

DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AND CREATION OF EUROREGIONS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Abstract

Cross-border cooperation, which has existed in Western Europe since the 1950s, has developed in Central and Eastern Europe only after 1990. This paper provides basic information about the development of cross-border cooperation and the formation of Euroregions in the Slovak Republic. This process is at the stage of formation and institutionalisation, due to legislative obstacles. The stage of realising concrete forms of cooperation can begin only after the stabilization of new regional self-government. The spatial differentiation and regionalization of Slovak border regions is accounted for, in this study, primarily by the relations between the given territory to that on the other side of the State border.

Shrnutí

Vývoj přeshraniční spolupráce a formování euroregionů na území Slovenské republiky

Přeshraniční spolupráce, která v příhraničních regionech států západní Evropy funguje už od 50. let 20. století, se ve střední a východní Evropě začala rozvíjet až po roce 1990. Cílem příspěvku je poskytnout základní informace o vývoji přeshraniční spolupráce a o vzniku a formování euroregionů zasahujících na území Slovenské republiky. Kvůli legislativním překážkám je tento proces v přechodu mezi institucionalizační a realizační fází; plnohodnotná realizační fáze v pravém slova smyslu se může naplňovat až po stabilizaci funkcí a pozic nově vytvořených regionálních samospráv. Příspěvek se zároveň pokouší přiblížit stručnou prostorovou diferenciací a regionalizací příhraničních regionů Slovenska, která vychází především ze vztahu příslušných příhraničních regionů s územím z druhé strany státní hranice.

Key words: Cross-border cooperation (CBC), Euroregion, Slovak Republic, regional self-government, Phare CBC, Interreg,

Introduction

The position of border regions is one of the most significant limiting elements of their development. This development is substantially conditioned by their embodying in a wider geographic framework and by creating interactions with the surrounding territorial units. The State border represents an important phenomenon that acts in space as a bigger or lesser barrier and its permeability influences the socio-economic development of the borderland to a considerable degree. The function of the border underwent relatively dynamic changes in history. Since the second half of the 20th century, the influence of the border has gradually been diminishing in western Europe. As a result, border regions can develop in all directions of geographic space, while within centralised political sys-

tems – on the contrary – these regions have a limited possibility for development only inland (i.e. towards centres of the respective country). This often makes from the borderland a socially and economically marginalised area.

In our contribution we aim at evaluating the development of border regions in the Slovak Republic in the transformation period. From the beginning we provide their basic characterisation issuing from hitherto researches on the single borderland sections conducted by: Jeřábek, Dokoupil, Havlíček (2004) and Halás (2005) – the Czech section; Rechnitzer (2000) – the Hungarian one; Drgoňa (2001) – the Polish one; Rajčáková (2005) – the Austrian one; Popjaková (1995) and Ivanička (1999) – the Ukrainian section. The main attention will be paid to the state of cross-border co-

operation with the neighbouring countries, to the issue of forming Euroregions and to their activities since the birth of independent Slovakia until now.

1. Basic characterisation of the Slovak border regions

Geomorphologic conditions and broken relief dissection result in a rather specific regional structure of the Slovak Republic. It is therefore very problematic to divide the territory of Slovakia into the "borderland" and "inland". (This fact is manifested to a high extent also in forming and delimiting Euroregions in the given territory – see the following chapters.)

Substantial differences may also be found in the individual sections of the State border. The dissection of relief along the borderline is one of the reasons for the uneven distribution of border crossings. They (with some exceptions) hitherto remain the only possible points to cross the State border. The border crossings also determine the character of the borderline as a barrier as well as the possibility of contacts and cooperation among border regions. The best road accessibility is on the border with the Czech Republic where one road border crossing is – on the average – situated per a border segment 15.7 km long. According to this indicator, it would appear that the interconnection with Austria is satisfactory as well (one road border crossing per 21.2 km). This border is, however, markedly distinct. Three road border crossings out of all five are concentrated in the area of Bratislava. In the Záhorie region, the passage through the Morava River is provided by a ferry in Záhorská Ves and a pontoon bridge in Moravský Svätý Ján; both much affected by the height of the water level. The interconnections with Ukraine (one road border crossing per 49.3 km) and Poland (one road border crossing per 49.7 km) are insufficient for the moment. In addition, the crossings with Poland are unevenly distributed; an inadequate network of road border crossings is evident especially in the eastern part of the border. On the contrary, road border crossings on the Hungarian border are spread more evenly. Here, in contradistinction to the other Slovak border sections through which mountain ridges run, the Danube River represents a significant obstacle. Sections between bridges over the river are relatively long. The bridges thus fulfil the function of "funnels" for the movement of inhabitants (mostly those of Hungarian nationality) from the Danubian Lowland to the territory of Hungaria. There are not many traffic limits at the road border crossings. But, besides the existing standard border crossings, also the establishment of a higher number of non-standard possibilities to cross the State border would be welcome. Among them, for instance, biking trails, hiking trails and access roads to objects from the other side of the border having a local significance (such as cottages, private lands, small gardens, etc.).

1.1 The Slovak-Czech borderland

The history of the Slovak-Czech border is the shortest, but simultaneously one of the longest. Explanation for this is relatively simple. Despite the fact that the border as a dividing line between the two sovereign countries officially arose only on January 1st, 1993, the territories of Slovakia and the Czech lands had been divided from each other by approximately the same line for a very long time; basically since the beginning of the 11th century. From the geographical viewpoint, the north-eastern part of the border is formed by ridges of the western arch of the Outer Carpathians (the Jablunkov Intermontane, the Moravian-Silesian Beskids, the Turzovka Highlands, the Maple Mts. and the White Carpathians in the longer central part), the south-western part is constituted by the Morava River up to its confluence with the Dyje River. The border area in the Czech Republic is made up of these administrative regions (from the north to the south): Moravian-Silesian, Zlín and South-Moravian ones with the centres in Ostrava, Zlín and Brno, respectively. The border area in Slovakia is represented by the Žilina, Trenčín and Trnava regions.

In the national comparison, the border regions on the Slovak side of the border belong to the most advanced. It is absolutely not the case for the northernmost segment (Kysuce region) where we register an increased out-commuting orientation towards the labour market of North-Moravian regional centres. The central section of the border (Central Považie region) has a central traffic position with a less pronounced orientation towards the Moravian side. The best possibilities to integrate are on the south: a region economically developed above the average within a wider range of Bratislava's influence, good transport interconnection and the location of regional centres in direct contact with the border. From the Moravian side, regional differences among the individual sections are not fundamental. However, when evaluating them comprehensively, we have to state that these regions economically belong below the national average. The weakest settlement hinterland on the Moravian side is in the central part of the Slovak-Czech border.

1.2 The Slovak-Hungarian borderland

The Slovak-Hungarian border is the longest Slovak border. It is defined mainly by the courses of the Danube and Ipel' Rivers. The western and eastern parts of the border lie in lowlands – northern extremities of the Pannonian Basin. The central part of the border is moderately dissected and there are situated the highest Hungarian mountain ranges along it from the Hungarian side. The territory of six zhupas (megye) on the Hungarian side is traditionally considered to represent the northern border regions. Starting from the west to

the east, they are *zhupas* as follows: Győr–Moson–Sopron, Komárom–Esztergom, Pest, Nógrád, Heves, and Borsód–Abaúj–Zemplén. The border area in Slovakia is delimited by the southern parts of the Bratislava, Trnava, Nitra, Banská Bystrica, and Košice regions.

Economic development in the border regions of both countries is markedly different when comparing the western and eastern parts. An exception in the east is merely made by territories of large cities – Košice and Miskolc with their immediate hinterlands, being considerably developed above the average in comparison with both sides of the eastern section of the border. The western part of the borderland has very good prerequisites for development. The triangle of Vienna–Bratislava–Győr belongs to the most promising (not only) border regions within the post-communist countries.

1.3 The Slovak-Polish borderland

The Slovak-Polish border is formed by mountain ridges of the Carpathians along most of its length. Only in a small part of the historical region of Spiš, the border is constituted by the Poprad and Dunajec Rivers. The borderland is mountainous from both sides of the line, with lesser plain segments in basins. In the central section of the border (Tatra Mts.), relief represents the greatest barrier – elevations here exceed 2,500 m above sea-level. We may find the highest mountains of both countries in this area. The connection (aerial tramways, etc.) between the Slovak and Polish parts of the Tatra Mts. is hitherto not sufficiently realised. The border area in Poland is constituted by the southern parts of these voivodeships (*województwo*): Silesian, Lesser Poland and Subcarpathian ones, with centres in Katowice, Cracow and Rzeszów, respectively. In Slovakia, the borderland is formed by the northern parts of the Žilina and Prešov regions. The economic situation, similarly to the Slovak-Hungarian borderland, is in both countries more favourable in the western section of the border. As for Poland, the areas around Katowice and Cracow traditionally belong to the economically more developed regions in the country. Moreover, Cracow itself simultaneously belongs to the most important cultural and historical centres of Poland. As for Slovakia, the most significant centres are Žilina, Upper Považie, Poprad and Prešov.

1.4 The Slovak-Austrian borderland

The Slovak-Austrian border is the second shortest one but extraordinarily significant from the economic as well as political viewpoints. Until May 1st, 2004, i.e. until the accession of the Slovak Republic and neighbouring countries into the European Union, it

was the only border section linking Slovakia with the EU. The border is almost along its entire length made up of the Morava River, just in a rather short section it is the Danube River. Finally, the Slovak-Austrian border is delimited on agricultural lands too but only in a very short segment in the vicinity of Bratislava. The borderland in Slovakia is constituted by the western part of the Trnava and Bratislava regions (or directly by the city of Bratislava), while the Austrian borderland includes the three federal republics (*die Bundesländer*): Burgenland, Lower Austria and Vienna.

An important fact considerably influencing cross-border cooperation is the proximity of both capitals – Bratislava and Vienna. However, from the economic aspect, the situation is different on each side of the border. In Austria, the region directly adjacent to the border (i.e. not Vienna's area) belongs to the least developed regions of the country. On the contrary, in Slovakia, Bratislava is matchlessly the most advanced region from the economic point of view. Spatially, its development is gradually proceeding also to other parts of the Slovak-Austrian borderland – i.e. to the northern hinterland/catchment area of Bratislava (the southern part of the Záhorie region).

1.5 The Slovak-Ukrainian borderland

The Slovak-Ukrainian border is the shortest Slovak border. The northern part of the borderland is formed by a sparsely populated area with well preserved natural conditions. The southern part lies in a plain area of an extremity from the Pannonian Basin and is characterised by orientation towards agriculture. This borderland in Slovakia comprises of the eastern parts of the Prešov and Košice regions, in Ukraine it is the Transcarpathian region with the centre in Uzhgorod.

The regions along both sides of the border belong to the economically least developed areas in the given countries. They are – particularly in the northern parts – sparsely populated and without important industries. On the other hand, this provides space for a potential development of tourism, but its underdeveloped infrastructure is here a main obstacle. Negative is also the fact that there is a stricter security regime and limited capacity on the Slovak-Ukrainian border due to the transition to the Schengen acquis.

2. Development of cross-border cooperation and activities of Euroregions in the territory of Slovakia

The first Euroregions in the territory of Western Europe began to be created already in the late 1950's, namely on the Dutch-German border. In 1958, the term *Euregio* was applied for the first time (it was for a concrete area, later this term was replaced by the

generally used name Euroregion). Then, in the 1960's, many problems pertaining to regional development, education including language one, commuting matters, transport and technical infrastructures or the environment started to be solved in a cross-border way. The principal goal of newly establishing cross-border structures was to support regional development in often neglected marginal areas being quite remote from metropolitan centres of single countries and to overcome cultural, societal and economic differences on both sides of the border. A significant motivation for cross-border cooperation was also to bring together people who thus learned to understand each other and to overcome ingrained stereotypes of perceiving the neighbouring nation through common work for the benefit of the region. As regards the post-communist countries, cross-border integration at the regional level started to be discussed in the early 1990's. This may be deemed continuous adapting to the situation in democratic Europe. However, this process did not progress evenly in the entire former communist bloc; we register several radical spatio-temporal disparities in it.

2.1 Institutional-legal framework for cross-border cooperation

Cross-border cooperation is the most effective instrument to gradually reduce the effect of the border. At the same time, cross-border cooperation is an important part of integration processes in Europe. This cooperation is supported through several international agreements and documents. Its development was most substantially influenced by the *European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities* signed in Madrid on May 21st, 1980, effective from December 22nd, 1981. Within this document, all activities aimed at strengthening and promoting neighbourly relations between inhabitants of borderlands on both sides of the common State border are considered to be cross-border cooperation. According to the Council of Europe, the given activities make a basis for meeting its main objective – the unification to the greatest degree possible of European countries and their populations (Marhulíková, 2005).

The Slovak Republic too gradually created legal conditions for cross-border cooperation and ratified European documents. The European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities and its Additional Protocol (definition of the rights of respective territorial communities or authorities to conclude agreements on cross-border cooperation) came into force on May 2nd, 2000. The Protocol No. 2 to the European Outline Convention, concerning inter-territorial cooperation, came into effect in Slovakia on February 1st, 2001, and

the European Charter of Local Self-government came into force in the country on June 1st, 2000. Slovakia signed bilateral intergovernmental agreements on cross-border cooperation with Poland in 1994, with both the Czech Republic and Ukraine in 2000, with Hungary in 2001 and with Austria in 2004.

On the basis of Weinberger's theory (1995), we may divide the institutions entering the process of cross-border cooperation into the normative and real ones. The former define the overall framework and rules, primarily expressed in legal norms and directives that specify the conditions and forms of realisation to a large extent. The later include the existing subjects, organisations and associations directly carrying out cross-border cooperation. The systems of neither type of institutions were sufficiently developed in Slovakia for a long time; more correctly, their competencies were not unambiguously defined (Zemko, Buček, 2000). Still in 2001, the Government Office of the Slovak Republic and eight other Ministries partook, directly or indirectly, in cross-border cooperation. The registration of Euroregions was made in a parallel way at the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, and uniform criteria for the establishment of Euroregions did not exist. Owing to that, the process became rather untransparent. At the same time, the societal perception of the term Euroregion was thus deteriorating. Only since 2002 the situation in this field has gradually been stabilising – the associations that are national representatives of Euroregions have been registered at the Ministry of Interior, the other competencies and project activities fall under the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic.

In 1999, the Programme Implementation Unit (PIU) PHARE CBC became part of the Government Office of the Slovak Republic, while until then it was administered by the Office for the Strategy and Development of Society. The Government Office thus became already the 5th institution in chronological order that assumed the respective competencies in the 1990's. It means that – in contrast to neighbouring countries – still new representatives for Slovakia participated in meetings and prepared relevant documents, therefore they naturally could not be adequately competent, adapted and oriented in the given issue. Unclear and chaotic rules simultaneously generated a system openly encouraging corruption; it is no wonder that a scandal regarding the misuse of financial means from the PHARE fund by employees of the Government Office broke out.

The process of forming the real institutions was in a similar situation as well. All legal documents coordi-

nating cross-border cooperation began to be adopted at the end of the 1990's merely. Until then, several important instruments creating the legal framework for cross-border cooperation and especially for establishing Euregional structures were absent in the Slovak legal system. Initially, the Slovak side was represented by heads of local authorities and representatives of local State administration during the meetings/negotiations on cross-border cooperation. But later it was shown that no legal norm in Slovakia mentioned the involvement of local State administration authorities in the process. Therefore, their participation was not backed up by law and got in conflict with the Constitution of the Slovak Republic.

As Slovakia lacked a legal basis for the cross-border cooperation of cities and communes nor the self-government of regions and its organs was established by law, the only self-government territorial units became cities and communes. That is why, when the problem of representing the Slovak side at the level of regions corresponding regional self-governments in neighbouring countries arose, cities and communes began to unite together. They created interest associations of legal entities substituting to a certain degree non-existing self-government regions. These special interest associations were not in an equivalent position with foreign partners (zhupas in Hungary, voivodeships in Poland, etc.) because – contrary to them – they did not have any possessions/money and had no required competencies.

From the beginning of the 21st century, the situation has been resolved and gradually stabilised. Slovakia has already created the elementary institutional-legal framework for cross-border cooperation, which is comparable with neighbouring countries. With regard to the approximately 5-year period of delay in this process, however, Slovakia is a little less experienced in this field in confrontation with the other V4 countries.

2.2 Formation, development and spatial distribution of euroregions

The above-mentioned institutional-legal delay compared to neighbouring countries has to be related to the overall political development of Slovakia till 1998. Efforts to maintain centralised power and not to disturb the still remaining strong position of the State brought about the suppression of all processes that resulted spontaneously from local or regional initiatives, including cross-border cooperation. When the Carpathian Euroregion was established in February 1993, Slovakia could even not become its regular member. In contradistinction to regions in Hungary, Poland and Ukraine (Romania joined in December 1993) Slovakia became just an associate member. The incompleteness of a new territorial-administrative organisation of the State was then given as the official reason. Apparently, it would not have been a problem to resolve this fact in detail within the signed agreement, but according to information from lobbies there occurred also a fear of the potential threat to territorial integrity and Slovak borders by the Hungarian side and other similar inadequate arguments. As a result, the Košice and Prešov regions became the full members of the Carpathian Euroregion only in 1999. Therefore, just the only Euroregion covering the territory of Slovakia officially worked in the country until 1999 – the Tatra Euroregion. It was established in 1994 and is thus the oldest Slovak Euroregion. Its members are cities and communes lying in the Orava, Liptov and Spiš regions as well as gminas lying in the Podhale and Gorce regions.

A more intensive acceleration of the formation of Euroregions in Slovakia took place as late as 1999-2000, which was associated with the ratification of the already mentioned European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities with its Additional Protocol

Euroregion	Partners	Establishment	Centre (in Slovakia)
Pomoravie–Weinviertel–Jižní Morava	A, CZ	23.06.1999	Holíč
White Carpathians	CZ	30.07.2000	Trenčín
Beskid Mountains	CZ, PL	09.06.2000	Žilina
Tatra	PL	26.08.1994	Kežmarok
Carpathian	H, PL, RO, UA	25.11.1999	Prešov
Košice–Miskolc	H	01.12.2000	Košice
Slaná–Rimava	H	10.10.2000	Rimavská Sobota
Kras	H	01.03.2001	Jablonov n/Turňou
Neogradiensis	H	25.03.2000	Lučenec
Ipeľ	H	06.08.1999	Šahy
Váh–Dunaj–Ipeľ	H	03.07.1999	Nitra
Triple-Danube	H	25.01.2001	Dunajská Streda

Table 1: Euroregions situated in the territory of Slovakia

and with the accession of the country to the European Charter of Local Self-government. In this context, four Euroregions were established (including the acceptance of the Carpathian Euroregion) in Slovakia in

1999; in 2000 even another five (Table 1). This process has gradually been stabilised – in 2001 the Triple-Danube Euroregion and Kras Euroregion were created to complete the list.

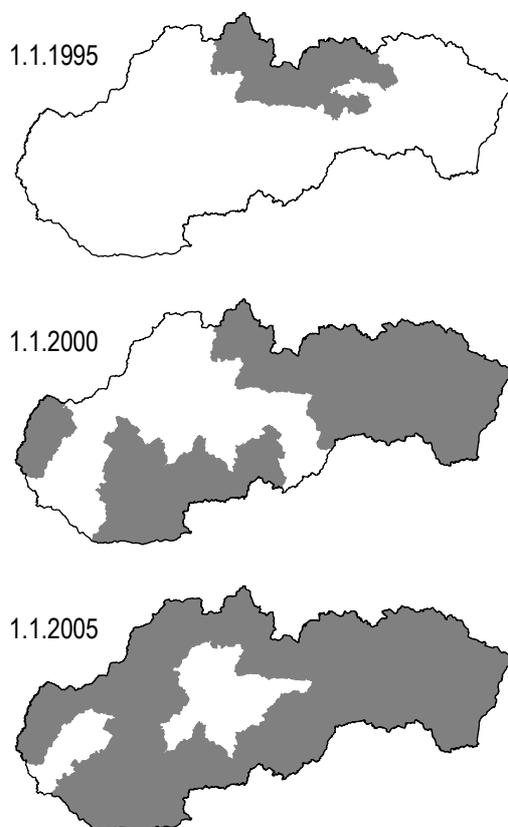


Fig. 1: Spatial development of euroregions in the territory of Slovakia

The Tatra Euroregion was established at least five years before the other Slovak Euroregions. Since 1999, the Euroregions have been formed primarily in marginal and economically less developed areas (this development is demonstrated in Picture 1). More specifically, in Southern and Eastern Slovakia – i.e. in territories that require to a higher degree internal as well as external stimuli for development. At this stage, a larger part of the Slovak-Hungarian borderland was incorporated in the process. It is that part of the borderland being marked with lesser natural obstacles and barriers to potential cooperation; moreover, with ethnically and linguistically related populations living on both sides of the border. Likewise, the Pomoravie–Weinviertel–Jižní Morava Euroregion was among the first. At that time, Austria was the only neighbour of Slovakia, which was the Member State of the EU. Owing to that, the greater experience of the Austrian side could thus be used. Austria had an interest to cooperate because Weinviertel belongs to the underdeveloped Austrian regions and its development was spatially limited by the Schengen border that was, in

addition, then poorly passable in the section with Slovakia.

The reform of public administration delegated most of the competencies in the field of cross-border cooperation to regional self-government authorities, i.e. the so-called higher territorial units (HTU) established on January 1st, 2002. In this connection, one has to look at the position of HTU centres to the State border. For instance, the city of Banská Bystrica – located almost in the very core of Slovakia – does absolutely not correspond to attributes of a city that should administer cross-border cooperation. It is imminent that hitherto centralisation might be replaced by another centralisation, but at a lower hierarchical level. Therefore, the proposed division of the Banská Bystrica HTU and the creation of Gemer–Novohrad HTU with the centre in Lučenec (or Rimavská Sobota) would certainly be well-grounded. This is the most acute case but, e.g., the Trnava HTU is defined in a little advantageous way too. Its centre – Trnava – is located quite close to the Austrian border, but the region as a whole neighbours only with Hungary and the Czech Repub-

lic as for communications. The implementation of an alternative made up by 12 HTUs in Slovakia would entail that also cities such as Lučenec, Michalovce, Poprad – having better prerequisites to fulfil the tasks of cross-border cooperation – would appear as the centres.

According to the number of participating countries, bilateral cross-border cooperation dominates (9 of 12 cases), especially on the Slovak-Hungarian border – 7 Euroregions. The majority of the hitherto Euroregions are represented by more or less compact territories. The Košice–Miskolc Euroregion has a special character, practically embodying in collaboration between both these cities only. The interconnection Košice–Miskolc originally arose within the Carpathian Euroregion by signing the agreement on cross-border cooperation. It is planned to be gradually extended to the surrounding area that should be defined later (the contemporaneous Košice region from the Slovak side and the Borsód–Abauj–Zemplén zhupa from the Hungarian one).

The Carpathian Euroregion is an untypical case of Euroregion having obviously a supra-regional character contrary to the others. In total 14.8 million inhabitants live in its territory, which with the area of 141,485 km² exceeds that of all Slovakia by as much as 2.9 times. The Carpathian Euroregion thus has a specific position not only in Slovakia but also in the European comparison. The Slovak part of the Euroregion covers 10,459 km² (21.3% of the Slovak territory) with 1.1 million inhabitants (20.5% of the Slovak population). The other Euroregions have a regional character. This should, however, be absolutely no obstacle to successfully develop in them cooperation at the local level too. If not taking into account Košice–Miskolc, the smallest Euroregion is Triple-Danube lying in Slovakia in the districts of Dunajská Streda and Galanta and having altogether 1,716 km² (3.5% of Slovakia's territory) with 205 thousand inhabitants (3.8% of the country's population).

Some Euroregions in Slovakia have already accommodated in advance and reflect the exact limits of administrative regions and self-government HTUs. For example, the White Carpathians Euroregion occupies the territory of the Trenčín region, the Váh–Dunaj–Ipel' Euroregion covers the territory of the Nitra region and the Carpathian Euroregion lies within the limits of the Prešov and Košice regions. Other Euroregions do not respect the limits of HTUs and are even overlapping in certain cases. We register 17 districts in total (out of them are four urban – Košice I, II, III and IV) whose territories fall under two different Euroregions, the Rožňava district even under three Euroregions. Particularly, the existence of the Kras Euroregion and the Slaná–Rimava Euroregion may be considered

paradoxical – they cover approximately the same territory.

On the contrary, the territories of 19 districts (including all five in Bratislava) are not part of any Euroregion in the country up to now. These territories form two continuous areas on the map of Slovakia. In both cases they are basically central areas. Generalising it may be said that one of them is the area being central from the geographical view (the already mentioned problem of the Banská Bystrica HTU and the proposed, but finally not approved, Gemer–Novohrad HTU); the other is the area being central from the economical view (the territory along the axis Bratislava–Trnava as the economic core of Slovakia).

As regards the starting position and natural prerequisites for regional development, differences between them are relatively high. It is Bratislava that unambiguously dominates, with the greatest potential and the most progressive trends of development. These are based on a favourable geoeconomic position, economic potential as well as the accessibility and potential of its partners from the Austrian and Hungarian sides. Although cooperation in the triangle Vienna–Bratislava–Győr has practically been discussed since 1989, it is still realised in a spontaneous way and has not been officially declared and sealed through the formation of a Euroregion until now. However, in comparison with the other regions, Bratislava has had a legal advantage hitherto that as the capital it could act as a self-government region. Moreover, also projects at the national level have been supported in this space. On the other side, this proves the fact that economically advanced regions do not need to institutionalise cooperation; it is formed in their case on the basis of natural relations.

Analogically to the situation in neighbouring countries, there exists also in Slovakia a representative organisation of Euroregions – the *Association of Euroregions in Slovakia* (AES). It was established in the city of Žilina on May 5th, 2001, and currently it has eight members. Among them three founding members may be found – the Pomoravie–Weinviertel–Jižní Morava Euroregion (represented in Slovakia by the Záhorie Regional Association), the Beskid Mountains Euroregion (the Beskids Region Association) and the Slaná–Rimava Euroregion (the Union of Slaná and Rimava). Later the Triple-Danube Euroregion (represented by the Danubian-Lower Váh River Regional Association), the Carpathian Euroregion (the Carpathian Region Association), the Tatra Euroregion (the Tatra Region Association), the Váh–Dunaj–Ipel' Euroregion (the Váh–Dunaj–Ipel' Regional Association) and the Kras Euroregion (the Kras Euroregion Association) joined the AES.

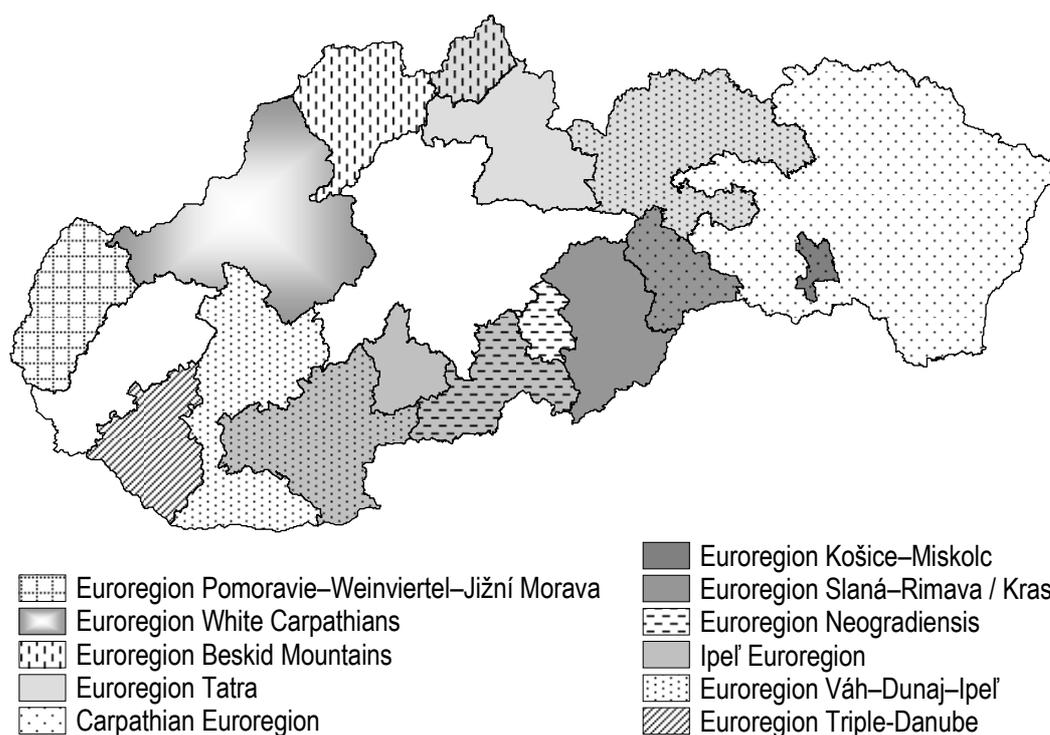


Fig.2: Euroregions situated in the territory of Slovakia

Merely three Euroregions in Slovakia are members of the pan-European *Association of European Border Regions* and, at the same time, these have hitherto been evidently the most active in general. In 1996, the Tatra Euroregion became a member of this Association, in 1997 it was the Carpathian Euroregion (then without the Slovak side) and in 2000 the White Carpathians Euroregion joined the Association of European Border Regions.

2.3 Activities and funding of euroregions

The primary objective of the created Euroregions should be to support the activities aiming at spatially unlimited development, naturally interconnecting these Euroregions with neighbouring regions in all directions of geographical space. Such a development should aspire to minimise the influence of the border and its barrier effects. Šindler, Wahla (1999) see the cardinal purpose of Euroregions in getting to know and understanding neighbours, building confidence, reducing the disadvantages of borders, suppressing the negatives resulting from marginal positions of borderlands, and improving living conditions of inhabitants. To fulfil these goals is not simple; it should include cooperation within several spheres with regard to specificities of given space. Representatives themselves of Euroregions in Slovakia consider the following domains/aims to be the most significant: to improve the communication connections of a concrete region with the territory on the other side of the State border (e.g. bridges, roads, railways, biking trails, border crossings and their equipment); the promotion

of a region and the increase of its attractiveness for tourism and recreation (presentations at exhibitions and fairs, info-centres, informational brochures and other publicity materials, internet sites); to amend legal norms and conditions supporting the entrepreneurial sphere, facilitating trade or the access of economical subjects to the territory of the neighbouring country; to jointly proceed in the field of the protection and creation of the environment; to become involved and coordinate participation in support programmes of the EU (according to an inquiry conducted with representatives of the individual Euroregions in July and August 2001).

Besides the above-mentioned fact (the non-existence of regional self-government authorities in Slovakia until 2002), we also registered the low coordination of central organs responsible for cross-border cooperation, inadequate competencies at the regional level, the absence of common funds and co-financed activities, differences in customs regulations, and limitations of cross-border contacts. Among the next restricting elements belonged an insufficient network of border crossings, their weak capacity, or the possibility to easily cross the borderline off border crossings. Some of these problems began to be solved after 2001 or following the integration of the country into the EU. However, the biggest problem – financing – still persists.

In the initial stage, the Euroregions in Slovakia were financed mainly from the State budget that largely supported getting their activities going (establishing

secretariats, current expenses, publicity). In 2000, the Beskid Mountains, Váh–Dunaj–Ipel' and Carpathian Euroregions thus received the sum of 1.66 million Slovak crowns. In 2001, eight other Euroregions (all remaining except for the Kras Euroregion) gained overall support reaching 2.55 million Slovak crowns. It was a one-shot starting financial injection in all cases; the Euroregions did not need to show their own activities. Financial support for Euroregions for 2001 was approved in April 2000 and, as a matter of fact, it was one of the key reasons for the birth of a large part of them. Euroregions were thus mostly established to make use of allocating the State subsidy without previous active cross-border cooperation carried out in the country.

Since 2002, all the competencies in this sphere have passed to the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic and also the strategy of financing the Euroregions has been changed. It is possible to apply for and to receive financial means only for the realisation of concrete projects. In the first stage, the projects within the system to support Euroregional activities were divided into five areas – human sources, the preparation of planning and development studies, the protection and creation of the environment, the development of tourism, and work with the public. In 2003, the areas of support were changed into the two fundamental categories: the preparation of supporting documents for investment projects to be realised in the territories of Euroregions and financed from domestic as well as foreign funds (category D); the activities aimed at promoting and reinforcing the development potential of border regions (category II).

In 2002, 16 projects were supported in this way with the total subsidy reaching 17.6 million crowns (with 11 Euroregions participating) and in 2003 it was 28 projects subsidised by 6.4 million crowns (with 10 Euroregions participating). In the latter year, the total amount of subsidy was thus reduced, namely for two reasons: ineffective management with financial means in the preceding year and efforts to allocate subsidies only in the case of co-financing a project. For the period of 2004–2006, the support of Euroregions from the State budget should stabilise with the gradual reduction of subsidies and their transfer to category I. In 2004, in total 38 projects were supported with the total subsidy of 11.6 million Slovak crowns (and with 11 Euroregions participating); for 2005–2006 the planned subsidy amounts to about 6 million crowns per year. On the whole, in the period of 2002–2004 altogether 82 Euroregional projects were supported by the sum of 35.6 million Slovak crowns. After 2003, when financing was divided into two given categories, in total 12.1 million crowns were invested in the projects of

category I, and 5.9 million crowns in the projects of category II.

Cross-border cooperation is promoted by the EU through several programmes and initiatives. It is part of the INTERREG Programme (this includes also transnational and interregional cooperation) that is regulated by directives for the structural funds of the Union. It has been in operation from 1990 (in 1990–1993 as Interreg I, in 1994–1999 as Interreg IIA, in 2000–2006 as Interreg IIIA). The INTERREG Programme was originally aimed at the internal borders of EU countries only, later it included also the external borders between the old Member States and Accession ones. In so doing, it helped prepare the latter for integration effected in 2004. One of the essential tasks of the currently running Interreg IIIA Programme is to raise the level of border regions with respect to commercial, economic, tourist, social and cultural relations with neighbouring regions. The NUTS III regions located along the borders are preferred areas. In 1994, the PHARE CBC (Cross-border cooperation) Programme was launched covering the borderlands of Member States with then Candidate Countries. Since 1998, this Programme has also been enlarged to the internal borders among the Candidate Countries (within the additional PHARE Credo Programme). The INTERREG as well as PHARE Credo Programmes have their priority spheres of activities but they are overlapping in many aspects. Insufficient communication and coordination between them have been much criticised in Slovakia.

In reality, the Euroregions have no political and just minimal economic power. They are not official territorial units, in essence merely interest ones. Certainly, their primary objective was to solve acute problems in border and marginal regions of countries. Jirousek (2005) argues that new Member States of the EU disseminate – by means of Euroregions – a European influence in their environment. Euroregions thus can be an excellent platform to build relations from below and driving force for initiatives of citizens. For this reason too, it is sometimes problematic to identify distinct spatial contexts at detailed analytical evaluating the Euroregions' activities. The impact of Euroregions on space is seldom of a larger-scale character, but rather mosaic. It depends upon activities of regional (or local) leaders and personalities or their groupings, which thus contribute to the development of some micro-regions using also the framework of cross-border cooperation for that.

3. Conclusion

The development of cross-border cooperation and cross-border integration processes at the regional (or local) level – i.e. the formation of regions situated on

both sides of the State border (called Euroregions in Europe) – was relatively complicated in the territory of the Slovak Republic during the transformation period. In comparison with neighbouring countries, this development showed several different features. We try to identify them in a synthetic form at the conclusion of the contribution.

The political situation existing in Slovakia until 1998 caused that favourable conditions for the development of cross-border cooperation were here not created. Even it may be said that it was purposely hindered in some cases. Efforts to maintain centralised power and not to disturb the still remaining strong position of the State brought about the suppression of all processes that resulted spontaneously from local or regional initiatives, including cross-border cooperation. Therefore, the first Euroregions in Slovakia began to arise with approximately a five-year delay compared to the other V4 countries.

The institutional stage of cross-border cooperation in Slovakia faced considerable problems. Competencies were not made clear enough, moreover – they still changed. It was possible to use experience (relatively good institutional frameworks) from such neighbouring countries as Hungary and the Czech Republic. As for Poland, its experience from Polish-German cooperation could be used better; the Slovak border with Austria is quite short. Though until 2004 it was the only border with the European Union, cooperation with Austria was insufficient. The border here is poorly passable in a long segment; in addition, the Austrian partner was less active.

In most cases, the Euroregions in Slovakia were formed not as a product, but only as a potential generator of cross-border cooperation (in the opposite

way than a natural process should go). They used means allocated from the State budget, but some of them then reduced further activities. At present, the Euroregions in the country are in transition between the institutional and implementation stages and thus their qualitative selection has inevitably to come. It will be necessary to search other (especially external) sources of financing in the future.

After improving the situation during 1999-2001, a great number of Euroregions arose in the country. Most of them were established on the Slovak-Hungarian border. The Euroregions are spread over the majority of the Slovak territory (not only in border regions). Formally only a smaller area in the central part of Slovakia (the city of Banská Bystrica with its wider surroundings) and the economically most advanced Slovak region along the axis Bratislava–Trnava are not included in cross-border cooperation.

It was never the case that Slovakia had in the foreign partner a strong leader moving cross-border cooperation within a Euroregion forward, to a qualitatively higher level. This would be required particularly in marginal regions of Eastern and South-eastern Slovakia. Development at the regional and mainly local levels are to a large degree conditioned by activities of individuals and lesser interest groups – regional and local personalities. These actors most contribute to the development of marginal and border regions and cross-border cooperation may be one of the instruments to help them in this field.

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