due to technological reasons), an insufficiently developed service sector, poor infrastructure facilities and structural diversification of the economy (Róg, 2013).

The borderland cooperation between Poland and Czech takes various forms: from strictly formal within a few Euroregions to even spontaneous ones, usually undertaken between neighbouring communities. Cross-border cooperation is located in various areas of the borderland's life that affect the everyday life of residents, i.e., in the spheres of the economy (cooperation between entrepreneurs), communication (expansion of the infrastructure and infostructural network), culture, sport and tourism, ecology, education and science (scientific research, joint implementation of EU programmes), combating all crime, and warning and assistance in states of disasters and crises (e.g., in case of a flood, fire, epidemic threat) (Kurcz, 2016).

## METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The changes that took place in various spheres of life of the inhabitants of the Polish-Czech borderland after the accession of both countries to the European Union were the subject of research within the Polish-Czech project: *Style and quality of life as well as life plans and Czech after the accession of Poland and the Czech Republic to the EU (Styl a kvalita života, stejně jako životní plány a identita obyvatel polsko-českého pohraničí po vstupu Polska a České republiky do EU)* 3, implemented by the Higher School of Management and Administration in Opole (leading partner) and Vysoká Škola Sociálně Správná, z.ú. IČ in Hawirzów (partner from the Czech side). Their goal – in the cognitive dimension – was to verify the hypotheses that: a) the accession of Poland and the Czech Republic to the EU and, in particular, access to structural funds contributed to the improvement of the level and quality of life of the inhabitants of the studied areas; b) open interstate borders to a certain extent determine the lifestyle of young borderlanders in terms of their leisure time activities; c) young inhabitants of the Polish-Czech border area have a positive attitude towards their Czech neighbours; d) open borders influence the life plans of young borderland inhabitants; e) young inhabitants of the Polish-Czech border area are tolerant, open to other people (different, strangers). The practical goal was to formulate postulates addressed to those working in education and regional policy, which should possibly be undertaken so that contacts across the borders would be as conflict-free as possible, so that the system of values and norms of the borderland residents would not favour the emergence of excluding barriers, but would be a significant factor of their well-being (Jasiński & Nowak, 2020).

The research used the method of document analysis and the method of diagnostic survey. The first method was used to determine the changes in the socio-cultural potential on both sides of the Polish-Czech borderland after the accession of the Republic of Poland and the Czech Republic to the EU, i.e., from 2004 to 2020, and the objective dimension of the quality of life (standard of living). Moreover, the diagnostic survey method was used to obtain answers, *inter alia*, to the questions about: the standard of living and the quality of life of the inhabitants of the Polish-Czech borderland, the lifestyle in free time, the value system of the borderland inhabitants, the benefits of the possibility of free crossing the border, life plans of young inhabitants, cultural identity, knowledge of young borderland inhabitants about their neighbours, their everyday life and problems, etc. (Jasiński & Nowak, 2020).

The survey was conducted in the first half of 2020 among students living in the Polish-Czech border of the Euroregion Pradziad and the Czech-Polish border

of the Euroregion Beskid. 325 secondary school students and 218 students living in the Opolskie Province, as well as 290 secondary school students and 280 students living in the Moravian-Silesian Region, participated in them. Interviews were also conducted with adult residents (32 people) of the Pradziad Euroregion. They operate in the social, political, or educational sphere to learn their opinions on the changes taking place in the life of the borderland residents after Poland acceded to the EU, about the climate and quality of Polish cooperation – Czech on the border (Jasiński & Nowak, 2020).

## **REFLECTIONS FROM THE RESEARCH**

Thanks to Polish and the Czech Republic's accession to the European community, social and cultural potential in border areas has undoubtedly improved. It seems that the changes given to the region through European integration have been properly used. However, there are still many remaining regions that demand further work.

For example, starting from 2007, beneficiaries from the Opolskie Province obtain EU funds for the implementation of projects under the Operational Program of Cross-border Cooperation Czech Republic – Republic of Poland 2007–2013 and the Interreg V-A Program Czech Republic – Poland 2014–2020. The objectives of these programmes result from the specific needs of this region. The emphasis was put on enhancing transport accessibility and improving the quality of the environment, preventing threats, developing entrepreneurship, developing tourism, supporting education and lifelong learning, and cooperation between local communities and institutions on both sides of the border on the preparation and realisation stages of the projects. It is worth noting that in a financial perspective of 2007–2013, under the Polish-Czech cooperation programme, over 170 projects worth over EUR 40 million were implemented in the Nysa and Prudnik districts, of which ERDF co-financing for entities from the Opolskie Province amounted to nearly EUR 18.7 million. The largest pool of funds has been allocated to supporting the improvement of road infrastructure, securing border areas against flood effects, collisions and catastrophes, and modernising several valuable historic and recreational facilities (Hanulewicz, 2020).

Meanwhile, according to the research of Czech scientists, the Czech-Polish borderland often still shows features of a peripheral area in relation to the development centres of both countries. It is due not only to the circumstances of its historical development but also to natural, climatic and geographical conditions. The

chances of using these specific features to gain a competitive advantage depend on the strength and abilities of the borderland's economic entities and regional authorities. Suppose such activities will be additionally supported by actions of the governments of both countries and by the skilful use of European Union funds to stimulate cross-border cooperation. In that case, nothing will prevent the development of close cooperation in industry, agriculture, tourism (including health resorts) and other non-productive areas, e.g., in services or scientific and research cooperation. The properly oriented regional policy will contribute to improving regional infrastructure, developing civic infrastructure, environmental protection, and developing social and health care (Navrátil, 2020).

A Polish team studied the life quality of young inhabitants of the Polish-Czech borderland in the context of the possibility of the free crossing of the border between Poland and the Czech Republic. They were looking for answers concerning benefits coming from the free crossing of the border between Poland and the Czech Republic, evaluation by young borderland inhabitants of the current standard of living in these areas, their attitudes towards other nationalities, recognised values and lifestyle preferred by young borderland inhabitants in their free time. In this matter, the high percentage of respondents living in the Polish border area who admitted in the course of the research that they do not know about various aspects of the lives of their Czech neighbours may be disturbing. While the lack of knowledge about others is the main reason for the emergence of fears, divisions into "my own" and "strangers", disapproval of diversity, dissimilarity, and otherness. Supplementing this knowledge is thus an urgent cultural and educational task on the borderland (Nowak, 2020).

Quality and lifestyle on the border of Polish-Czech territories were decided to be considered from the perspective of the problems of the Czech population of the Beskidy Euroregion in the social aspect. The point was to formulate and identify the social potential of a given area and three basic pillars: social capital, cultural capital and human capital. Each of these pillars was described in detail and precisely characterised with concrete questions, which will be assigned to selected people living in a given area in the next stage, related to the current research phase. According to the author of the relevant article, answers to these questions will have crucial meaning for further research because they will contribute to identifying real social problems in Polish-Czech relations and working out an effective solution to them (Nálepová, 2020).

As demonstrated by Polish research investigations, the life plans of Polish-Czech borderland inhabitants mostly depend on real possibilities but also partly on the dreams of a young person. The life decisions of Polish respondents (stu-

dents and pupils living on the Polish border with the Czech Republic) are rather not influenced by the country's membership of the European Union and the open borders. They do not intend to live in the Czech Republic in their existential plans. Although today it is possible to move freely beyond national borders and more and more people from Poland take up employment with foreign neighbours, most respondents prefer to live at home and tie their plans to their homeland. However, most of the responders among young inhabitants see changes in open borders for the better quality of their free time. Since our neighbours have many touristic attractions (for example, the Praděd peak in the High Jeseník mountain range, a path in the clouds in the Morava valley, the Zoo in Ostrava, or the Cave on Szpiczak; nowadays the attractions include Czech trade Sundays). Respondents appreciate areas related to border security, peace and good neighbourly relations in their place of residence. Respondents appreciate areas related to border security, peace and good neighbourly relations in their place of residence (Sliwa, 2020).

According to student surveys by Czech researchers, young Czech citizens' life plans also indicate the strong bond of these responders with their country. Although most plan their future life in Czech, some consider living in a different place, even beyond the Czech Republic. However, they show a clear reluctance to live in Poland, pointing to significant negative stereotypes, attitudes and opinions concerning Poland, the Polish language and the inhabitants of Poland. There were relatively frequent statements in the research that Poland is Catholic and not suitable for a satisfactory life for people who belong to a minority (e.g., sexual minorities). These claims were also supported by the results of the hierarchy of values. Most Czech respondents consider faith/religion to be an insignificant or even irrelevant value. In contrast, the third most important value for them is freedom of speech (it can be assumed that it is not only about freedom of verbal expression, but about the freedom to express oneself in any aspect). An interesting conclusion from the study is the fact that although the respondents consider themselves rather conservative in terms of fundamental life changes. Their conservatism is not related to faith/religion (Murin, 2020).

Changes in everyday life of the Polish-Czech borderlands and their social activity are the next problems analysed in the publication. Our research was carried out to gain knowledge in the matter of views of young inhabitants (pupils and students) of Polish-Czech borderlands about their neighbours, respondents' attitudes towards other nationalities, everyday life and its concerns, changes which have occurred in everyday life through the past years, and opinions of local government activists on cooperation in the Polish-Czech border areas and on the forms of social activity implemented there. From it, the current multi-faceted image of

society in border communes is emerging. There is a possibility of commuting people living in the border areas for weekend recreation, sightseeing their neighbours' country, holidays, or participating in their neighbours' cultural life. Polish people enjoy, cheaper than in Poland, leisure services, access to goods, which are limited in Poland, better conditions for practising sports, and access to medical services – frequently inaccessible in Poland. Let us select selectively here that, for example, the attitude of young Poles from the border to the issue of “strangers” in their immediate family environment is unambiguous: they would most willingly (about 90% of elections) accept a Pole, then a Silesian, a Czech, then a German or a Slovak however, they would be less enthusiastic about welcoming a Ukrainian or a Russian to their family, and the least enthusiastic about welcoming a person of Roma nationality. When defining the special features, our neighbours noticed in Poles, first of all, hospitality and diligence, but also drunkenness and intolerance, and then the openness of Poles, their tendency to help, and eventually racism. Few of the respondents attributed positive features, such as patriotism and kindness, or negative ones, such as jealousy or a tendency to complain. In turn, the opinions of young Poles on the qualities that characterised Czechs were very different, and at the same time, the indications were very scattered. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that applause was gained especially by Czech neighbours' openness, friendliness, courtesy, hospitality, and cheerful disposition.

Information and opinions concerning social activity on the Polish-Czech borderland, acquired during conversations (32 interviews) with authorities of particular understanding in the topic of our interest – they indicated the crucial changes in the economic, social, science and cultural sectors, but also personality and mentalities of people, which undoubtedly contributed to the improvement of the everyday life of the regional community. All of these positive elements, facts leading to the improvement of existential standards, which were noticed and appreciated by our responders (incl. revival of neighbourly contacts, trouble-free tourist, health and cultural trips) could arise, inter alia, thanks to the activity and commitment of all residents, especially local activists, enthusiasts completely devoted to the border region (Łangowska-Marcinowska, 2020).

Czech researchers presented slightly different opinions on the changes in everyday life of the borderland population seen through the prism of their attitude towards other nationalities. According to them, the most frequently indicated nationality that young Czech respondents would accept in their family is Czech, followed by Slovak, German, Pole, Ukrainian, Russian, and (sporadic elections) Roma. Among nationalities, besides the ones offered in the survey, respondents listed, e.g., American, British, Italian or Spanish. There is also frequently an

answer: anyone decent. Young Czech respondents do not have a fundamental problem with the positive perception of national differences in their families, do not shy away from accepting multiculturalism, and are usually sympathetic to the possibility of accepting representatives of both Slavic and non-Slavic nations into the family circle. When asked about any particular features of the character of representatives of both Polish-Czech borderland countries, the vast majority of young respondents (about three quarters) answered that they do not see any of such properties or traits neither in Poles nor in Czechs. However, a quarter of the respondents attributed patriotism to Poles and strong faith (religiosity). Moreover, some young Czechs perceive our citizens as good traders, friendly, communicative, diligent, skilful and proud of their nation. However, some think Polish people frequently whine, are noisy, vicious, atheist, beer drinkers, constantly dissatisfied, unkind, mean, and xenophobic (Černek & Heinz, 2020).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POSTULATES FOR SOCIAL PRACTICE**

After our countries joined the European Union, the Polish-Czech borderland is not only a workplace for many Poles and Czechs but also an area of many touristic and cultural attractions. This fact is conducive to establishing interpersonal contacts and better acquaintance with the characters and mentality of members of both nationalities, as a result of the confrontation of different systems of values, life attitudes and levels of life, not only the relations between the population, the conditions of the everyday existence of the inhabitants, and the level of their social activity change in a visible way. Poles and Czechs upgrade their status by moving around the border area mainly for socio-economic purposes. Various initiatives realised by activists on both sides of the border contribute to gradually blurring the stereotypical negative image of neighbours. They get used to the slow weakening of perennial cultural and mental barriers, making the local community aware of the relationships and similarities and the shared responsibility for shaping the reality in the immediate vicinity.

The final reflection proves the legitimacy of a sustained good functioning of the Euroregions existing on the border between Poland and the Czech Republic. Among the goals of transborder cooperation border regions of the European Community, as a rule, apart from strengthening economic and socio-cultural conditions, including removing obstacles and economic and infrastructural inequalities, determining methods of solving various problems, including manifestations of intolerance and nuisance characteristic of peripheral areas, also formulating prin-



ciples for building attitudes mutual trust and cooperation between institutions as well as building and strengthening mutual ties between people through dialogue and the spirit of tolerance. Moreover, because the attitude of tolerance and dialogue is not acquired automatically by a person, but are results of specific knowledge and communication skills, as well as the will to communicate and the willingness to cooperate with others, preparation for this intercultural dialogue must become the task of national educational systems, and at the local level – local governments. At present, no less important in this education are, among others, pro-ecological issues for the protection of the welfare of regional nature, including the protection of air, water, soil, and forest resources.

Here are a few concrete yet selectively formulated postulates concerning the vital issues of the Polish-Czech border, directed at the attention of both the central state authorities of both countries and the territorial authorities of the regions.

- Regional authorities and institutions should have greater legally restricted freedom to independently decide about their own actions (and their own responsibility) in the borderland in various sensitive areas in science, culture and education. At the same time, the financial support of the state is indispensable.
- There is a necessity to improve road and rail communication between borderland cities and successive modernisation of the communication chain between the two countries.
- Information on the achievements and development prospects of both countries in the economy (industry, agriculture, construction, trade), as well as culture, education, and science, should be intensified in regional communities. It would lead to an even better knowledge and understanding of the foreign neighbour and enhance interregional ties.
- The same goal – strengthening ties between the communities of regions – could be served by broader joint undertakings of local governments, institutions and organisations on both sides of the border for the growth of the regional economy (entrepreneurship), technology, innovation, computerisation, general and vocational education, culture and art or sports and recreation. It seems that the strength of our European continent as our place on earth grows precisely from the regions, from people's readiness to think and act in terms of regional community consciousness.

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