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The Past, Present, and Future of Cross-Border Cooperation between Municipalities in the South Bohemian Region: A Case Study

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive view of matters of cross-border cooperation, with the main emphasis on the typology and development of structures supporting cross-border cooperation in a selected region of the Czech Republic (South Bohemian Region). The study focuses on the analysis of changes in the methods and ways of cooperation of municipalities in the programming periods 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 (Euroregions, cross-border impulse centers, European territorial cooperation groups, partner and friendly cities, etc.). The research not only analyzes the actual development of cooperation between municipalities in the region studied, but also identifies the prerequisites of and barriers to cross-border cooperation. The data obtained show a significant decrease in the interest of municipalities in cross-border cooperation within the conditions of the Czech Republic in recent years. The current situation with regard to the existence and development of cross-border cooperation in 2024 is not very satisfactory, although it is paradoxically an area strongly supported by the EU Cohesion Policy. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region. A thorough review of existing literature on cross-border cooperation and related policies was conducted to establish a theoretical framework. The practical part of the study is based on field research carried out by the author in 2007–2013 and 2014–2020. This research examined the level of cooperation between the 623 municipalities in the South Bohemian Region (in 2016, there were 624 municipalities in the region). In the case of cross-border impulse centers, the input data were represented by e-mail and telephone inquiries to representatives of individual municipalities and the websites of Euroregions. To conduct a comprehensive study on cross-border cooperation between municipalities in the South Bohemian Region, logical and scientific methods were used. Universal methods of logic ensured the correctness and orderliness of the thought process, with abstraction identifying key elements. Synthesis was used to divide the study into parts, analyze them in detail, and integrate them into a comprehensive analysis. Scientific methods included analysis to examine the current status and frameworks of cross-border cooperation and comparison to identify similarities or differences between the Czech Republic and neighboring countries.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation; Czech Republic; municipality; region; regional development



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1. Introduction

Today, cooperation stands as the bedrock upon which the edifice of effective public administration and regional development is built. In a rapidly evolving global landscape, the imperative for collaboration among diverse entities has never been more pronounced. At the heart of this imperative lies the recognition of the “synergic effect”, i.e., the profound truth that, together, entities can achieve far beyond what they can individually. Cooperation embodies a tapestry of interactions, woven intricately between governmental bodies, non-profit organizations, businesses, and communities, all converging toward a common

goal. It is the orchestration of collective intelligence, resources, and efforts toward shared objectives that fuels progress and fosters resilience in the face of adversity. In the realm of public administration, cooperation transcends bureaucratic silos, fostering interdisciplinary approaches to governance that are responsive to the complex challenges of our time. Cooperation empowers governments to leverage the expertise and resources of diverse stakeholders, catalyzing innovation and driving more effective policy outcomes. Similarly, in the context of regional development, cooperation emerges as a catalyst for inclusive growth and sustainable prosperity. By forging partnerships across sectors and boundaries, regions can harness their unique strengths and assets to address pressing socioeconomic issues, from infrastructure development to environmental conservation (see, e.g., [Peráček et al. \(2016\)](#) or [Peráček et al. \(2017\)](#)). Moreover, cooperation fosters a culture of trust and reciprocity, essential ingredients for building resilient communities capable of weathering storms and seizing opportunities. It nurtures networks of solidarity and mutual support, amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and ensuring that the benefits of development are equitably distributed. As we navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century, the imperative for cooperation has never been clearer. It is through collaboration, solidarity, and a shared purpose that we will chart a course toward a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

Contemporary inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic has its roots in the period immediately following the Velvet Revolution in 1989 when the relations of Czech municipalities with each other and with municipalities abroad were restored (see e.g., [Milošovičová et al. 2018](#)). At the same time, agreements and contracts from before 1989 started to be revised. These had been based on the so-called cooperation policy within socialist countries or on international cooperation of socialist countries with developing countries. The revision of documents was implemented across all municipalities, especially as regards potential applicability, actual fulfillment, and the changed political situation. In 1990, territorial government was restored and other legislative changes were implemented, which strengthened the authority of municipalities and enabled them to develop other forms of cooperation, such as micro-regions, joint participation in business corporations, and common-interest associations of legal entities (alliances). Also, the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic resumed activity. Throughout the 1990s, new regional and national structures of cooperation were originating, and there was further acceleration when the Czech Republic entered the EU in 2004. The late 2010s were connected to either a strengthening of the relations between the private and the public sector or the fragmentation of the existing forms of cooperation, as the case may be. For this reason, a fragmented structure of over twenty possible means of cooperation with other municipalities is available to municipalities today. The cooperation has different degrees of intensity and spatial arrangement in the respective areas, which is caused by various barriers and obstacles to inter-municipal cooperation.

The large number of forms of inter-municipal cooperation represents, on the one hand, a wide choice of opportunities for cooperation, but on the other hand, it is a limit and an obstacle to the development of inter-municipal cooperation, as it can lead to the fragmentation of power and sources. According to [Ježek \(2006\)](#), the lack of a coherent conception of inter-municipal cooperation plays an important role. In the past thirty years, quite a large number of different forms of cooperation were formed and they gradually covered most of the area of the Czech Republic. However, the dynamics of their development seems to have been exhausted due to a missing concept, which would enable filling in the blank spaces on the map of inter-municipal cooperation and covering the entire area of the Czech Republic. This step would actively help to provide effective public services within the scope of municipalities and infrastructure, and to remove some disparities; for more information, see, e.g., [Novotná et al. \(2014\)](#) or [Hálová and Alina \(2014\)](#). One of the not only interesting but also promising forms of inter-municipal cooperation is cross-border cooperation.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive view of the matters of cross-border cooperation, with a main emphasis on the typology and development of structures supporting cross-border cooperation in a selected region of the Czech Republic. In particular, the bases for regional development of the border region of the South Bohemian Region (NUTS 2) in the Czech Republic were analyzed. On the basis of preliminary indications based on the personal experience of the author as a member of the Commission for the Strategic Development of the Statutory City of České Budějovice (Czech Republic), the European Commission's Eurobarometer 422 and 423 surveys (for example, only one fifth of all citizens are aware of the EU's investment in border regions) and statistical data on the drawing of funding from European funds (approximately 30% of municipalities out of 6253 municipalities did not make use of the EU funds in the period 2007–2013 at all, and even 60% of municipalities did not use EU funds in the 2014–2020 programming period), it can be observed in this respect that, in the region investigated, we can see a gradual decline in interest from municipalities and other regional development actors in this area of cooperation, despite the prioritization of cross-border cooperation by the European Union and the Czech Republic. That this study primarily targets the South Bohemian Region is not entirely random, for it is a border region adjacent to Germany and Austria, a region which had been isolated by the so-called Iron Curtain until 1989. From the point of view of regional development potential, it is the region with the lowest population density in the Czech Republic (64.9 inhabitants/km²) and a highly fragmented settlement structure, which is a handicap that can be overcome through various ways of cooperation. These unique conditions have historically led to the creation and development of a very diverse range of forms of cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region, some of which cannot be found in other regions or only to a very limited extent.

The theoretical part of the study is based on a review of the relevant literature. The practical part of the study is based on field research carried out by the author in 2007–2013 and 2014–2020. This research examined the level of cooperation between the 623 municipalities in the South Bohemian Region (in 2016, there were 624 municipalities in the South Bohemian Region, as the case may be). In the case of cross-border impulse centers, the input data were represented by e-mail and telephone inquiries to representatives of individual municipalities and the websites of Euroregions ([Silva Nortica 2024](#); [Euroregion Šumava 2024](#); [Evropský region Dunaj-Vltava 2024](#)). All data regarding the individual municipalities were personally verified by the author based on the author's own local knowledge, websites of the individual municipalities, commercial register, etc. A caveat is that the relatively large error rate of the input datum (its outdated character) may be a problem. According to the author, the expert estimate of the error rate is about 25%. It is essential to stress the importance of so-called local knowledge, which is necessary to eliminate errors resulting from, e.g., the multiple municipalities having the same name. This procedure enabled an evaluation of the level of cross-border cooperation between municipalities (see Table 1). It is not possible to merely perform desk research without verifying the data. Based on the typology listed in Table 1, it was possible to evaluate the involvement of individual municipalities in the South Bohemian Region in cross-border cooperation. The results demonstrate the importance and the role of cross-border cooperation within all forms of cooperation in the South Bohemian Region (inter-municipal cooperation on a regional level, cooperation of municipalities with subjects in the area, and national structures of inter-municipal cooperation), although the study exclusively focuses on cross-border cooperation. The methodological procedure for obtaining and verifying the source data is identical to the evaluation of cross-border cooperation.

Table 1. Forms and means of cooperation of municipalities in the Czech Republic; author’s own research.

Availability of Data	Means of Cooperation	Form of Cooperation
yes	Micro-regions	Inter-municipal cooperation on a regional level
no	Joint participation in business corporations	
no	Contract for the fulfillment of a particular task	
yes	Specific forms of cooperation	
yes	Local action group	Cooperation of municipalities with subjects in the area
no	Public Private Partnership	
no	Union	
yes	Clusters	
no	Specific forms of cooperation	National structures of inter-municipal cooperation
yes	National Healthy Cities Network of the Czech Republic	
yes	Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic	
yes	Association of Local Governments of the Czech Republic	
no	Specific forms of cooperation	Cooperation of municipalities with subjects from other countries
yes	Cross-border impulse centers (CBICs)	
yes	Euroregions	
yes	European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation	
no	Twin towns and sister cities and municipalities	Specific forms of cooperation
no	Specific forms of cooperation	

Note: As a suitable database or other sources of data does not exist, it was not possible to analyze all forms of contemporary cooperation of municipalities in the studied region. It would be possible to collect some missing data, but the data would be very fragmented and the process would be extremely time-consuming and expensive.

The related research questions for the study are:

1. What are the main types of structures supporting cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region?
2. How did the methods and ways of cooperation among municipalities in the South Bohemian Region change between the programming periods in 2007–2013 and 2014–2020?
3. What are the main factors influencing the decline in municipal interest in cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region in recent years?
4. What are the main barriers to the development of cross-border cooperation among municipalities in the South Bohemian Region?
5. What roles do Euroregions, cross-border impulse centers, and European Territorial Cooperation groups play in supporting cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region?

To conduct a comprehensive study on cross-border cooperation between municipalities in the South Bohemian Region, I integrated logical and scientific methods. I began with universal methods of logic to ensure the correctness, truthfulness, and orderliness of my thinking, using abstraction to unify the thought processes and identify key elements. The synthesis method was applied to divide the study into individual parts, analyze these parts in detail, and then integrate them into a comprehensive analysis. I also employed scientific

methods, such as analysis, to examine the current status and frameworks governing cross-border cooperation, and comparison to identify similarities and differences between the Czech Republic and neighboring countries (for the definition of scientific methods, see, e.g., [Peráček and Kaššaj \(2023\)](#) or [Kaššaj and Peráček \(2024\)](#)).

Cross-border cooperation is defined within the framework of this research by the so-called broader concept, i.e., as any formal co-operative interaction between entities from territories located on either side of the border. To be able to objectively assess the level of cross-border cooperation in the selected region, it is necessary to establish ways of cross-border cooperation and quantify their initial and current levels. Due to the fact that municipalities are the basic entity who initiate and implement cross-border cooperation, the analysis of cross-border cooperation is based on quantifying the involvement of the municipalities from the South Bohemian Region in the individual ways of cross-border cooperation. Of the five ways of performing cross-border cooperation, three of them—cross-border impulse centers, Euroregions, and European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation—are identifiable and analyzable using available data. These forms of cooperation have been subject to scrutiny and assessment within the current research framework. However, the remaining two methods of cross-border cooperation could not undergo a detailed analysis due to inherent challenges:

- The first obstacle was the lack of comprehensive data sources. Conducting an in-depth examination of these cooperation modalities would require access to diverse and detailed datasets, which are often fragmented or incomplete.
- Secondly, the complexity and diversity of these cooperation mechanisms posed challenges for standardizing data collection and analysis methodologies. The intricacies of intergovernmental agreements, institutional structures, and funding mechanisms further complicate the research process.

Moreover, the research constraints extend beyond data availability to financial considerations. Analyzing these two forms of cooperation—presumably less formalized or documented—would entail significant costs. Gathering relevant information from various sources, including governmental agencies, international organizations, and local stakeholders, would necessitate substantial financial resources. Therefore, while the analysis focuses on the three discernible forms of cross-border cooperation (for more details, see Table 1), it acknowledges the limitations imposed by data availability, methodological challenges, and resource constraints in comprehensively studying all aspects of cross-border collaboration. Efforts to address these limitations may require enhanced data collection mechanisms, standardized reporting frameworks, and increased financial support for cross-border research initiatives. For more about the problems and challenges of the economy and regional development, see, e.g., [Porvazník et al. \(2018\)](#), [Čajková et al. \(2023\)](#), [Khan et al. \(2023\)](#), and [Dvorský et al. \(2023\)](#).

From a scientific point of view, the presented study focuses on the research of (collective) social capital at the municipal level, specifically on the analysis of the network of relations with municipalities within the framework of cooperation of municipalities. The author's approach to measuring social capital is based on the approach of [Van Deth \(2003\)](#): the author measured the number of cases where individual municipalities are involved in the networks of cooperation of municipalities in the South Bohemian Region. First, the first component of social capital, i.e., the objective association between municipalities, is examined according to [Paxton \(1999\)](#). This level of objective network structure shows how individuals in a social space are connected to each other. This makes it possible to interpret the second component of social capital, namely the subjective form of the links between municipalities, since the links between subjects must have certain qualities. At the same time, it must be noted that the position of the concept of social capital and its measurement in the "capital family" are quite weak, which is of course indirectly related to the meager historical support for this doctrine. The huge boom in the concept of social capital at the end of the twentieth century can hardly be explained in any other way than by the ambition to explain the phenomena that arose in the knowledge-based economy. According to [Maskell](#)

(2000), social capital is, as regards its measurability, an overly complicated concept dependent on a specific local context, and therefore it is not possible to put together a universal set of indicators. In general, different approaches to measuring social capital are based on the principle that the authors have a motivation to solve different types of problems (Jančák et al. 2008), which, among other things, is related to the fact that social capital has a significantly “variable” character at different levels of social systems, in different historical contexts (Šafr and Sedláčková (2006)), and also with respect to differences in the order hierarchy of regions.

As regards similar research on cross-border cooperation between municipalities in other countries, the author adopted a pioneering approach in this respect, both in terms of using the concept of social capital and in terms of its practical application to municipalities. For example, Van Deth (2003) applies the measurement of social capital only to individuals. A similar comprehensive approach to the evaluation of the cooperation between municipalities, which includes several forms or ways of cooperation, has not yet been implemented in the Czech Republic or abroad. There are many reasons for this state of affairs, especially the absence of a uniform typology of forms and methods of cooperation between municipalities (the author created it for the Czech Republic—see Table 1) and the unavailability or non-existence of source data. There are only evaluations of the individual forms of cooperation in the Czech Republic and abroad, but there are not many of them. Moreover, they are insufficient as a basis for providing a complex evaluation of the state and development of cross-border cooperation. The lack of interest in comprehensive research on this topic, which is especially relevant at the moment, represents a serious problem (Srebalová and Peráček (2022)). This is something I would like to eliminate with the present study, at least partially.

3. Research Results

3.1. Development of Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe

A large number of typical problems that had been repeated on both sides of the border led to the first attempts to eliminate them in the 1950s. The reason for the negotiations of the representatives of the border regions were, above all, their efforts to permanently secure peace, improve the standard of living, and catch up with areas lying further inland. It soon became clear that the goals set could not be achieved solely through the development supported by the national centers, but that, when the goals had been achieved, the negative effects of the border would be mitigated or completely eliminated. Cross-border cooperation emerges as an important instrument for weakening the negative effects of borders and improving the everyday lives of local residents and interregional cooperation, all this providing the transfer of knowledge and experience in relation to the specific problems of the regions and the promotion of the principles of European integration. Cross-border cooperation between directly adjacent border regions has therefore been a long tradition in Europe. As Gabbe et al. (2002) state, “in some western European countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, cross-border cooperation was first enabled in the 1980s thanks to far-reaching political changes, the introduction of democratic systems and thanks to the membership of the European Union. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, a comparable process could only begin after 1989”. The politically motivated barriers set by nation states during the Cold War artificially disrupted the former economic contacts of the regions concerned and the cultural context. This is also why a special group of regions is at the forefront of the debate on the so-called Europe of Regions, namely cross-border regions that are most and first affected by the unification process (for more details, see Knippschild (2011)). The role of regional actors as an important development factor is confirmed by Hulst and van Montfort (2007), Frick and Hokkeler (2008), Rose (2010), Griebel (2010), Schultz and Knoblauch (2011), Klein (2012), Richter (2013), Huber (2014), Nováčková et al. (2023), and others. Cross-border cooperation has experienced the greatest development since the early 1990s. The main factors are the following (for more details, see Badulescu et al. (2014)):

- Political changes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have opened the way for the gradual removal of the dividing influence of borders;
- Deepening integration within the European Union, where cross-border cooperation has played an important role in the EU regional policy, reducing the disparities between European regions;
- Gradual enlargement of the EU, where cross-border cooperation has played a very important role in the process of preparing the new member states for EU accession and consequently their integration;
- Cross-border cooperation as an important instrument in the development of relations with neighboring countries without the status of candidate countries.

In the Czech Republic, cross-border cooperation began to develop in the early 1990s, thanks to most of the above-mentioned factors. At first, the demand for creating cross-border contact in any form arose in border municipalities. This demand was caused by the communication deficit resulting from the relatively high degree of closed borders. One might say that, initially, a certain degree of curiosity also played a role in relation to the “old-new” neighbors on the other side of the border. Connected to these first personal contacts was the further development of the idea of the systematic development of cross-border cooperation, including its institutionalization (Poštolka and Branda (2009)).

When we talk about cross-border cooperation, it is primarily about the active participation of citizens or entire social groups in the creation of common values and building a cross-border community. It is a purposeful activity, whether institutionalized (e.g., in the form of partner municipalities or other partnerships) or uninstitutionalized, where mutual learning, confidence building, and efforts to understand the other are crucial. Cross-border activities can therefore be seen as a sort of attempt to minimize the role of the border. Cross-border cooperation seeks to suppress the unilateral orientation of municipalities and regions toward the interior, in an attempt to eliminate the limitations on everyday life and development caused by the presence of the state border. The form and intensity of cross-border links are determined by various factors, including, among other things, the origin of the border and its function (either as a precursor to social systems or as an area of intense cultural and other exchanges). The main objective is to ensure that national borders do not impede the balanced development and integration of the European space. Border regions face two problems: the border represents a cut in the economic, cultural, and social sense, and border regions are often neglected by national politics. For these reasons and due to growing internal borders and the emergence of external borders following the enlargement, support for cross-border activities and projects is needed. Depending on the degree of permeability, Maier (1990) defines borders that are “closed”, “partially open”, and “open”. The level of permeability of the border directly affects the cultural (see, e.g., Fichter-Wolf (2010)), social, and economic development of border regions.

In the context of cross-border cooperation, it is also necessary to define the area in which such cooperation is implemented, i.e., the border regions. If we want to define the border regions, we are accepting the existence of the border–inland dichotomy. In such a polarized space of a coherent state unit, there is a border region (or zone) in which the influence of the border (and thus the neighboring countries) can be observed. There is considerable disagreement as to how great this influence is and to what extent it is beneficial or not. Historians and political scientists, for example, often consider border areas to be inhabited by the German-speaking population. The definition of border areas is not uniform, both for the Czech Republic and also in EU conditions, and therefore it is always necessary to define it individually due to the specific conditions that are observed locally (see, for example, Haggett (1975) or Anderson and O’Dowd (1999)). In addition to the distinction between inland and border regions, the border regions can also be categorized. Hampl (2005) divides the border regions into two types: border regions of the functional (nodal) type with strong regional centers, and hence an associated higher intensity of settlement, industrialization, and urbanization, and border regions of the homogeneous (zonal) type, having the characteristic of a peripheral zone with clear “sloping” toward inland centers. In

broader terms, cross-border cooperation can be understood as any co-operative interaction between entities in territories stretching across the opposite side of the border.

The issue of reducing or completely eliminating obstacles and barriers to cross-border cooperation is all the more important, as more than a third of EU citizens live and work in border regions (namely, 37% of the total EU population, i.e., 150 million). In the environment of the Czech Republic, this includes inhabitants of all regions except Prague and Central Bohemia. The borders therefore affect their lives directly and indirectly. Almost all countries are aware of the importance of cross-border cooperation, yet such activity has mostly been realized only in European regions. In this context, Italy points to the need for common European rules, while the United Kingdom pursues a policy of cross-border and international cooperation and implements it in line with community requirements. Only a few countries in Europe are not engaged in cross-border cooperation—for example, Finland says it has no cross-border cooperation between entities, though it cooperates with Sweden and Norway on the basis of conventions (Lipott (2011)). Russia emphasizes the importance of partner cities. Cross-border cooperation is mostly not institutionalized, no autonomous entities are established, and different types of cooperation arise that do not necessarily relate to the provision of services. What applies to this area more than to others is that voluntary agreements and flexible forms of cooperation are usually concluded. France, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands, and Austria have more integrated cooperation models, including the establishment of a legal entity with a management structure. Cross-border cooperation between other countries does not usually allow the creation of new entities, but rather, it is implemented on the basis of simple agreements and emphasizes the role of the regions (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Portugal, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Norway). In terms of intensity, cross-border cooperation can be divided into several levels (Lezzi 1994): no relationships, information exchange, consultations, negative/positive coordination, cooperation, and integration.

The intensity of cooperation usually has an impact on the development of the form that such cooperation takes, even though the intensity of cooperation can vary across the different forms. Regarding the form of cooperation, several developmental stages can be observed (Järviö 2011):

- Informal cooperation. A considerable portion of cooperation takes place informally, both in the past and now. Cooperation works on the basis of an unwritten agreement and is not formalized in any way.
- Signed cooperation agreement. This is the beginning of the formalization of cooperation.
- Joint entities (structures) without legal personality. This is a higher form of cooperation that is no longer short-term cooperation and starts being systematically promoted and developed.
- Joint entities with legal personality. Various entities may have a legal personality under either private or public law.

Formalized cross-border cooperation has five basic forms in the conditions of the Czech Republic:

- Cross-border impulse centers—Impulse centers offer impulse and supporting activities in cross-border projects and activities of everyday life. Economic, cultural, and social cooperation in the region help overcome existing prejudices and motivate the population to work together across borders.
- Euroregions—A Euroregion can be characterized as a form of cross-border cooperation between the local or regional self-administration of border regions of two or more countries sharing a border, where cooperation aims at coordinating joint efforts and implementing joint activities in different areas of life in accordance with national law and international law standards, in order to address common problems, taking into account the interests of people who inhabit this territory on both sides of the border. In European politics, the term “Euroregion” usually refers to the structure of transnational cooperation between two (or more) neighboring territories located in different European countries.

- **European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation**—One of the latest forms of foreign/cross-border cooperation is the so-called European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). The political strategy of the European Committee of the Regions, adopted by the Committee of the Regions council in December 2006, states the following (Dušek 2013): “The EGTC is a new legal instrument that allows the creation of stable structures for territorial cooperation on the cross-border, transnational and interregional level. First and foremost, it must be understood as an instrument supporting territorial cooperation under the Structural Funds, although the EGTC Regulation allows it to be used outside the Cohesion Policy and, more generally, outside EU funding. The EGTC can actually be used for cooperation in such domains as public health, public transport, disaster prevention or the creation of transnational tourism structures. In addition to this, the EGTC will be open to national funding and will be an additional tool for the implementation of PPP strategies”.
- **Partner cities and towns**—Partner cooperation between towns and municipalities is a form of long-term international cooperation between municipalities consisting of regular meetings between the representatives of towns and their citizens and is mostly based on an official document (partnership agreement) or on a resolution by the city/municipality authorities. Partner cooperation, as a natural tool for international cooperation between cities and municipalities during their long existence, has shown its contribution to the greater understanding between peoples and cultures.
- **Specific forms of cooperation**—Within the cooperation between municipalities and entities from other countries, municipalities can participate (on the European level) in a number of associations defending the interests of towns and municipalities, e.g., the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the Council of Europe (CLRAE), the European Council of Municipalities and Regions (CEMRs), or the Committee of the Regions. Ad hoc informal cross-border cooperation, for example, in the cultural field, can belong here as well. An entirely new form of cooperation has been, since 2009, the Covenant of Mayors, a major European initiative aimed at local and regional authorities that volunteer to increase energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources in their territory.

If we focus on the current cross-border potential of the Czech Republic’s cooperation with the neighboring countries, the relationship with Germany and Austria is today very diverse and dynamic, more so than in other border areas. Relationships are intense here, but there has been a decline in cross-border links over the last few years, which is particularly visible if we take into account the euphoria concerning the contact with Bavaria and Austria in the 1990s. Unlike in the border regions with Poland and Slovakia, the links in these areas are more economically and pragmatically oriented in terms of win–lose (for more details, see Knippschild (2011)).

3.2. Development of Cross-Border Cooperation in the Czech Republic

Recent cross-border cooperation has its roots in the Czech Republic in the period immediately following the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when Czech municipalities re-established relationships with foreign municipalities (for example, the city of Brno immediately in 1989 with Stuttgart, Vrchlabí, with Trouville sur Mer, and Beroun with Goslar). At the same time, revisions of pre-1989 agreements and contracts resulting from the so-called cooperation policy within the socialist camp countries started, and/or there was international cooperation between socialist countries and developing countries. The revision of the relevant documents took place across all municipalities, in particular from the point of view of possible applicability, material implementation, and the changed political situation (see, e.g., the 1971 non-functioning agreement on the partnership between Prague and East Berlin versus the still functioning cooperation between Tábor and Kostnice since 1984).

In 1990, there was a “re-establishment” of territorial self-government and other legislative changes that strengthened the powers of municipalities and allowed them to develop other forms of cooperation, such as micro-regions, joint participation in business corpora-

tions, and interest groups of legal entities (associations). The activity of the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic was restored. The whole period of the 1990s involved the emergence of new regional and national cooperation structures, and further acceleration occurred in connection with the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in 2004. The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century was connected to the strengthening of relations between the private and the public sector and with the splitting of existing forms of cooperation, so that regional development actors now face a fragmented structure with more than twenty possible ways of cooperation (for more details, see Figure 1). In individual areas, however, this cooperation has different intensities and spatial arrangements, as can be demonstrated by the example of cross-border cooperation in the Czech Republic, which has been developing very slowly—the relationships between partner towns and municipalities were restored in 1989; the Euroregion was formed right after that in 1991. Other forms are already inherently tied to the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union (from 2000 the cross-border impulse centers, and from 2009 the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation). With the exception of Prague and the Central Bohemian Region, all regions (NUTS 2 level) in the Czech Republic are involved in cross-border cooperation.

1989	• twin towns and sister cities and municipalities
1990	• microregions
1990	• joint participation in business corporations
1990	• alliance (common-interest association of legal entities)
1990	• Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic
1991	• Euroregion
1994	• National Healthy Cities Network of the Czech Republic
1998	• Union of Towns and Municipalities of the South Bohemian Region
2000	• contract for the fulfilment of a particular task
2000	• cross-border impulse centres (CBICs)
2002	• local action group
2003	• local Agenda 21
2003	• clusters
2006	• Public Private Partnership
2006	• Public Public Partnership
2007	• National Network of Local Action Groups of the Czech Republic
2008	• Association of Local Governments of the Czech Republic
2009	• European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation

Figure 1. Historical development and fragmentation of inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic; author's own research.

Amid this intricate web of collaboration, the landscape of regional development continues to evolve, propelled by innovation and adaptation. As we navigate the complexities of a globalized world, new paradigms of cooperation emerge, challenging traditional boundaries and reshaping the way stakeholders engage with one another. In response to shifting geopolitical dynamics and emerging socioeconomic trends, novel forms of cross-border collaboration are taking root, transcending geographical constraints and fostering deeper integration among diverse communities. From collaborative research initiatives to joint infrastructure projects, these innovative approaches hold the promise of unlocking untapped potential and driving sustainable growth across borders. As regional actors embrace this era of unprecedented connectivity and interdependence, the journey toward collective prosperity and resilience gains newfound momentum.

3.2.1. Cross-Border Impulse Centers

Cross-border cooperation between municipalities and towns in the South Bohemian Region has developed considerably in the past as part of the so-called cross-border impulse centers, especially in connection with the accession of the Czech Republic to the EU and the Schengen area. However, this kind of cooperation unfortunately shows how EU financial support can create “artificial” cooperation, without a vision for long-term sustainability and its functioning. At the beginning of the programming period in 2007–2013, there were four impulse centers in the South Bohemian Region (Impulse Center Nová Bystřice, Impulse Center Slavonice, Cross-Border Impulse Center České Velenice, and Cross-border Impulse Center Sdružení Růže), which covered 31 municipalities; the centers in Slavonice and Nová Bystřice were working independently (Svazek obcí Vitorazsko and Sdružení Růže) with an impact on 40,933 inhabitants (6.46% of the region) over a territory of 1070.5 sqm (10.65% of the region). With the termination of financial support under the last grant M00035 “Establishment of the Euroregion Silva Nortica economic platform”, the activities of all Czech centers were terminated/reduced (on the Austrian side, there has been no center in operation in 2014). In the 2014–2020 program period, the cross-border impulse centers of České Velenice, Slavonice, and Nová Bystřice operated during a mandatory five-year period of sustainability (minimum activity was carried out, operation was ensured by the town administration); the definitive demise of the centers occurred after 2017 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Cross-border impulse centers.

Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2014–2020)	Participation in PP 2014–2020 (Number of Occasions)	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions) in %	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2007–2013)	Participation in PP 2007–2013 (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation
0.00%	0	−100.00%	−32	1.68%	32	Cross-border impulse centers
0.00%	0	−100.00%	−32	1.68%	32	Total

Source: author’s own research.

According to initial intentions, impulse centers were created to support the implementation of cross-border projects and various everyday activities. The tasks of these centers were essentially the same as those of the Euroregions, with the difference being that the impact area of the impulse centers included smaller areas of micro-regions or towns and hence addressed more specific problems. However, when looking back, the ambitions of the founders of the impulse centers appear to be exaggerated. Unfortunately, the activities of cross-border impulse centers have historically focused only on culture and sports. In the economic sphere—for example, in supporting small- and medium-sized enterprises—the roles of the centers have been inadequate and have completely failed. The reason is not only a lack of knowledge, but also the lack of funds. These are, among other things, the reasons for the emergence and gradual disappearance of this form of cooperation. Another factor of extinction is the fact that cross-border impulse centers originated mainly in regions where bilateral relations and cooperation had already existed in the past (for example, České Velenice–Gmünd was one town before 1919). Impulse centers thus created an “impulse” for mutual cooperation that was not needed at all. The disappearance of cross-border impulse centers does not, however, mean that Czech–Austrian cooperation on the regional level, city level, and municipal level will not continue.

3.2.2. Euroregions

In the South Bohemian Region, there are currently two Euroregions: the Silva Nortica Euroregion and the Šumava–South-West Bohemia Euroregion (the Czech Republic is currently covered by 13 Euroregions). After 1991, these were the kick-off element for cross-border cooperation between border regions.

For the Euroregion Silva Nortica, the name Silva Nortica is the historical designation of the area and means “North Forest”. The history of the process of how the common Austrian–Czech discussion platform was established dates back to 1989. The Waldviertel Management initiative was directed primarily at the chiefs of the South Bohemian districts, and later at the newly established regional development agencies in Jindřichův Hradec and České Budějovice, with whom a declaration on cooperation between regions was signed on 13 April 2000. Following the active intervention of the Association of Towns and Municipalities of the South Bohemian Region, efforts to create the Euroregion intensified. The negotiations eventually culminated in the founding of the Euroregion Silva Nortica on 28 May 2002 in the Gmünd/České Velenice Economic Park. The founders are Europaplattform Pro Waldviertel on the Austrian side and the South Bohemian Silva Nortica Association on the Czech side. The Silva Nortica Euroregion includes the territories of Jindřichův Hradec, České Budějovice, Písek, and Tábor in the South Bohemian Region, and the Waldviertel region with the districts of Zwettl, Krems, Gmünd, Waidhofen an der Thaya, and Horn in the territory of Lower Austria. The Association of Legal Entities “Jihočeská Silva Nortica” was founded on 16 May 2002 as a voluntary association of municipalities, towns, and other legal entities in the Czech part of the Euroregion, and the partner on the Austrian side is the Europaplattform Pro Waldviertel Association. In the 2007–2013 programming period, the Euroregion consisted of 41 municipalities; in the 2014–2020 programming period, there were 40 municipalities with an impact on 263,145 inhabitants (41.55% of the region) over a territory of 1703.53 sqm (16.94% of the region). During the survey period, four municipalities left and three municipalities joined the Euroregion, so it is a relatively stable association in terms of the member base. The largest members are České Budějovice, Tábor, Písek, and Jindřichův Hradec, which makes the Euroregion a very strong entity.

The Euroregion Šumava was founded in 1993 in Český Krumlov. It includes the territories of Domažlice, Klatovy, Prachatice, Český Krumlov, and Strakonice. The foreign partners of Euroregion Šumava are Euregio Bayerischer Wald–Unterer Inn in Bavaria and Regionalmanagement Mühlviertel in Upper Austria. Together with these partners, Euroregion Šumava constitutes one cross-border unit. The main activities of Euroregion Šumava are the improvements in the quality and coordination of cross-border cooperation, representation of the region, exchange of information, and participation in the development policies and EU programs. In the 2007–2013 programming period, the Euroregion had 125 member municipalities (89 in the South Bohemian Region), but in the 2014–2020 programming period, it suffered a significant drop in membership to only 97 members, of which 53 members, representing 80,806 inhabitants, were in the South Bohemian Region (12.76% of the region) over a territory of 1932.18 sqm (19.21% of the region). The Euroregion has been expanded by only one municipality in recent years: Hartmanice. On the other hand, 37 municipalities left the Association (most of the municipalities of the Association of Blatensko Municipalities). For more information, see Table 3.

Table 3. Euroregions in the South Bohemian Region.

Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2014–2020)	Participation in PP 2014–2020 (Number of Occasions)	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions) in %	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2007–2013)	Participation in PP 2007–2013 (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation
1.41%	40	−2.44%	−1	2.16%	41	Silva Nortica Euroregion
1.87%	53	−40.45%	−36	4.68%	89	Euroregion Šumava
3.28%	93	−28.46%	−37	6.84%	130	Total

Source: author’s own research.

3.2.3. European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation

The forms of cooperation between municipalities and entities from other countries, for which statistical data are available, also include the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation, which are legal entities created to facilitate cross-border, transnational, or interregional cooperation in the EU. Although some regions, mostly Moravian, have been involved in this form of cooperation in recent years, this form of cooperation cannot be found in the South Bohemian Region. One may often make the mistake of labeling the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation as the European Region Danube–Vltava, created in 2012 along the border of the Czech Republic, Germany, and Austria, and covering seven partner regions (Upper Austria, Lower Austria (Most and Waldviertel), Lower Bavaria with the district of Altötting, Oberpfalz, the Pilsen Region, the South Bohemian Region, and the Vysočina Region). The model that this cooperation represents can be described as a trilateral working community without legal personality, operating on the basis of a political agreement and declaration, not the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation. This form of cooperation cannot be reflected when studying and researching formal cooperation among the municipalities in the South Bohemian Region (see Table 4).

Table 4. European groupings for territorial cooperation.

Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2014–2020)	Participation in PP 2014–2020 (Number of Occasions)	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions) in %	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2007–2013)	Participation in PP 2007–2013 (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation
0.00%	0	-	0	0.00%	0	European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation
0.00%	0	-	0	0.00%	0	Total

Source: author's own research.

At the same time, this is the last form of cross-border cooperation, for which statistical data are available, with entities from other countries, but other forms, such as partner cities and municipalities or specific forms of cooperation, are not available as regards the availability of suitable data resources.

3.2.4. Level of Cross-Border Cooperation in the South Bohemian Region

In the South Bohemian Region analyzed, a number of factors influenced the development of cross-border cooperation in the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods, particularly the inflow of European funds and national budget funds. The modality of certain topics (especially environmental) has also had a significant impact. A certain paradox of the development of most cross-border cooperations is the fact that large and economically powerful municipalities from within the region are involved as the first municipalities, followed by municipalities situated in the immediate vicinity of the border.

At the end of the 2014–2020 programming period, the impact of the lack of funding resulting from the completed drawing of grants from the 2004–2006 programming period and the 2007–2013 programming period began to gradually show, especially on cross-border impulse centers and Euroregions. The result was the complete disintegration of the network and the closure of cross-border impulse centers (−90.6% of member municipalities in 2014) and a −28.5% decrease in membership interest in Euroregions. Overall, between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, almost 50% of the municipal involvement (also due to the fragmentation of the individual forms of cooperation) occurred in all forms of regional cooperation in the South Bohemian Region, but unfortunately at the expense of cross-border cooperation. The decline in interest in cross-border cooperation is concentrated mainly in the northwest inner periphery of the South Bohemian Region and along the Czech–Austrian border area (for

more details, see Table 5). As the research results reflect the respective local and regional specifics, the results and conclusions may be diametrically different, depending on the particular conditions in the given country.

Table 5. Means of cooperation of the municipalities in the South Bohemian Region in the programming periods 2007–2013 and 2014–2020.

Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2014–2020)	Participation in PP 2014–2020 (Number of Occasions)	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions) in %	Δ of Participation (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation in % (PP 2007–2013)	Participation in PP 2007–2013 (Number of Occasions)	Means of Cooperation	Form of Cooperation
26.83%	761	5.55%	40	37.93%	721	Micro-regions	Inter-municipal cooperation on a regional level
10.37%	294	2.44%	7	15.10%	287	Specific forms of cooperation (Union of Towns and Municipalities of the South Bohemian Region)	
20.45%	580	32.12%	141	23.09%	439	Local action group	
4.69%	133	118.03%	72	3.21%	61	Local Agenda 21	Cooperation of municipalities with subjects in the area
0.00%	0	-	0	0.00%	0	Clusters	
18.62%	528	-	528	0.00%	0	National Network of Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic	National structures of inter-municipal cooperation
4.76%	135	3275.00%	131	0.21%	4	National Healthy Cities Network of the Czech Republic	
8.18%	232	2.20%	5	11.94%	227	Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic	
2.82%	80	-	80	0.00%	0	Association of Local Governments of the Czech Republic	
0.00%	0	−100.00%	−32	1.68%	32	Cross-border impulse centers	Cooperation of municipalities with subjects from other countries
3.28%	93	−28.46%	−37	6.84%	130	Euroregions	
0.00%	0	-	0	0.00%	0	European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation	
100.00%	2 836	49.18%	935	100.00%	1 901	Total	

Source: author's own research.

4. Discussion

In the space of just 30 years, internal cross-border cooperation has transformed from a marginal issue for European integration into an important strand of the objective of the European Union's regional policy (Harguindéguy and Hayward (2012)). However,

recent crises have shown that resilience is a crucial aspect of border region development. For example, the partial closure of borders due to the migration flows of 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onward have led to enormous political complications, serious difficulties for the border regions' citizens, and socioeconomic challenges (Opilowska (2020); Andersen and Prokkola (2022)). These recent experiences have underlined the need to further develop border regions' governance (Chilla and Lambracht (2022)).

The cooperation of municipalities today can no longer be considered as a unique phenomenon between several European countries, as it is now implemented in most developed countries of the world. However, cooperation takes different forms reflecting the relevant system of public administration, the legal system of the state, and historical, cultural, and other factors. According to Drulák et al. (2004), the differing importance of NUTS regions in Europe is an example of such diversity: NUTS 1 regions are dominant in some countries (Belgium and Germany), while NUTS 3 regions are crucial in the Czech Republic, and some studies of paradiplomacy often focus on NUTS 2 regions (in France, Italy, or Austria). This diversity can partially slow down regional cooperation, as the regions anchored in different national systems are often incommensurable in terms of status and competence, and this difference cannot be reduced to differences between federal states (e.g., Germany) and unitary states (e.g., France). But, despite the diversity of actors, we can observe certain common features in the process of regionalization that relate to its dynamics and its motives. According to Jech and Štegmánová (2013), the aim of cooperation is always the same: to coordinate the provision of basic public services to citizens through the joint effort of municipalities in a suitably chosen area. This makes it possible to achieve possible savings from joint activities, offer more services when available resources are involved, and ensure a higher level of their effectiveness. An advantage of long-term cooperation is also the sharing of information and experience. One of the basic features of effective cooperation is its voluntary character, which does not exclude (on the contrary, it presupposes) different forms of support in legislation, as evidenced by the abundant experience from abroad. An often-mentioned example is the "French model" of a community of municipalities, which often cooperate to carry out their self-governing tasks in order to save costs. Economic reasons are the motive for the cooperation of small municipalities also in Austria. In Switzerland, for example, municipalities are obliged by law to join in a so-called school community in order to provide primary and secondary education. The average size of territorial self-governing units/municipalities differs significantly in each European country. While it is 1680 inhabitants per municipality in the Czech Republic and 1914 inhabitants per municipality in France, it is 179,000 inhabitants per municipality in the UK and 60,200 inhabitants per municipality in Denmark. According to Davey (2011), this different and often very complex and complicated structure is the result of many trends in the 1980s and 1990s, which include:

- Support for the development of regional levels of self-government from the structural funds following the accession of new states to the European Union;
- Functional requirements for EU-funded environmental infrastructure;
- The desire of municipalities for regaining independence in the post-1989 period, after an era of violent merging in Communist totalitarianism;
- Regional autonomy in Spain;
- Ethnic conflict in the countries of the Western Balkans.

According to Ježek (2015), evaluating foreign experience with the cooperation of municipalities and creating a typology for it is also a very difficult and complex issue. The individual models differ considerably, both in terms of their initiation and financing, organizational structure, objectives, and tasks pursued. The legislative possibilities of creation also differ significantly. If we evaluate different types and forms of European inter-municipal cooperation, most forms of cooperation have only one common criterion (method of initiation), while such cooperation shows considerable variability as regards the other criteria.

From the European point of view, inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic is distinguished mainly by its voluntary character, flexibility, and strong support from EU funds. This cooperation is particularly important for smaller municipalities, which often do not have sufficient resources and capacities to provide all public services and to implement projects independently. Municipalities often associate to create different forms of cooperation, which allow them to share costs and resources for the provision of public services. This cooperation is necessary mainly for smaller municipalities, which would otherwise have insufficient resources to implement larger projects.

If we evaluate not only the ways but also the main forms of regional cooperation in the Czech Republic, the first cooperating partner is always the other, most often neighboring, community, i.e., a form of cooperation at the regional level. This conclusion is confirmed by the development of cooperation in the regions as well as the survey of a representative sample of 263 municipalities implemented within the “Regional management as a way to sustainable development of rural regions” project, registration number WB-14-04 (realized by the author in 2004–2006), which evaluated, among other things, the importance of institutions/partners for the development of the region. Respondents said that other important regional development actors included citizens, universities, and the private sector, which gradually started to show in a dynamic increase in cooperation, first with other entities in the territory, and subsequently in the presence of regions within the national structures of cooperation between municipalities. Despite the priorities of the European Union and the many instruments designated since 1990 for ensuring the balanced and sustainable development of European border areas (INTERREG, INTERREG II, Phare CBC, INTERREG III, IVC, and V), their lack of efficiency, a poor systematic approach, and long-term unsustainability come to light, as evidenced by the decreasing interest in cooperation between municipalities and entities of other states, a decline caused by many barriers and a lack of financial attractiveness when compared with other forms of cooperation.

The removal of institutional and legal barriers and the implementation of regional policies and programs should, in theory, improve the position of border regions in the EU. These policies have led to increasing cross-border cooperation and to the systematic reduction in many cross-border barriers (Medeiros and Neto (2021)). It is, nonetheless, difficult to find a straightforward answer regarding the degree to which regional growth is affected by the proximity to international borders and if/how these border effects have been changing. Some authors identify a positive effect of European integration, such as Basboga (2020), who observes that European border regions’ gross value added grew after the opening of national borders. But, other authors also question the extent of these effects. Camagni et al. (2019), for example, estimate that European administrative and legal border barriers still lead to a significant loss in GDP per capita, while Goecke and Hütther (2016) found that abutting an international border had no effect on the probability of economic convergence in EU regions. Kallioras et al. (2011) found that border regions behave differently, with some converging and others diverging, while Capello et al. (2018b) note that border regions perform above average with the resources that are available to them, but lag behind in the efficient use of these resources—although, in another study (Capello et al. (2018a)), they note that this depends on the type of territorial resource that is explored (for more details, see Viegas et al. (2023)).

The historical orientation of cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region toward solely cultural and sporting activities also plays an important role—in the economic sphere, cross-border cooperation is entirely inadequate and a complete failure. It is not surprising that citizens do not consider this form of cooperation as promising, which is also reflected in the interest of the community in the South Bohemian Region. The disappearance of impulse centers, the “reduction” in Euroregions, and the related lack of interest in the involvement of South Bohemian Regional development actors in the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation are also related to the failure of fulfilling their project intentions. Cooperation in the field of cultural and sports activities alone can be equally well implemented by municipalities in partner cities and municipalities;

there is no reason to set up separate impulse centers or any other forms of cooperation. Another factor is the fact that formalized cross-border cooperation originated mainly in regions where bilateral relations and cooperation had already existed in the past—for example, České Velenice and Gmünd, which were a single town before 1919. These ways of cross-border cooperation thus created an “impulse” for mutual cooperation that was not needed at all. The disappearance of some ways of cross-border cooperation does not, however, mean that Czech–Austrian and Czech–German cooperations at the regional level, city level, and municipal level should not continue. Since 1989, border regions have also begun cooperating with partner cities and municipalities, and this cooperation continues intensively. This way of cooperation, albeit statistically unmeasurable, has undergone a historical development, from the revision of agreements and contracts from the period before 1989 to the rapid development in the 1990s (with a poor concept approach), and the optimization and consolidation of cooperation in the post-2000 period. In the case of partner cities, the benefit of the exchange of experience and information in the field of regional development and tourism can be regarded as a major contribution, but for a number of municipalities, how to select individual partner cities—often from exotic destinations, such as the USA, Israel, China, Japan, and Korea—has become a matter of dispute. The high financial costs and minimal effects of cooperation with exotic destinations in America, Asia, and Australia have led to a shift of such a cooperation to the declarative level only, and direct cooperative cooperation has gradually emerged only as direct cross-border cooperation between partner cities and municipalities, such as between Český Krumlov and Linz (see, e.g., [Baycan-Levent et al. \(2010\)](#)).

The experience of entities in the South Bohemian Region with the functioning of cross-border cooperation has shown, in recent years, that financial stimulus can quickly initiate the emergence and development of new ways of cross-border cooperation, but not a long-term and sustainable cooperation that could efficiently utilize the significant economic potential of border regions. It is now also evident that the different forms and ways of cross-border cooperation have to be built from a bottom-up approach, if we want them to be truly effective, functional, and satisfy the needs of their participants and those of the cross-border area’s inhabitants ([Frątczak-Müller and Mielczarek-Żejmo \(2019\)](#)).

5. Conclusions

Contemporary society is increasingly aware of its rights in relation to public administration and expects them to be fulfilled in a qualitatively increasing trend and in line with the development of knowledge in all areas of life ([Peráček et al. \(2022\)](#)). After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the Czech border witnessed a dramatic development of cross-border contacts that had been interrupted for more than 40 years, and consequently the region has seen a gradual development of cross-border cooperation, which is currently being implemented on both a formal and informal basis. Regarding formal cooperation, several major ways of cross-border cooperation have been established: partner cities, towns and municipalities, Euroregions, and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (for more details, see [Figure 1](#)).

Theoretically, it is possible to add so-called specific forms of cooperation to these ways, namely marginal forms of cooperation, where only a very small number of municipalities participate due to existing barriers (legislative, financial, linguistic, etc.), for example the Organization of World Heritage Cities, where only municipalities registered with UNESCO can participate. However, not all forms of cross-border cooperation have proven to be viable and can survive in the long term. Research has shown that bottom-up initiatives, such as partner cities and municipalities, can be considered as methods of stable and developing cooperation (although they could not be quantified in the research). Top-down approaches have encountered a lack of regional development actors in the field of cross-border cooperation in the Czech Republic (e.g., the South Bohemian Region) or were only a temporary episode, lasting only as long as the funding from European cross-border cooperation programs (e.g., cross-border impulse centers) lasts, which can

be seen in the dramatic decline in interest among municipalities in this area and can also be explained by the ambiguity of the benefits of these forms of cooperation. This opinion does not prevail only among the municipalities, but also in professional circles. The question of the impact of cross-border cooperation on “real” regional development is disputable (including its legitimacy), changing across time and space, but this level is an important platform for promoting regional interests. [Martin \(2009\)](#) states that Euroregions and cross-border micro-regions (a form that does not exist in the Czech Republic for legal reasons) have the potential to become an essential interface at the local level and connect inhabitants of marginalized regions of EU member states; but, on the contrary, [Aschauer \(1995\)](#) questions their meaningful existence. The current situation with regard to the existence and development of cross-border cooperation in 2024 is not very satisfactory, although it is paradoxically an area strongly supported by the EU Cohesion Policy under Objective 2 “European Territorial Cooperation”. The cause of the current problems with this form of cooperation can be seen in the absence of analyses quantifying the impacts of cross-border cooperation, as well as in the insufficient reflection of the real needs of border regions by regional, national, and European bodies, which can be demonstrated by the example of tourism. Already, the past research of the author ([Dušek \(2010\)](#)) showed the positive role that cooperation between municipalities in the South Bohemian Region plays. It can be noted in the concrete financial statement valid in 2015 for all methods of cooperation of municipalities in the South Bohemian Region that the involvement of municipalities in another form of cooperation means average financial transfers from national and European resources amounting to CZK 1.442 million for the municipality. In the previous programming period in 2007–2013, this financial transfer was very often a form by which tourism was supported, but in the programming period in 2014–2020, this was an area of European funds that was no longer subsidized (only projects related to the protection of natural and cultural heritage are supported). However, this negative change is crucial for the border area, as tourism is one of the main themes of cross-border cooperation. The inconsistency of this step is confirmed by the latest studies (see, e.g., [Binder and Matern \(2019\)](#); [Rauhut and Humer \(2020\)](#); [Medeiros et al. \(2023\)](#)), which did not focus on the link between municipalities and the inflow of funds, but on the link between funds and specific impacts on border regions. Municipalities in the remote border areas of the Czech Republic are facing depopulation, primarily due to the departure of young and educated people. There is a loss of historical ties, traditions, cultural heritage, and a general relationship to the land, the countryside, and rural life. There is a lack of adequate transport services, and it is difficult to find jobs in the region. As a result, only elderly and less-educated people remain in the remote communities, and there is a lack people capable of carrying out the necessary functions for those rural communities (see, e.g., [Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic 2019](#)). This means that funding from the European Structural Funds can play a key role in the fight against the depopulation of remote municipalities, since subsidies—according to all mathematical models—have reduced unemployment in the region, helping to boost economic growth, further increasing public investment and stimulating private investment, and thereby increasing the demand for the labor force. If grant programs are set up incorrectly, this can not only lead to the ineffective use of funds through top-down ways of cooperation (see the programming period in 2007–2013), but also threaten the functioning ways of cross-border cooperation and create irreversible socioeconomic changes and disparities in peripheral border areas. The requirements calling for a revision and change in grant scheme settings are unrealistic, so we can reasonably expect a further shift of regional development actors from cross-border cooperation to regional, national, and territorial forms of cooperation that increase the absorption capacity of the territory more than just cross-border cooperation (see, e.g., [Antunes et al. 2020](#)).

The conclusions of the author’s survey presented here concern only the “monitored” set of 624 municipalities in the South Bohemian Region (i.e., 10% of all municipalities in the Czech Republic), but given the size of the surveyed sample, it is possible to consider

that the conclusions and results of the research apply similarly to other regions in the Czech Republic, even though they have undergone a slightly different historical, cultural, economic, and social development. The matters connected to cross-border cooperation cannot only be generalized to the lack of support for tourism. The lack of a comprehensive concept of community cooperation plays a role here. Although there are a number of conceptual and strategic documents (such as the Czech Republic's Regional Development Strategy 2021+ ([Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic 2019](#))), a real and relevant concept of inter-municipal cooperation is missing. The strategic framework for the development of the Czech Republic's public administration for the period 2014–2020 emphasized the need for public administration reform, but, again, it did not come with any specific proposal for a solution. The aim was once again to create only variants of the solution to the current situation. The significance of this issue and the need to address it are underscored by the fact that the Czech Republic is in one of the last programming periods, where it is a net recipient of funds obtained from European sources. This is therefore a unique opportunity to use these funds for fundamental changes, preserving quality living conditions in the peripheral border regions of the Czech Republic.

In the South Bohemian Region, the main structures currently supporting cross-border cooperation are Euroregions and twin towns, sister cities, and municipalities. Between the programming periods in 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, there were significant changes in the methods and ways by which municipalities cooperated. The focus gradually shifted from informal contacts and ad hoc projects to more structured and institutionalized forms of cooperation, which are better aligned with European policies and funding. This shift was driven by the aim to increase the efficiency and sustainability of joint projects. However, in recent years, there has been a decline in the interest of municipalities in cross-border cooperation. The main factors include the complexity of administrative procedures associated with European funds, lack of financial resources and human capital at the municipal level, as well as bureaucracy. Another significant factor is the limited capacity of smaller municipalities to actively engage in complex cross-border projects, which often require specific expertise and experience. Barriers to the development of cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region also include legislative differences between the Czech Republic and its neighboring countries, cultural differences, and language barriers. Despite these obstacles, Euroregions and twin towns, sister cities, and municipalities play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating cross-border cooperation. They provide platforms for the dialog and coordination between partners on both sides of the border, mediate access to European funds, and support the implementation of joint projects that create tangible benefits for local communities. Euroregions thus contribute to strengthening regional identity and cohesion, while the role of twin towns, sister cities, and municipalities in the South Bohemian Region lies in strengthening interpersonal relationships, cultural exchange, and cooperation among cities and municipalities on both sides of the border. These partnership relationships facilitate the sharing of best practices, knowledge, and experiences in various areas, such as territorial management, social services, tourism, or culture. Through partnerships between cities and municipalities, cooperation on cross-border projects and initiatives is also facilitated, bringing tangible benefits to the region's residents and thus contributing to the region's development and cohesion. Partnerships also enhance the understanding and dialog among residents of different regions and promote mutual respect and solidarity.

Cross-border cooperation is a key tool for the development of regions that share common borders and face similar challenges. In the European Union, this type of cooperation is supported by various programs and initiatives that facilitate the coordination and sharing of resources between neighboring regions. The South Bohemian Region, located on the border between the Czech Republic and Austria, exemplifies cross-border cooperation. The analysis of this cooperation provides important findings and conclusions that can be applied not only in the European context, but also internationally. This study focused on evaluating the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region, comparing it with other European regions, and identifying general implications that can

contribute to a better understanding and support of similar initiatives worldwide. The effectiveness of cooperation between the South Bohemian Region and its neighboring regions in Austria, especially Upper Austria and Lower Austria, demonstrates that such cooperation can be very effective when addressing common problems and fostering regional development. Key areas of cooperation include infrastructure, environment, tourism, education, and culture, which bring specific benefits to both parties. Support from European Union programs, such as INTERREG, plays a crucial role in facilitating and implementing cross-border projects. These funds enable the realization of projects that would be financially demanding for individual regions, although the termination of such funding could quickly disrupt established cooperation networks. The South Bohemian Region and its neighboring Austrian regions benefit from geographical proximity and historical links, which facilitate cooperation. This factor is similar in many other European regions, where cross-border cooperation is supported by geographical proximity and historical connections. Additionally, administrative and legal similarities between the Czech Republic and Austria ease cooperation, while in other parts of Europe, differences in administrative structures can present obstacles that need to be overcome.

Cross-border cooperation in the South Bohemian Region can serve as a model for other regions around the world. The key to success lies in identifying common interests and effectively utilizing available financial resources. The significant role of European funds highlights the importance of funding from transnational organizations to support cross-border cooperation. Similar mechanisms can be used in other parts of the world to promote regional cooperation. Strong institutional support and the existence of specific bodies or working groups for cross-border cooperation are crucial. This is not only applicable to Europe, but also to other parts of the world where regional cooperation can create significant socioeconomic benefits. Flexibility and adaptability in projects and cooperations to changing needs and conditions are essential. This flexibility is a key factor for success on an international scale.

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