

## Polish Sceptics and Czech Optimists: Perception of the Development within Euroregion Beskydy

### *Szkeptikus lengyelek és optimista csehek: fejlesztési percepciók a Beszkidek Eurorégióban*

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**ABSTRACT:** The openness of space is one of the fundamental ideas behind the existence of the European Union. The benefits arising from this should outweigh the disadvantages associated with it. An advantage of openness is the possibility of integrating border regions of different countries into a consistent functional whole where cross-border cooperation takes place. Resulting mechanisms can lead to endogenously driven development of the territories that are typically on the periphery of their countries. However, reality is much more diverse. This is valid also in case of Central and Eastern European countries, where general socioeconomic processes take different forms in different regions and places. The same holds true also for territorial units, such as Euroregions that represent one of the most remarkable geographical embodiments of European integration. At the same time, they constitute one of the institutionalised forms of cross-border cooperation. Euroregions bear a twofold importance in post-communist countries that for a long time suffered from pretty limited cross-border interactions and cooperation. Our article delves into the municipalities of Euroregion Beskydy at the Polish-Czech border. The main objective of the paper is to analyse and assess strengths and weaknesses of the development as perceived by Polish and Czech municipalities in the framework of Euroregion Beskydy.

The article concentrates primarily on a qualitative dimension of the whole issue. This is partly supplemented by a quantitative perspective. The investigation mirrors the state of municipalities on Czech and Polish sides of Euroregion Beskydy from the perspective of municipal managements. From the methodical perspective, the questionnaire was utilised. This allowed respondents to identify the principal strengths and weaknesses of their municipalities based on their own knowledge and perceptions. The questions had a nominal character, and by aggregating similar responses, broader, consistent categories of strengths and weaknesses were established and analyzed. Respondents could name principal strengths and weaknesses of their municipalities on the basis of their own perception. The purpose was to identify substantial developmental domains or problem characteristics in individual municipalities of the researched Euroregion. At the same, it



has been found out to what extent optimistic or pessimistic moods are prevailing in individual municipalities of the Euroregion. The research question posed in the framework of this paper is as follows: what are the most frequently mentioned strengths of municipal development at Polish and Czech side of Euroregion Beskydy? The results brought an interesting difference in the perception of the municipal development within Euroregion Beskydy. Respondents on the Polish side of the Euroregion can be characterised by higher rate of scepticism when compared with their Czech counterparts. On the Czech side of the Euroregion, slightly optimistic view on municipal lives is prevailing.

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**ABSZTRAKT:** *Az eurorégiók az európai integráció egyik legfigyelemreméltóbb földrajzi megtestesülését képviselik. Kettős jelentőséggel bírnak a posztkommunista országokban, amelyek hosszú ideig meglehetősen korlátozott határokon átnyúló interakcióktól és együttműködésektől szenvedtek. Cikkünk a lengyel-cseh határon fekvő Beszkidek Eurorégió településeit mutatja be. A kvalitatív és kvantitatív módszertant alkalmazó tanulmány fő célja, hogy elemezze és értékelje a lengyel és cseh önkormányzatok által elindított fejlesztési tevékenység erősségeit és gyengeségeit a Beszkidek Eurorégióban. A vizsgálat a határ menti települések állapotát tükrözi az önkormányzatok szemszögéből. A válaszadók saját percepcióik alapján azonosították településeik fő erősségeit és gyengeségeit. A cél az volt, hogy a vizsgált eurorégió egyes településein lényeges fejlesztési területeket vagy problémajellemzőket azonosítsunk. Kiderült ugyanakkor az is, hogy az eurorégió egyes településein mennyire érvényesül optimista vagy pesszimista hangulat.*

*A tanulmány keretében feltett fő kutatási kérdés a következő: melyek az önkormányzati fejlesztés leggyakrabban említett erősségei a Beszkidek Eurorégió lengyel és cseh oldalán? Az eredmények különbséget mutatnak a településfejlesztés megítélésében. Az eurorégió lengyel oldalán lévő válaszadókat cseh társaikhoz képest magasabb szkepticizmus jellemzi, míg a cseh oldalon optimistább szemlélet uralkodik az önkormányzati létről.*

## Introduction

People are crossing borders for the sake of different reasons. These may include a wide spectrum of activities encompassing commuting, work, and leisure. The democratic character of societies usually guarantees that borders can be crossed freely and in a non-organised way. Naturally, cross-border cooperation is built upon these principles. Subsequently, cross-border cooperation is generally orientated towards the systemic creation of coherent territories, for which an integrated development is concomitant (Aagesen et al. 2022).

Continuously evolving transformation of spatial flows based on the gradual elimination of formal barriers can be beneficial in the context of the creation of naturally interconnected regions. This includes both material and intangible

dimensions. As a consequence, the integration of regions – also through existing borders – transforms existing spatial patterns.

These natural processes represent an inseparable part of the development within Europe and especially in European Union countries. Not surprisingly, numerous studies have been devoted to the role, processes and impacts of the European integration in the context of cross-border cooperation. Investigations have been targeted primarily to different forms of cross-border cooperation as well as to various types of territories, for which peripheral or semi-peripheral positions are symptomatic (see Keating 2013; Medeiros 2015 and 2018; Telle 2017; Jakubowski 2020, 2022; Balogh, Pete 2018).

In this context, special attention should be devoted to the wider socio-economic context in which the above transformations take place. While the natural evolution that is concomitant for the advanced western countries contributes to natural integration with a bottom-up character, in the case of Central and Eastern Europe countries, the socio-economic processes do not follow the same developmental trajectory. Particular manifestations of East-West divide can be contemplated in both material structures of the territories, as well as within the intangible dimension held by people and expressed primarily via informal institutions (Gorzalak 1996; Bachtler et al. 2000; Telle 2017; Lux 2018; Lux et al. 2018; Sucháček 2019; Urminský 2018).

Matters become even more complicated when we deal with the formation of transnational territories. Naturally, contemporary socio-economic spatial configuration anchored in the previous history affects Euroregions in a substantial way (Keating 2013 and 2017; Noferini et al. 2020; Perkmann 2003). It is also relevant in case of the Euroregion Beskydy, which represents the object of our investigations.

There is no uniformly accepted definition of the term 'Euroregion'. The literature review shows that cross-border cooperation is the essence of the Euroregion. One of the basic definitions presents 'Euroregion' as a territorial unit formed by two contiguous sub-national units belonging to two separate states (Perkmann 2002; Durà et al. 2018; Howaniec, Lis 2020).

Euroregions constitute one of the forms of cross-border cooperation. These are territorial units linking the border regions of different European countries with common or similar historical, cultural, and often economic traits (Sucháček et al. 2018). Euroregions are created on the basis of an endeavour to collaborate in order to solve specific problems linked to the peripheral territories. In general, they concentrate on the issues that cross the borders and cannot be dealt with on only one side of the border. Euroregions should be perceived as a result of cross-border cooperation on the one hand, as well as a generator of further cross-border collaboration on the other (Dolzblasz 2013).

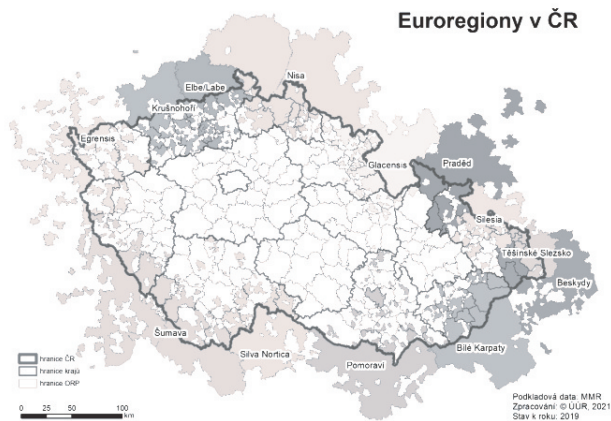
The first Euroregion that appeared in Europe was the German-Dutch Euroregio in 1958. At that time, there existed the distinct effort to restore confidence in cross-border activities and interaction after World War II. With

evolving European integration, many other Euroregions have also emerged, which have further fortified cross-border activities as well as cooperation. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the amount of Euroregions grew rapidly along the borders of the former communist countries. In the territory of the contemporary Czech Republic, the first Euroregions were established after 1991, and today, they are found all along the border of the country (Sucháček et al. 2018).

Our attention is focused on the Euroregion Beskydy that represents one of cases of this type of territory. The origin of the Euroregion dates back to 2000. Euroregion Beskydy can be found in the border areas in the east of Czechia, north-western Slovakia, and the south of Poland (see also Figure 1). Figure 2 presents zoomed-in location of Euroregion Beskydy.

In all three countries, this territorial entity holds the semi-peripheral position, especially with regard to its geographical location and the distance from the decision-making centres of the countries concerned (Sucháček et al. 2018). The pivotal geographical element, which is common to the entire area, is the Beskydy Mountains.

Figure 1: Euroregion Beskydy and its location  
*A Beszkidek Eurorégió elhelyezkedése*



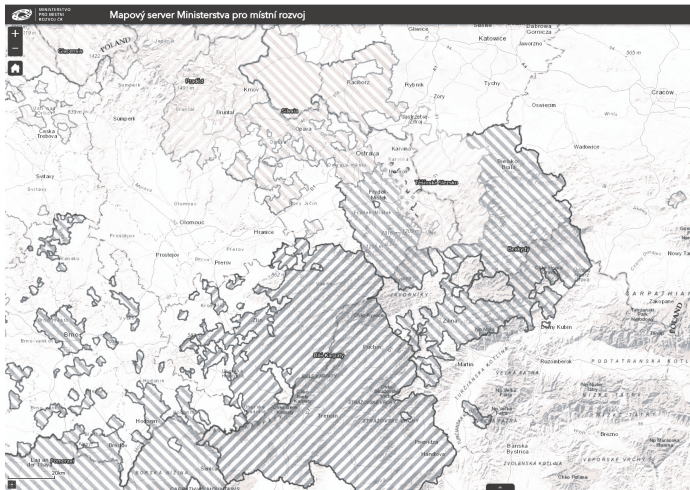
Zdroj: Ústav územního rozvoje, 2021.

Source: Ústav územního rozvoje (2021)

Euroregion Beskydy constitutes one of the youngest Euroregions functioning on the Czech-Polish-Slovak border, and can be perceived rather as a small-scale region: the total area covers 6 143 km<sup>2</sup>, and the total population count in 2014 was approximately 1.2 million inhabitants (see Kurowska-Pysz 2014). The Polish side of the Euroregion covers 52% of the total area with 60% of inhabitants, while the Czech side operates only with 15% of the total area and 18% of the total inhabitants. The remaining territorial and population portions (33% and 22%, respectively) are held by Slovakia. The Slovak side of the Euroregion has less intense and more

formal interactions with its Polish and Czech counterparts. This fact can be accounted for by the presence of Polish minority in Czech part.

Figure 2: Euroregion Beskydy and its location from a detailed perspective  
*A Beszkidek Eurorégió és elhelyezkedése, részletes megközelítéssel*



Source: *Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj (2023)*

Several specific features concerning both Polish and Czech side of the Euroregion are notable. Both are adjacent to traditional industrial areas. Naturally, intense socio-economic spatial interactions bind them to these areas. While in case of the Polish part, it is the Katowice conurbation, in case of the Czech side, it is the Ostrava agglomeration. The overall character of the wider regions are determined by the gravitational pull of these centres. The complementary character of wider regions at both Polish and Czech sides of the border (i.e. industrial cores versus recreational or rural agricultural spots) ensures an intense integration of the relations in the framework of these territories.

It is only seldom stated that in reality, territorial trajectories are often shaped by decisions and policies created and implemented by distant central actors. Such kind of 'external influence' also played a non-negligible role during the history of both analysed parts of Euroregion Beskydy. Central institutions in the capital cities proved to be too distant from real life in both of these territories. For a long time, borders worked as hindrances to the development of investigated territories, as political and administrative borders did not respect the natural spatial socio-economic interactions. Currently, despite generally sound developments in the realm of physical borders, many psychological frontiers still remain in peoples' minds. These cannot be mitigated or even removed at once; on the contrary, their redress will require much longer time (see also Sucháček 2022).

Last but not least, as a consequence of the proximity of old industrial areas and in spite of the gradual transformation of all principal socio-economic structures and a rising quality of life, both Czech and Polish parts of the Euroregion are still perceived as territories suffering from socio-economic problems. These negative images are very often embalmed by the national media (see Sucháček, Urmínský, 2022; Sucháček 2014 and 2015).

It is worth noticing that there exists a cognitive gap in the area of cross-border cooperation in case of post-communist countries. Our investigation focuses on strengths and weaknesses as perceived by Polish and Czech municipalities belonging to Euroregion Beskydy. Subsequently, the endeavour of the authors is to concentrate on filling in this existing gap.

Common cultural roots, identity and historical development generate similar specific institutional heritage in these territories. These aspects can act as intangible assets on the one hand, but also as an impediment to further development on the other.

The main objective of the article consists in the analysis and assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the development as perceived by Polish and Czech municipalities in the framework of Euroregion Beskydy. The primary approach adopted in this paper is a qualitative one, but it is supplemented also by a quantitative perspective. Thus, a fine blend of methodical perspectives facilitates a comprehensive assessment.

The research question posed in the framework of this paper is as follows: what are the most frequently mentioned strengths of municipal development at the Polish and Czech sides of Euroregion Beskydy?

The paper proceeds as follows: after the introduction, the theoretical view on Euroregions and border-related issues is provided. Methodical continuities are depicted in the next section, followed by the results of our study. Findings derived from the analysis and assessment of the perception of development by individual municipalities in the frame of Euroregion Beskydy are debated within the discussion section. The paper ends with synthetic conclusions.

### **Municipalities as basic territorial units for the formation of Euroregions in the era of fuzzy borders**

There are no doubts that Euroregions are receiving a new importance in the framework of the process of disappearing borders. This beneficial process can be contemplated primarily within European space, and applies mainly to the long-term perspective. A whole new quality is brought by the formation of so-called Schengen area, in which a significant part of previous border-related barriers has disappeared.

However, it is debatable to what extent the boundaries remain in the minds of the inhabitants of the border regions. Cross-border cooperation within the Euroregion

framework can help to gradually remove these mental barriers (Anholt 2010; Wróblewski 2016; Kurowska-Pysz, Szczepańska-Woszczyzna 2017). At the same time, it cannot be omitted that after opening previously strictly protected state borders, individual regions have to be prepared to cope also with stronger competition, and should adapt their strategies accordingly (Sucháček 2022).

The whole integration process is based among others on the endeavour to include just border territories. In spite of intense efforts, territorial differences and heterogeneity remain palpable in this respect. Jakubowski (2020) mentions long lasting asymmetry in the domain of economic development and performance.

While some authors deal with more general questions related to cross-border activities, others tackle concrete territories. This may include border areas of the whole country (Jakubowski et al. 2022), a concrete region (Sucháček et al. 2018) or even one town (Wroblewski, Lis 2021). In general, there is an apparent aspiration to improve the integration of border areas, which should lead to the sustainable development of territories in question as well as the whole European Union (Jakubowski et al. 2022; Bellamy et al. 2017).

Cross-border cooperation runs in the framework of different forms of institutional anchoring (see Sanguin 2013; Abrahám 2017). One of its typical forms is constituted by Euroregions. Euroregions became an inseparable part of the whole European space, and are created alongside the borders on the basis of voluntary activities (Durà et al. 2018). Frątczak-Müller and Mielczarek-Żejmo (2020, 9.) perceive Euroregions as follows: “The Euroregion is an internally complex social institution. Its aim is to integrate communities separated by borders, and differing in terms of culture, economy and administration.”

Previous delimitation according to Perkmann (2002) captures Euroregions as territorial units created on the basis of two contiguous subnational units. Subnational units must be formed from a minimum of two different countries. The creation of fundamentals for mutual collaboration, mitigation of existing barriers, and the stimulation of sustainable development framed by the mutual trust of relevant actors can be treated as a basis of Euroregions (see Frątczak-Müller, Mielczarek-Żejmo 2020).

The pivotal idea of Euroregions consists in a gradual spatial integration leading finally to the coherent territorial units. The purpose of their existence is however much wider, and lies in the formation of a spatial partnership leaning on sound inner territorial cooperation (Aagesen et al. 2022). In this context, a strong endogenous bias of such kinds of development is apparent. Such a territory is subsequently developed by means of collective powers stemming from the endeavours of individual actors. At the same time, it should be reminded that there is nothing like a standardised formal structure for the management of Euroregions.

Gradually opening local and regional economies, the augmentation of their productivity, the acceleration of social contacts, and the formation of international and transboundary social networks are forming a new set of

opportunities for the development of Euroregions (Jakubowski 2020). According to Medeiros (2018), the reduction of barriers is of utmost importance in the frame of the development of mutual collaboration. Yet, at the same time, the identification of strengths – including both absolute and comparative advantages – and subsequent capability to utilise them are relevant as well. Very often, longer efforts and a wider concord in the territory in question are necessary.

Territorial cooperation and Euroregions in general became the subject of vivid debates. Much academic attention has been dedicated to the theoretical understanding of cross-border regions. The literature on cross-border regions relies primarily on interdisciplinary theoretical developments. Attempts to make the sense of cross-border regions are rooted in two main theoretical perspectives: new regional geography and new regionalism (see also Perkmann 2003; Popescu 2008).

Euroregions represent an appropriate unit for cross-border cooperation. Perkmann (2007) considers such a form of cooperation as the construction of a new territorial scale. On the other hand, Euroregions can be characterised by numerous conceptual shortcomings. Medeiros (2011) notes that Euroregions are not delimited via rigid criteria; moreover, some of them even lack a legal identity.

In this article, we are deliberately capturing the territorial level of municipalities. Municipalities form a basic territorial unit of the state, and a basic self-governing community of citizens living in a concrete area. They are exactly delimited by concrete borders. The territory of the municipality is formed by one or more cadastral districts.

The municipality is a public corporation, which has its own property. The municipality acts in legislative relations in its own name, and bears responsibility arising from these relations. The mission of the municipality is to foster the conditions for the socio-economic development of the municipality just in accordance with the local context.

Municipal territories represent the basic units from the point of view of the identification and subsequent solution of various kinds of problems. It is desirable to solve these municipal issues primarily in an endogenous way and by local managements, provided that they enjoy sufficient self-governing room in terms of both competences and finance.

Nonetheless, Svensson (2014) rightly criticises the motivation of local managements to take part in the membership within Euroregions. Instead of membership that stems from policy advantages, there exists a strong bias to pecuniary benefits from the membership. These tendencies imply a possible priority of grant thematic areas of intervention vis-à-vis the genuine needs of municipalities (see also Sucháček et al. 2018).



### **Methodical approach to detecting opinions of local leaders**

Our research reflects the state of municipalities on Czech and Polish sides of Euroregion Beskydy from the perspective of municipal managements. Respondents could name principal strengths and weaknesses of their municipalities on the basis of their own perception. The purpose was to identify substantial developmental domains or problem characteristics in individual municipalities of the investigated territory. At the same, it has been disclosed to what extent optimistic or pessimistic moods are prevailing in individual municipalities of the Euroregion.

The survey was carried out in the pre-Covid-19 period. Data were collected from August till October 2018. We used two basic techniques for collecting data called PAPI, i.e. Pen and Paper Interviewing; and CAWI, i.e. Computer Assisted Web Interviewing. Potential respondents were first approached via electronic form. If they did not react on the electronic form, the PAPI technique was used. Researchers addressed altogether 50 respondents on the Czech side of the Euroregion, and 50 respondents on the Polish side.

The final structure of the questionnaire consisted of 14 closed questions and 2 open questions. Closed questions were evaluated from one to five on the basis of the Likert scale. The higher value at the scale, the higher intensity of the phenomenon in question. Thus, 1 marks full dissent, whereas 5 denotes full agreement and 3 stands for a neutral attitude.

The two open questions that facilitate obtaining the specific and context-based information have been utilised. One of them concentrated on the strengths of the municipality in question, and the next on the weaknesses of the municipality concerned. The final 100 respondents could mention a maximum of 5 strong and 5 weak attributes of their municipality. The great advantage is that respondents have not been constrained by pre-defined categories. They could use their own labels for descriptions of the main attributes.

On the Czech side of the Euroregion, 42 respondents out of 50 that have been questioned stated at least 1 strength and at least 1 weakness. Further 7 respondents have been put aside as they stated neither any strengths nor any weaknesses. 1 respondent mentioned only weaknesses of the municipality. On the Polish side, 7 of the questioned respondents mentioned neither any strengths nor any weaknesses. A further 3 respondents mentioned merely weaknesses but no strengths. The remaining 40 respondents were able to identify at least one strong and one weak point.

Results obtained had the character of a nominal variable, and have been further analysed according to the frequencies of occurrence. Individual assertions have been aggregated into thematic categories that are reflecting the whole spectrum of respondents' answers (see also Table 1 and Table 2).

It cannot be omitted that with regard to the character of our investigation, we deal with subjective perceptions of the reality from the side of the middle and/or top municipal managements. Particular respondents of our survey included mayors, their deputies, councillors, or heads of departments. Final assessments are naturally affected by the subjective views of respondents. Emotions, working positions, personal interests, or situational contexts play a non-negligible role here. Thus, evaluations of individual respondents may differ from the reality or data reflecting the real situation from a quantitative perspective.

These factors can be treated as limiting elements of our research. In spite of this, subjective views on the situation in individual municipalities are useful just with regards to their contextual assessments. This is even reinforced by the fact that the research has been accomplished with respondents having competencies to influence the municipal life, equipped with the knowledge of local settings, and co-responsible for the functioning of the whole Euroregion Beskydy.

### **Unveiling municipal strengths and weaknesses in Euroregion Beskydy: Czech and Polish insights**

The results bring us several interesting facts. Respondents on the Polish side of the Euroregion can be characterised by a higher rate of pessimism or scepticism when compared with their Czech counterparts. On the Czech side of the Euroregion, a slightly more optimistic view on municipal lives is prevailing.

The pivotal findings can be summarised as follows (for more information see also Table 1, Table 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4):

- Polish respondents delimited a higher amount of weaknesses of their own municipalities when compared with strengths.
- Polish representatives stated a larger number of weaknesses in comparison with their Czech counterparts.
- Czech representatives were able to define more strengths in comparison with their Polish counterparts.
- Czech respondents defined more strengths than weaknesses when evaluating their own municipalities.

If we concentrate on the composition of answers, neither unique problems nor strengths could be identified. The answers turned out to be rather motley, as they reflected the complexity of analysed issues. Analysis of thematic categories focusing on strengths and/or weaknesses represents a substantial step for the formulation of realistic cross-border cooperation, strategies and scenarios.

As for strengths, the structure of the distribution of answers is relatively similar at both sides of the border. Some 70% of respondents stated that there are 4 and more strengths. As to the weaknesses, at least 4 of them have been identified by 84 % of Polish respondents and 57 % of their Czech counterparts.

Table 1: Main Categories of Answers in Poland  
*Fő válaszkategóriák Lengyelországban*

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Frequency of answers</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>	<i>Frequency of answers</i>
Amenities	46	Lack of amenities	45
Place attractiveness	31	Transport, infrastructure and transport	38
Entrepreneurship and employment	22	Bad environment	35
Favourable geographical location	16	Physical infrastructure	28
Cooperation, participation and local politics	15	Cooperation, participation and local politics	17
Transport, infrastructure and transport	11	Promotion and communication	15
Infrastructure	11	Entrepreneurship and employment	9
Promotion and communication	4	Low place attractiveness and population	1
Miscellaneous	0		

*Source: Authors' construction*

Several facts can be derived from the analysis of strengths. Rank of the importance of thematic categories bears some resemblance. The first three positions are occupied by amenities, place attractiveness, and entrepreneurship and employment. This applies to both Czech and Polish municipalities. Nonetheless, the ranks of these categories as well as the intensity of their perceptions are different.

In case of Polish municipalities, the top of the hierarchy of investigated categories is occupied by amenities. These amenities include sports and cultural infrastructure, the presence of schools and kindergartens, restaurants, shops etc. From this perspective, the Polish side focuses on more practical issues of the life. Polish municipalities thus pragmatically accentuate satisfaction of the needs of their inhabitants.

For the Czech side, the aforementioned category is important too; nonetheless, it occupies the second or third position, respectively, together with the category encompassing entrepreneurship and employment. According to the Czech respondents, the category called place attractiveness is the top attribute of their municipalities. This category is connected primarily with natural beauties of their milieu.

Table 2: Main Categories of Answers in Czechia  
*Fő válaszkategóriák Csehországban*

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Frequency of answers</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>	<i>Frequency of answers</i>
Place attractiveness	44	Lack of amenities	34
Entrepreneurship and employment	28	Transport, infrastructure and transport	31
Amenities	28	Cooperation, participation and local politics	22
Cooperation, participation and local politics	14	Physical infrastructure	21
Promotion and communication	13	Low place attractiveness and population	17
Miscellaneous	12	Entrepreneurship and employment	15
Transport, infrastructure and transport	12	Bad environment	15
Favourable geographical location	8	Promotion and communication	9
Infrastructure	7		

*Source: Authors' construction*

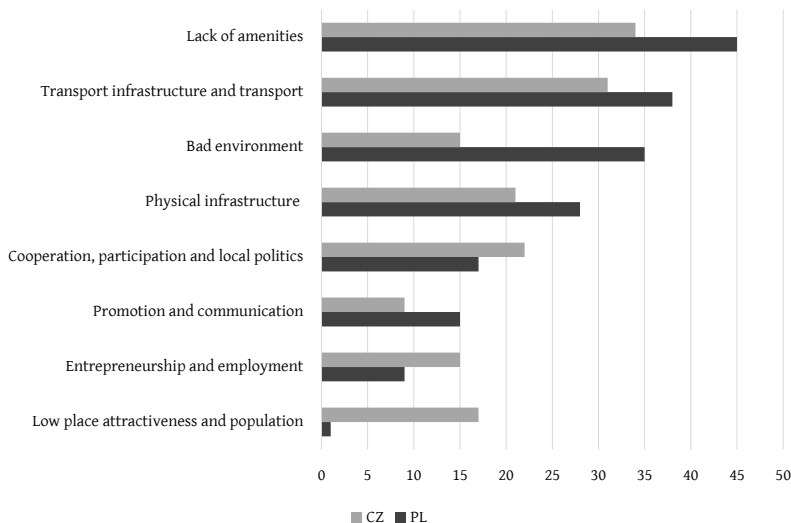
At the same time, the aforementioned findings provide us with the answer to the research question formulated at the beginning of this article. Amenities, place attractiveness, and entrepreneurship and employment are perceived as the most important strengths of the municipal development at both Polish and Czech side of Euroregion.

As to other assessed categories, more differences can be observed in case of the location of municipality in the proximity of borders. According to Polish respondents, nearness of the border is a very strong attribute of their municipalities. In contrast to their Czech counterparts, Polish municipalities are more apt to utilise the socio-economic potential of the territory, which includes the augmentation of market opportunities, and demand related to local products and services. On the other hand, Czech respondents proved to be a bit more positive when evaluating marketing activities, such as communication and promotion.

The presence of physical infrastructure, such as sewage systems, waste water treatment plants, gas pipelines and some others, represents a further important category. On the Czech side, there was no mention of this, which can be ascribed to the fact that physical infrastructure is taken for granted. Nonetheless, if there is no physical infrastructure, or existing physical infrastructure is in a bad state, it appears within weaknesses.

Analysis of the perception of weaknesses shows a relatively same pattern in both the Czech and Polish sides of the Euroregion Beskydy. The first two

Figure 3: Weaknesses in Polish and Czech municipalities (number of mentions)  
*A lengyel és cseh önkormányzatok gyengeségei (említések száma)*



Source: Authors' construction

positions are occupied by Amenities and Transportation Infrastructure in both cases. It is worth noticing that Amenities constitute the category that is assessed largely inconsistently, i.e., both positively and negatively. The inconsistency stems from the fact that Amenities cover a large spectrum of facilities. If we talk about small municipalities, it is barely conceivable that every single municipality has a doctor or a school, a kindergarten, or even a swimming pool.

Transportation infrastructure is typically perceived as a weakness in connection with its poor state. The physical state of roads or pavements is rather widely criticised. The same applies to traffic congestions. On the Polish side, there appeared complaints regarding the frequency of public transportation. On both the Czech and Polish sides of the Euroregion, the insufficient network of cycling routes has been criticised. As already mentioned, there is no common border and that is why common solutions of transportation issues are often constrained. Solutions are often possible only when co-operating with non-members of the Euroregion.

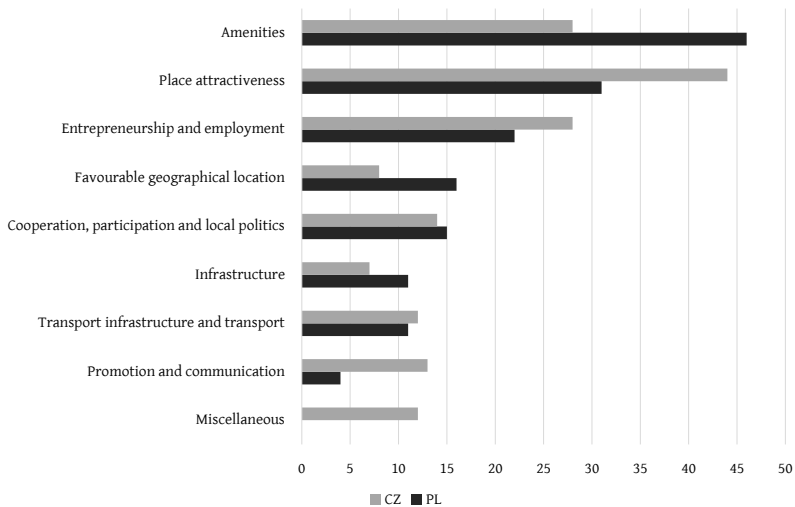
Perception of the quality of environment in both investigated parts of the Euroregion differs substantially. The Polish side perceives the environmental problems with much higher intensity. The most frequent issues include air pollution, polluted water, or excessive noise. Environment is treated as a weakness by a full 81% of Polish respondents, and 36% of Czech respondents.

The Czech side is sensitive to the problems of local politics, cooperation, and participation of local population and further subjects of territorial development. On the Czech side, issues related to the entrepreneurship and employment are

more pronounced. The same holds true for the inadequate state or non-presence of physical infrastructure.

There are also some other domains that are perceived as problematic in Czech municipalities. It includes wider socio-demographic characteristics of the population, such as an immigration of the population, the presence of minorities, weak qualification of the labour, or lower purchasing power. Contrary to that, Polish municipalities do not treat wider socio-demographic characteristics of their populations as problematic.

Figure 4: Strengths in Polish and Czech municipalities (number of mentions)  
*A lengyel és cseh önkormányzatok erősségei (emléltések száma)*



Source: Authors' construction

In the case of Czech municipalities, a higher degree of entrepreneurial activities would be beneficial as this would facilitate larger employment. On the other hand, in Polish communities, there exists a room for the improvement of marketing activities, such as promotion or communication.

## Discussion

The investigation brought a couple of interesting findings. In sum, Polish representatives have mentioned larger amounts of weaknesses in comparison with their Czech counterparts, and Czech representatives have been able to delimitate more strengths in comparison with their Polish counterparts.

As to the comparison of strengths and weaknesses of Polish and Czech municipalities, Polish respondents mentioned a higher number of weaknesses of

their own municipalities when compared with their strengths. In case of Czech municipalities, more strengths than weaknesses have been identified.

Thus, a relatively pessimistic or sceptical attitude of Polish respondents in comparison with their Czech counterparts could be found. This can be accounted for by the fact that the Polish countryside is relatively underdeveloped in comparison with Polish towns and cities that underwent a substantial modernisation in the years of systemic transformations (see e.g., Gorzelak 1996, 1998; Lux 2018; Sucháček 2005). Quite negative attitudes of the Polish part of Euroregion Beskydy can be attributed to this urban-rural polarisation in Poland, as the Polish part of Euroregion Beskydy is composed primarily of small towns and rural settlements.

In contrast, Czechia has a smaller territory than Poland, and the difference between urban and rural areas is not so high, which can be treated as the consequence of country's development during the period of socialism. And since for the settlement systems, a large inertia is concomitant, previous developments that aimed to draw nearer urban and rural areas find their projections until now. These facts offer us a plausible explanation of generally more optimistic attitudes on the Czech side of Euroregion Beskydy, which does not suffer from any substantial gap in relation to urban structures of the country.

It has been found out that in case of Polish municipalities, the most frequently mentioned strength is represented by amenities. These amenities include sports and cultural infrastructure, the presence of schools and kindergartens, restaurants, shops etc. Polish municipalities also turned out to be much more sensitive in terms of the lack of amenities. From this point of view, the Polish side concentrates on more practical issues of life. Investigated Polish municipalities rather pragmatically stress the satisfaction of the needs of their own inhabitants.

In contrast, Czech respondents accentuated primarily the category called place attractiveness as the top attribute of their municipalities. This category was in their view substantially connected with natural beauties and a good environment of their milieu. Interestingly, Czech municipalities quite frequently mentioned the Beskydy mountains, which can be in a way treated as a uniting element of the Czech part of the Euroregion, forming its specific identity *sui generis*.

The possible explanation of the above-mentioned phenomena can be found in the history of both investigated countries. In Poland, the institution of private entrepreneurship survived the pressure of the communist regime. In the Czech Republic, on the contrary, private businesses could not exist during the whole socialist period. This institutional-evolutionary difference intensely affected the development of entrepreneurship in the years of systemic transformation in both countries after 1989. While Polish entrepreneurs already possessed certain know-how at the beginning of restructuring, 'learning by doing' was concomitant for their Czech counterparts. Entrepreneurship in the Czech Republic thus developed quantitatively rather than qualitatively (Sucháček 2005). This might also influence the attitudes of respondents from both sides of Euroregion when Poles

manifest themselves as more pragmatic, and with higher business drive. These results are also compliant with Dołzbłasz (2013), Svensson (2014) or Howaniec and Lis (2020).

It is also interesting and worth noticing that the category called low place attractiveness and unfavourable population characteristics turned out to be perceived as a weakness in the Czech part of the Euroregion with much higher intensity. In Polish municipalities it played a nearly negligible role.

The different perception of development in the Polish and Czech parts of Euroregion Beskydy can be quite satisfactorily accounted for by their institutional differences. While from the outer perspective, their informal institutions seem to resemble each other, inner and more detailed investigation discloses their genuine heterogeneity.

The dissimilarity of informal institutions in Poland and the Czech Republic is apparent. In the Czech Republic, secular-rational values are prevailing to the detriment of traditional ones. This is caused among others by the traditional institution of faith that survived in Poland during the whole totalitarian period. In 1999, 55% of Poles depicted themselves as strong believers, while in the Czech Republic, the respective portion of inhabitants was a mere 14% (see also World Value Survey 2023).

Subsequently, socio-demographic issues in Polish and Czech municipalities of Euroregion Beskydy can be characterised by different attributes. In general, population issues, such as immigration of the population, the presence of minorities, the weak qualification of the workforce, or lower purchasing power are perceived rather sensitively in Czech municipalities of the researched Euroregion.

## **Conclusions**

Euroregions constitute one of established forms of local and regional development. Their basis consists in the endeavour to stimulate cross-border cooperation. The objective is to develop the territorial units located close to the border. Undoubtedly, Euroregions vivify the territorial integration of the European Union as they facilitate the development of typically semi-peripheral or peripheral territories.

There is always the danger that Euroregions can comprise territories which lack consistency, and whose inhabitants and further relevant actors do not identify themselves with the purpose and the reason of their existence. Subsequently, Euroregions can suffer from a lack of the common regional identity, weak functional integration, and/or inappropriate institutional settings and anchoring (for comparison, see e.g. Popescu 2008 or Telle 2017).



A lot of previous studies devoted to Euroregions or cross-border cooperation lean on the role of commonly shared borders. They strive for an explanation of positive sides and advantages stemming from territorial continuity. In this case, borders fulfil the role of connecting links rather than barriers.

In our case, Czech and Polish sides of Euroregion Beskydy do not share a common crossing-point (see also Figures 1 and 2). Territorial strips of the Euroregion stretch through Slovakia. In spite of this seemingly unfavourable situation, there exists an intense cooperation between Czech and Polish municipalities in the frame of the Euroregion. Moreover, this rather vivid collaboration has lasted and worked well over 20 years. That is why stronger motives exist for mutual collaboration, rather than mere geographical continuity and advantages derived therefrom. Nonetheless, the integration process is of a different type than that depicted e.g. by Balogh and Pete (2018).

The identification of strengths and weaknesses in individual communities provides us with useful information about the situation in the whole Euroregion. At the same time, one can estimate possible future directions of mutual cooperation. The same holds true for the formulation of common strategies and scenarios.

The primary role in the process of identification of strengths and weaknesses is played by municipal managements. These managements aggregate information on the real happenings in individual communities, and at the same time, they have various instruments of decision-making at their disposal. Subsequently, they are able to shape real municipal life as well as developmental directions of individual municipalities.

Municipal managements also act as the primary representative when acting with other municipalities, i.e., from a horizontal perspective. The same hold true for their contacts with e.g., self-governing regions, i.e., the vertical perspective. Finally, the existence of the Euroregion is always dependent on the willingness of local actors to co-operate, as well as the trust of the parties involved.

The great advantage of our research was that individual respondents have not been constrained by pre-defined categories. On the other hand, we dealt with subjective perceptions of reality from the side of the middle and/or top municipal managements, i.e. the respondents of our survey.

Our research reflected the state of municipalities on Czech and Polish sides of Euroregion Beskydy from the perspective of municipal managements. Respondents could name principal strengths and weaknesses of their municipalities only on the basis of their own perception. In that way, the principal developmental domains or problem characteristics in individual municipalities of the researched Euroregion have been identified. At the same, it has been found out, to what extent optimistic or pessimistic moods are prevailing in individual municipalities of the Euroregion.

The results brought an interesting difference in the perception of the municipal development within Euroregion Beskydy. In general, respondents on the Polish side of the Euroregion can be characterised by a higher rate of

pessimism or scepticism when compared with their Czech counterparts. On the Czech side of the Euroregion, a slightly more optimistic view on municipal developments is prevailing.

It has been also found out that Polish municipalities focus upon more practical issues of life. The Polish side rather pragmatically strives for the satisfaction of the needs of their own inhabitants. In comparison, Czech municipalities mainly stressed place attractiveness as their top asset.

In sum, it turned out that there exists a distinct differentiation in the perception of strengths and weaknesses of the development by Polish and Czech municipalities in the framework of Euroregion Beskydy. Differences in the settlement system of both countries with the accent on urban-rural polarisation in Poland and less palpable urban-polarisation in Czechia provide us with a satisfactory explanatory framework of material, tangible character. Nonetheless, the explanation would be incomplete without considering a distinct differentiation in informal institutions of both investigated countries, or the immaterial, intangible dimension of the Euroregion concerned (for comparison, see Wróblewski 2016).

Arguably, final evaluations could be influenced by subjective views of respondents. Parameters such as emotions, working positions, personal interests, or situational contexts might affect the final results in this case. Subsequently, assessments of individual respondents may differ from the reality or statistical data reflecting the real situation from a quantitative perspective.

The aforementioned factors should be perceived as limits of our investigation. In spite of this, subjective views on the situation in individual municipalities are undoubtedly useful and often indispensable taking into consideration their contextual character. Moreover, the research has been directed to respondents having competencies to affect the municipal life, equipped with the knowledge of local milieu, and co-responsible for the functioning of the whole Euroregion Beskydy.

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