

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITIES FOR SOCIETY AND ECONOMY THE EXPERIENCE OF RESEARCHERS FROM THE VISEGRÁD GROUP

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CHAPTER 12

Enhancing Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) Between Poland and Czechia Through Euroregions: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: Cross-border cooperation is a critical aspect of regional development and integration within the European Union. In the case of Poland and Czechia, this cooperation is facilitated through Euroregions, transnational partnerships formed by border regions of different countries. The border between Czechia and Poland spans almost 800 km. Since 1991, six Euroregions and two European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) have been established, facilitating cross-border cooperation (CBC) along the entire length of the border. This institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation probably contributed to achieving and sustaining a high level of mutual Czech-Polish relations. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges of cross-border cooperation between Poland and Czechia within the framework of Euroregions, focusing on key initiatives, best practices, and areas for improvement.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation (CBC), Euroregions, Polish-Czech relations, sustainable development



12.1. Introduction

The presence of diverse administrative systems poses obstacles to the equitable development of various European regions within the EU (Böhm, 2023). This challenge is evident along the borders between Czechia and Poland. Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) emerges as a crucial tool for mitigating these obstacles (Böhm,

2014; Durand, 2015; Jańczak, 2011; Klatt & Herrmann, 2011; Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018; Perkmann, 2003).

The key question revolves around whether CBC is perceived as a sustainable, inherent, and beneficial endeavour beyond its direct stakeholders and those involved in implementing cross-border cooperation initiatives (Böhm, 2021; Böhm & Opiola, 2019; Opiola & Böhm, 2022).

The Czech-Polish border, much like others in Central and Eastern Europe, saw significant shifts during the 20th century. The formation of Poland and the former Czechoslovakia stemmed from World War I, and their borders were shaped through international arbitration in 1920, dividing contested regions such as Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia, which led to lukewarm relations between the two countries during the interwar period. Despite both being part of the eastern bloc, cross-border interaction was limited. After World War II, the original 1920 border was reinstated, as German-Polish and Polish-Soviet borders were moved westward. Although both countries belonged to the Soviet bloc, border permeability was low, and cross-border cooperation was minimal. Following the collapse of communism in 1989, Poland and Czechoslovakia aimed to strengthen their relations by becoming members of Western organizations like the Visegrád Group in 1991 and creating collaborative frameworks across borders, such as Euroregions, during the 1990s.

Cross-border cooperation brings many benefits, however, there are certain barriers. What may be noteworthy or unexpected, yet, is the relatively limited level of cross-border labour mobility between the workforces of both countries (Kurowska-Pysz, 2015, 2016a).

Research indicates that stakeholders in cross-border cooperation do not prioritise collaboration in the labour market due to a perceived lack of genuine cross-border demand (Bertram et al., 2023). There are some exceptions, particularly driven by the automotive and mining industries in Czechia, which attract Polish workers. The primary reason for the relatively low level of Czech-Polish cross-border cooperation in the labour market is the absence of a major economic driver on either side of the border, rather than any hostile or re-bordering sentiments in the mutual relations between entities from both countries (Böhm & Opiola, 2019; Gamon & Naranjo Gomez, 2019).

CBC has emerged as a vital mechanism for fostering economic growth, promoting cultural exchange, and addressing common challenges in border regions. Euroregions play a crucial role in facilitating this cooperation between Poland and Czechia, two neighbouring countries with a shared history and close geographical proximity (Kurowska-Pysz, 2015, 2016a).

This chapter aimed to analyse the dynamics of cross-border cooperation within Euroregions, highlighting both the opportunities it presents and the challenges it faces.

12.2. Czech-Polish Cross-Border Cooperation

Cross-border cooperation plays a significant and crucial role in the integration process of European territories (Castanho et al., 2016, 2017a, 2018; Guo, 2018). CBC involves establishing a network of connections that foster socio-economic cooperation (Kurowska-Pysz, 2015, 2016a) and helps to overcome cultural and social barriers in local communities situated on borderlands (Dacko-Pikiewicz, 2019; Kurowska-Pysz, 2016b; Wróblewski et al., 2018). Numerous experts on borders have consistently emphasised the significant and pertinent role that CBC plays in the process of integrating European territories (Castanho et al., 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Kurowska-Pysz & Szczepańska-Woszczyzna, 2017; Scott, 2016; Sergeyeva et al., 2022; Vulevic et al., 2020).

In fact, CBC is a vital factor in overcoming obstacles associated with the existence of state borders. The European Union's policy, advocating for a borderless Europe and supporting cross-border cooperation for 25 years, has led to the emergence of integrated cross-border regions in certain parts of Europe (Durand et al., 2020). Cross-border cooperation entails collaboration extending beyond borders, between neighbouring states/regions, aimed at eliminating barriers (social, economic, infrastructural, and cultural) associated with state borders or alleviating the effects of their existence. It is a form of international cooperation that strengthens mutual relations, ensures stability, and promotes cooperative and sustainable socio-economic development (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji [MSWiA], 2020). According to the European Framework Convention on Cross-border Cooperation between Communities and Territorial Authorities (Council of Europe, 1980), cross-border cooperation is understood as jointly undertaken actions aimed at strengthening or further developing neighbourly contacts between communities and territorial authorities, as well as reaching agreements and adopting arrangements to achieve these intentions. The benefits of collaboration include driving innovation similarly to international cooperation, enhancing the significance of parent companies in foreign markets, facilitating the development of their own research and development (R&D) infrastructure, and aiding in skill acquisition. Cross-border cooperation constitutes one facet of European Territorial Cooperation, which forms part of a cohesion policy with the aim of tackling cross-border challenges and jointly unlocking the potential of diverse regions. Funding for cooperative endeavours is provided through the European Regional Development Fund, encompassing three primary components: cross-border cooperation, transnational cooperation, and interregional cooperation (European Territorial Cooperation).

European Territorial Cooperation has been integral to cohesion policy since 1990. In the programming period of 2014-2020, comprehensive regulations governing actions in European Territorial Cooperation, supported by the European Regional

Development Fund (ERDF), were adopted for the first time in the history of European cohesion policy. This approach is being continued for the period spanning 2021-2027.

12.3. Euroregions – Barriers and Opportunities

An integral component of CBC is Euroregionalisation, which involves local communities coming together to pursue common interests across borders and recognising the importance of addressing issues at institutional level (Kurowska-Pysz, 2016a, 2016b).

Territorial partnerships, such as cooperation within Euroregions, are alliances that not only alter the operations of the participating organizations, but also influence their surroundings and the region where they function. Additionally, in this particular form of collaboration, the objectives of the participating organizations should align with the broader goals of cross-border cooperation (CBC), which significantly impacts the establishment of socio-economic cohesion within the Euroregion, in line with the region's interests. During this process, various obstacles frequently arise from diverse sources, which contradict the specified objectives of CBC (Medeiros et al., 2022, 2023). Key stakeholders in CBC play a pivotal role in overcoming at least some of these hurdles (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018).

Initially, Euroregions emerged as collaborations between municipalities representing either the parts of Western or Eastern Europe, such as the trilateral Czech-Polish-German Euroregion Nisa-Nysa-Neisse established in 1991. Subsequently, they began to form between countries of the former Eastern bloc itself, including along the Czech-Polish border, with Euroregion Glacensis in 1996, Praděd in 1997, Silesia and Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia in 1998, and Beskydy in 2000. Presently, there are six Euroregions spanning the entire Czech-Polish border. While some Euroregions involve partners beyond municipalities and regions – typically universities or chambers of commerce – this is not the case for all Euroregions, and these additional partners often have limited influence. Consequently, the agenda and scope of cooperation within individual Euroregions are shaped by the interests of the municipalities who serve as their primary founders (Böhm & Opiola, 2019).

The Euroregion Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia encounters the least language barrier, primarily because of the presence of a Polish minority on the Czech side and the usage of a mutually understood dialect on both sides of the border. Comparatively lower language barriers are noticeable in the other three 'Eastern' Euroregions. As for the other two, Glacensis and Nisa-Nysa-Neisse, these regions experienced almost complete population shifts; thus, one might anticipate a more significant language barrier there (Böhm & Opiola, 2019).

The Czech-Polish Euroregions have actively participated in EU Interreg programmes or their predecessors since their inception in the late 1990s. They are recognised as proficient beneficiaries of these projects, often yielding significant impacts. However, upon examining the statutes of all six Euroregions, it becomes evident that their scope of cooperation activities is highly comparable. Regarding cooperation in the labour market domain, it was only identified as a priority for two Euroregions-Silesia and Těšín /Cieszyn Silesia (Böhm & Opiola, 2019). Table 12.1 presents basic statistical data on Czech-Polish Euroregions.

Table 12.1. Basic statistical data on Czech-Polish Euroregions

Euroregion	Founded	No. of inhabitants in thousands	Surface in sq. km	No. of members
Nisa-Nysa-Neisse	1991	1 578	12 591	295
Glacensis	1996	770	5 249	150
Praděd/Pradziad	1997	761	7 656	112
Silesia	1998	771	2 732	76
Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia	1998	672	1 730	29
Beskydy	2000	1 300	6 343	181

Source: own elaboration based on (Böhm & Opiola, 2019).

Generally, the Euroregion's objective is to carry out cross-border cooperation, viewed as collective actions aimed at strengthening and nurturing neighbourly relations between territorial communities or authorities of two or more contracting parties, as well as concluding the agreements and arrangements necessary for the adoption and implementation of such plans. Established and endorsed by the European Union, the Euroregion may receive financial support for its activities. The effectiveness of cross-border cooperation in Euroregions depends on various favourable and unfavourable factors (Noferini et al., 2020; Scott, 2012; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). The extent and dynamics of cross-border cooperation are predominantly influenced by cultural, social, and economic barriers, which may affect partners to different extents (Bufon et al., 2014; Kramarz et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is influenced by the cooperation process or the cooperation area (Sousa, 2013). Moreover, their surroundings can also be a source of barriers (Evrard & Engl, 2018; Svensson, 2015).

It is clear that both obstacles from within and outside factors impact the progress of CBC in Euroregions; the negative factors affecting CBC in Euroregions can be divided into two groups (Wróblewski, 2016a, 2016b).

1. Internal barriers arise from specific and individual circumstances related to CBC processes in Euroregions and their partners. These circumstances include

communication methods among partners in Euroregions, resource availability and potential for CBC development, as well as understanding of CBC conditions and potential benefits.

2. External barriers, largely beyond the control of Euroregions and CBC partners, concern the cross-border environment, including legal regulations, administrative procedures, economic and social conditions, EU cohesion policy directions, and the availability of European funds for CBC development.

Assessing the feasibility of achieving CBC goals in Euroregions requires analysing cooperation barriers (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018). While Euroregions can focus on internal barriers, external ones are tougher to address in the short term. Hence, within a limited timeframe, external barriers persist as challenges. Internal barriers, notably lack of awareness about CBC, differing partner interests, and limited resources, shape CBC's effectiveness. Educating stakeholders about CBC benefits through Euroregions and local governments can mitigate these barriers.

However, external barriers, affecting economic and environmental tasks, stem from regulations beyond local levels. These challenges, like disparities in legal frameworks and funding, hinder strategic goal implementation. Overcoming external barriers is challenging at local level due to their regional or national scale origins (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018).

In fact, engagement in cooperation efforts at regional or national levels is hindered when CBC is not prioritised in development strategies, making public funding hard to secure. Consequently, only a few entities, primarily public institutions, participate, while NGOs and businesses face obstacles due to limited financial support and apprehensions about using public assistance (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018).

12.4. The Interreg V-A Czech Republic-Poland Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020

This Programme, endorsed by the European Commission on June 23, 2015, stands as a pivotal initiative aimed at fostering integration among residents and bolstering the attractiveness and accessibility of the border region. Covering diverse thematic areas and benefiting from a substantial budget allocation, it signifies the joint commitment of Poland and Czechia to promote sustainable development and cooperation across their shared border.

In terms of support areas, the programme encompasses various subregions and counties in both Poland and Czechia, including Bielsko, Rybnik, Jelenia Góra, Wałbrzych, Nysa, Opole, as well as Strzelin and Pszczyna counties in Poland, and Liberec, Hradec Králové, Pardubice, Olomouc, and Moravian-Silesian regions in Czechia (Fig. 12.1).



Fig. 12.1. Support area of Poland and Czechia

Source: (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2022).

With a total budget of EUR 226.2 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the programme allocates funds across four main thematic objectives. The largest portion of the budget, accounting for 60%, is dedicated to enhancing natural and cultural resources to support employment, aiming to enrich the range of tourist attractions and improve regional infrastructure such as road connections. Additionally, funds are directed towards cross-border risk management, education and skill development, and institutional and community cooperation (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2022).

Implemented through flagship, standard, and micro-projects, this programme focuses on various aspects, including the development of natural and cultural potential, education, and institutional cooperation. Notably, micro-projects play a crucial role in addressing specific needs and fostering grassroots cooperation.

The beneficiaries include a diverse range of stakeholders such as public authorities, educational institutions, NGOs, and religious associations. Through the implementation of numerous projects, the programme has achieved significant

outcomes, including the revitalisation of natural and cultural attractions, the construction and modernisation of cycling and hiking trails, and enhanced cross-border cooperation among various services.

Looking ahead, the programme continues to evolve, with ongoing preparations for a new Cross-border Cooperation Programme for 2021-2027. With a focus on addressing emerging challenges and building on past successes, this initiative remains instrumental in promoting collaboration and sustainable development in the Czech-Polish border region.

12.5. Examples of Projects Implemented in 2024 Under the Interreg Czech Republic-Poland Programme

The Czech-Polish Monitoring Committee of the Interreg Czech Republic-Poland programme gave its approval to projects focusing on tourism development and enhancing cross-border connections among residents and institutions; this decision was made during a meeting held on 13 March 2024.

Under the 'Tourism' category, funding has been designated for:

- seven standard projects, totalling EUR 13.5 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF),
- one project from the Euroregion Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia, utilising a small project fund with a value close to EUR 1.5 million from the ERDF.

These initiatives aim to foster tourism growth in the Czech-Polish border region. Notably, initiatives include establishing a new cross-border hiking trail in partner municipalities such as Szklarska Poręba and Podgórzyn. Moreover, expansion plans for the 'European Route of Castles and Palaces Poland-Czech Republic' encompass additional areas within the border region (Královéhradecký Region, Olomouc Region, Opole Voivodeship). Furthermore, construction of a footbridge over the Olza River will facilitate direct connectivity between cycling paths spanning Karviná, Kočoběž, Český Těšín, Cieszyn, Pogwizdów, and Hažlach.

In the 'Residents and Institutions Cooperation' segment, funding has been allocated for:

- three standard projects, totalling EUR 1.5 million from the ERDF,
- one project from the Euroregion Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia, receiving EUR 400 thousand from the ERDF, with a focus on enhancing public administration functionality and fostering cross-border collaboration in this domain.

These standard projects aim to deepen cross-border relations among residents and institutions in the Czech-Polish border region. For instance, the Kłodzko Health Care Team and the Zdravotnická záchranná služba of the Pardubice Region will engage in knowledge exchange, sharing best practices in pre-hospital care, and medical rescue management as organizational entities.



12.6. Conclusions

One of the primary opportunities of cross-border cooperation between Poland and Czechia lies in the promotion of economic integration and development. Through joint initiatives and projects, Euroregions enable the pooling of resources and expertise, leading to the development of infrastructure, promotion of tourism, and enhancement of trade relations between the two countries. Furthermore, Euroregions provide a platform for cultural exchange and collaboration in areas such as education, healthcare, and environmental protection, fostering greater understanding and solidarity between border communities.

Despite the benefits it offers, cross-border cooperation between Poland and Czechia also faces several challenges, such as external and internal barriers (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018). One of the key challenges is the need for improved coordination and communication between stakeholders from both countries. Language barriers, administrative differences, and divergent priorities can hinder effective collaboration and project implementation within Euroregions. Additionally, securing funding for cross-border projects remains a challenge, as financial resources are often limited and competitive.

Overcoming external barriers poses significant problems. Nonetheless, studies conducted in the Euroregion of Těšín/Cieszyn Silesia suggest that the impact of internal cooperation barriers at local level, which primarily affect social cooperation objectives, can be mitigated (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018). Internal barriers mainly affect non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses, albeit for different reasons. Among the stakeholders in cross-border cooperation, local governments are best positioned to implement social goals due to their mission alignment and preparedness. Typically, it is the local governments within Euroregions that have the most comprehensive understanding of cross-border cooperation. Hence, local governments, tasked with ensuring the welfare of local communities, should actively promote cross-border cooperation among NGOs and entrepreneurs by providing information on cooperation essentials, models, resources, and benefits. This can involve:

- expanding cross-border administrative cooperation across various sectors, including education, culture, and tourism;
- offering periodic financial assistance to NGOs for their contributions to European projects through CBC seed money funds;
- establishing cross-border thematic clusters in entrepreneurship, culture, art, and transportation (Karaś et al., 2023; Łukaniszyn-Domaszewska et al., 2023);
- facilitating partnership exchanges for NGOs and entrepreneurs interested in cross-border collaboration;

- advocating for best practices from cross-border cooperation among organizations unfamiliar with it.

In conclusion, cross-border cooperation between Poland and Czechia within the framework of Euroregions presents significant opportunities for regional development and integration. By leveraging their shared interests and resources, both countries can enhance economic ties, promote cultural exchange, and address common challenges more effectively. However, overcoming the challenges of coordination, communication, and funding will be crucial in realizing the full potential of cross-border cooperation between Poland and Czechia. Through continued commitment and collaboration, Euroregions can serve as catalysts for building a more prosperous and interconnected border region fostering sustainable development in this area.

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