

The Development of Euroregions in the Polish-Slovak Border Area

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to present the factors and circumstances of establishing and functioning of the institutionalized forms of trans-frontier cooperation, which are the Euroregions, on the Polish-Slovak border. The author presents the environmental conditions of trans-frontier cooperation. He includes inter alia the mountainous type of border, the abundance of mineral and thermal springs, other mineral sources, and a great number of protected areas. The social and economic factors are the second group of conditions presented by the author. The demographic potential, as well as the ethnic, national and religious variety of this border region is described. The author concentrates on the variety of cultures, folklore and the persistence of local traditions. Due to the economic conditions, the transport and communication infrastructures and the commercial cooperation on the borderland are also presented, especially emphasizing the issue of the trans-frontier tourism. The Carpathian, Tatra and Beskid Euroregions, which are established on the Polish-Slovak borderland, are analyzed by the author. He presents a brief characteristic of each Euroregion, particularly emphasizing the functional aspect.*

Keywords: *euroregion, trans-frontier cooperation, borderland*

Introduction

The political, social and economic changes, that took place in Eastern and Central Europe after 1989, provided an opportunity to develop trans-frontier cooperation between Poland and neighboring countries.

Since the beginning of 1990s, Polish cooperation with the Slovak Republic develops intensively, mainly because of the cultural proximity, common historical heritage and language similarity. Due to this, we can claim that this cooperation is exemplar. Till now, the partnership fructified with a number of mutual initiatives, provided by the local governments and non-governmental organizations. As an example, we could mention the foundation of three Euroregions — the Tatra, the Carpathian and the Beskids Euroregions.

The aim of this paper is to present the factors and circumstances of establishing and functioning of Euroregions on the Polish-Slovak border. Because of the great variety and rarity of the natural resources in this area, the environmental conditions of trans-frontier cooperation will be particularly presented. Moreover, the presently existing Euroregions will also be subject to analysis.

Social and economic conditions

The border between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Slovakia is 541 km long. The borderland takes 38.100 square km — of which 22.300 square km lies on the Polish side and 15.800 square km on the Slovak side of the border. There are 4,8 million people living there, about 3 million of them in Poland and over 1,5 million in Slovakia (Urząd Statystyczny w Krakowie 2009: 1–11).

The borderline area is one of the most interesting and active regions both in Poland and Slovakia. High electoral activity, mass participation in religious practices, low level of divorces and suicides rates, existence of a number of foundations and associations, persistence of folklore and local traditions and many more features — all these examples show a great social cohesion of this region.

People living in this borderland are the ones who strictly cultivate tradition. They present the rightist point of view. They are also attached to the ideas of liberty and self-governance. They cope very well with the free market too.

The borderland is a multi-cultural and multi-religious region. It is populated by various ethnic groups, has a number of national minorities and also believers of different religions. We can find there Lemkos, Ukrainians, Romani, Jews and Germans. The Catholic Church has the greatest esteem in this area (Rządowe Centrum Studiów Strategicznych 2000: 4).

Moreover, there are numerous Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic monuments, as well as places connected with Jewish, Orthodox and Protestant faiths. Some of them are catalogued as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The borderland is also a place of numerous centers of religious cults, especially the Marian cult, as well as pilgrimage of the Orthodox, Greek Catholics and Jews.

This is also one of the most significant centers of folk culture in Poland and Slovakia. A number of traditional rural settlements with well-preserved original architecture are located there. We can find folk art in buildings, interior decorations and equipments, objects for everyday use and work tools. All the traditional customs and ceremonies are still cultivated,

the musical and dancing folklore is an example here (Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2007: 21).

This common penetration of cultures and traditions constitutes an essential factor for active economic cooperation.

What's important, the economic development would not occur without a proper transport and communication infrastructure. The contemporary transport system in this region refers to historical routes and railways. Most of them cross the border from north to south.

The border infrastructure is relatively well developed. There are 56 frontier crossings, 3 of which are railway border crossings, and another 28 are crossing points for local and small border traffic. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the distance between different frontier crossings is being reduced, from 105 km in 1990 to 19,5 km in 1998. However, there is still a lack of crossings on tourist trails.

The fact is that the borderland is less economically developed compared to other regions of Poland and Slovakia. Nevertheless, the western area of the borderland has developed faster, namely Bielsko-Biała region in Poland, and Žylina region in Slovakia. The western part of the borderland is characterized by a relatively high standard of living, low unemployment rate and ample investments. This is also the place where the majority of the centers with the highest research potential is located.

The economic structure of the Polish part of the borderland compares quite poorly. Despite the fact, that services and production are the dominant sectors of the economy (about 78% of all the employed in 2004), agriculture still plays an important role (27% of employees). In turn, in Slovakia 95% of all the employed work in the first two above-mentioned sectors and only 4,8% in agriculture. What's more, the structure of employment is changing rapidly, and, as a result, the number of people employed in services is growing (Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2007: 11–15).

An important branch of local economy, both in Poland and Slovakia, is tourism, mainly due to peculiar environment, rich cultural heritage and proper tourist infrastructure. The trans-frontier tourism is developing rapidly — yearly, over 5 million Poles and 4 million Slovaks cross the borderline. However, most of the tourists stay on the borderland for less than 24 hours.

The development of tourism wouldn't be possible without a proper tourist infrastructure. In this respect, the Slovak part of the borderland is equipped better, however, the Polish infrastructure is being used more intensively. Another major problem is that the quality of tourist services is currently deteriorating (Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2007: 20).

The cultural and environmental potential indicates enormous possibilities to create new tourist attractions in this area. The Carpathian region is suitable for new forms of tourism and can meet the requirements of various kinds of tourists. It is convenient to practice active tourism there — such as mountaineering, skiing, speleology — and moreover, holiday, weekend, sightseeing, recreational or business and conferential trips, as well as health-resort stays are also possible there. In the following years, the borderland will remain one of the most significant tourist areas of Poland and Slovakia (Sacha 2000: 132–135).

Environmental conditions

The Polish-Slovak borderland is characterized by a great variety and rarity of natural resources. This area is placed in the central part of the Western Carpathians, including the highest massif of the Tatras. It is a mountainous terrain with a high level of forestation. The main European watershed runs through this region, delimiting the Baltic Sea catchment area — the Vistula basin — and the Black Sea catchment area — the Danube basin. The Vistula, as well as the Dniester, the Pruth and the Váh are the biggest rivers, which have their springs in this region. In order to decrease the threat of flooding, which is a great challenge for the region, special water reservoirs are being created. The biggest water basins are placed in the San River Valley, that are the Orava and the Liptovská Mara reservoirs and the Solina Lake.

The Polish-Slovak borderland possesses the deposits of mineral and thermal water, which are used for health and recreational purposes. Moreover, there are numerous deposits of mineral water, which are used for health and consumer purposes. This specific mountainous microclimate favors the establishment of health resorts, spas and special medical institutions. The borderland is also rich in mineral resources, for example, there are deposits of petroleum, natural gas, salt, sulfur and some stone materials.

The Carpathian area is highly wooded. Forests occupy nearly 50%–60% of all the area. The biggest forest massifs are located in the Żywiecki, the Sądecki and the Silesian Beskids and the eastern part of the Low Beskids (Więckowski 2004: 71–107).

The whole borderland, but especially the Tatra and the Sub-Tatra areas, are among the most attractive karst region in both Poland and Slovakia. On the Polish side of the borderline, there are over 500 caves. The longest and the deepest cave-complex — Great Snowy Cave — is located there. The biggest aggregations of caves are found in the Kościeliska, the Chochołowska and the Bystra Valleys, as well as the Czerwone Wierchy massif. Only 6 caves are now available for tourists — they are the Mroźna, the Myłna, the Raptawicka, the Obłazkowa, the Smocza Jama and the Dziura caves. On the Slovak side of the borderline, there are caves which have significant dripstones. The biggest aggregations of these caves are placed in the Bielskie and the Low Tatras, as well as in the Great Fatra. There is also the biggest Slovak cave-complex there, the Demianowski Cave System, which has over 35 km in length. Four caves are available for tourists — the Demianowska Cave of Liberty, the Demianowska Ice Cave and the Bielska caves. What's more, the Demianowska Cave of Liberty is recognized as the most beautiful cave in the Central Europe (Parma et al. 1989: 68–75).

For many years this high natural potential has been an important subject of legal protection both in Poland and Slovakia. National and landscape parks, reserves and natural monuments are the main kinds of areal system of protection. It should be mentioned that the Polish-Slovak borderline is the only one in Poland, and one of the few in Europe, that is hosting so many protected areas. The Polish side of the border touches with 5 national parks, 4 landscape parks and 10 reserves. The Slovak side directly borders on 3 national parks, 3 landscape parks and 12 reserves. The common borderline divides two international biosphere reserves — the Tatra Biosphere Reserve and the Eastern Carpathians. The number of protected areas is complemented with almost 800 natural monuments and territories incorporated into the NATURE 2000 Program.

1990s saw a significant intensification of Polish and Slovak cooperation in the field of environmental protection. As a result, trans-frontier areas of protected wildlife were established, as well as some common projects and research initiatives were taken up.

Euroregions on the common borderland

The geographical closeness, common natural heritage, cultural and linguistic similarities constitute the basic factors for the development of trans-frontier ties between the local societies on the Polish-Slovak borderland.

The Euroregions are the most developed phase of regional cooperation. Nowadays there are three functioning Euroregions on the common borderland — that are the Carpathian, Tatra and Beskids Euroregions.

What is characteristic of all of the Polish-Slovak Euroregions is that at their core lie the ecological issues. The environment plays a crucial role in the functioning of these institutions. It is displayed *inter alia* in the nomenclature of the Euroregions (their names are taken from the names of mountain massifs), in the areas that are included in the Euroregions (the Carpathian Mountains are the 'core' of these institutions) and, finally, in the cooperation field, which is wildlife protection (Więckowski 2004: 211).

The Carpathian Euroregion was brought to life on the 14th February 1993 in Debreczyn, Hungary. It was the first Euroregion on the Polish-Slovak borderland. It covers the areas of Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary and Romania and was founded by the governments of these states. However, there were some controversies connected with its establishment, for example, a stormy discussion in the Polish parliament and the opposition of Vladimir Meciar in Slovakia. During the initial years, the participation of Slovakia in the functioning of the Euroregion was quite marginal as it was only an associated member. The truth is that at the early stage the whole Euroregion didn't function properly. Fortunately, there are more and more initiatives of trans-frontier cooperation in this region (Szczepaniak 1995: 156–157). The economic cooperation is also developing at a quick pace. For many years now some markets and commodity exchanges have been organized in the local border cities (Euroregional Markets in Krosno and Koszyce), with several Polish-Slovak economic forums taking place. The cultural and educational cooperation is also improving. The local universities are cooperating intensively, for example the Resovian and the Preszowski Universities, moreover, some cyclic cultural events are being organized. Because of the great wildlife potential of this region, the protection of natural resources is a very important issue — since 1992, the International Biosphere Reserve in the Eastern Carpathians is functioning within the Euroregion (Kaczmarczyk 2004: 171–204).

The Tatra Euroregion was established on August 26 1994 in Nowy Targ, Poland. This time it was a rank-and-file initiative of the local authorities and population, which had a communal character. The Tatra Euroregion was a joint initiative of the Polish and Slovak local governments of the Tatras and the Sub-Tatras. Its main goal was to secure a balanced and sustainable development of the region, as well as to unite the citizens and other institu-

tions on both sides of the border. The Euroregion enabled a rapid development of cultural and social cooperation within its borders. Common publishing of books and promotional brochures is a measurable result of the cooperation. As one example of this activity we can mention a bilingual yearbook called 'The Polish-Slovak Borderland.' Another one is the INFOTATRY information system, which helps to exchange knowledge between the members of the Euroregion. The foundation of the Polish-Slovak Cooperation Centre in Nowy Targ and the Slovak-Polish Meeting House in Kieżmark, which are the centers of the trans-frontier cooperation, is seen as a great achievement of the Euroregion. A project of a tourist trail around the whole Tatras is being realized now. The economic cooperation in the region is also receiving calculable profits. The economic forums and border city meetings are being cyclically organized. An effort is made to open new border crossings, especially on the tourist trails. The cooperation between the local governments, schools and cultural institutions is tightening under the auspices of the Euroregion (Nowak et al. 1999: 6–22).

The Beskids Euroregion is Polish-Czech-Slovak Euroregion, covering the Beskids area, which arose on February 18 2000 in Rajcza, Poland. Its aim is to stimulate trans-frontier cooperation connected with the economic, cultural and tourist development, as well as to protect the regional environment. Similarly to the Tatra Euroregion, cultural and social cooperation develops here the quickest. Plenty of promotional events, such as air picnics, glider contests, bicycle rallies and athletic meetings are being organized. As a member of the Silesian Tourist Organization, the Euroregion is preparing its own stand during the international fairs of tourism. The Euroregion coordinates the activities connected with the Cracow-Moravia-Vienna Greenways and supports informative and promotional initiatives. Within this framework, a number of books, maps, leaflets, brochures and DVDs about the region are being produced (Sanetra 2005: 63–75).

Conclusion

Summing up our arguments, we can state that nowadays the environment and culture are the main issues of the Polish-Slovak borderland cooperation. In this respect, tourism, recreation, health resorts, cultural, economic and ecological cooperation, as well as the development of border infrastructure, should be the most important fields of activities of the local authorities, so that they could optimally exploit the region's great potential.

The Polish-Slovak trans-frontier cooperation has been successfully developing since the beginning of the 1990s. The establishment and functioning of the Euroregions in this area constitutes a new quality in bi-lateral relations. The membership of both states in the European Union and the Schengen Agreement presents a great opportunity to develop their trans-frontier institutions. In the following years the activities of Euroregions will be co-financed by the European Territorial Cooperation Program.

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