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## **State borders and cross-border cooperation in Czechia in the post-communist era: Trends and developments**

**Abstract:** *This article deals with the topic of the border status and cross-border cooperation in Czechia in the last 30 years. Special attention is paid to the EU integration process and its impact on the Czech borders and borderland and to the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed the durability of state borders despite the widely promoted idea of a borderless Europe. The text is theoretically based on the concepts of de-bordering and re-bordering and perceives borders as dynamic and socially constructed phenomena.*

**Keywords:** *border regions, cross-border cooperation, Central Europe, COVID-19*

**JEL code:** *Z13*

<https://doi.org/10.32976/stratfuz.2021.31>

### **Introduction**

Czechia often claims to be a bridge between the East and the West. Still, Czechia lies outside the main European axes between Berlin and Moscow and Paris and Istanbul in a geopolitical sense. Its current economic and political fate lies predominantly in the cooperation with neighbouring states, Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Austria. Nowadays, the relations with these states are cooperative in the EU and NATO (except Austria) and state borders between Czechia and the mentioned states are unquestionably mutually respected and permeable. Functioning cross-border cooperation (CBC) is represented by institutions such as Euroregions and European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). The situation on the borders was different in earlier history and several troubles emerged there even in the post-communist era. The main goal of this text is to characterise the change of border status and permeability in the last three decades in Czechia through the lens of border studies and political geography. Special attention is paid to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on border issues, borderland and CBC. The article is theoretically grounded in the paradigms of de-bordering and re-bordering; and it is based on an analysis of relevant primary and secondary documents and personal experience of the author as a Czech citizen living alternately in Ostrava (CZ-PL borderland) and Liberec (CZ-PL-D borderland). Generally, except for a theoretical section, the text is structured chronologically and deals with all important events until the end of 2020.

### **Theoretical basis**

State borders epitomise a manifestation of state authority, specific administrative and legal system in the territory (Paasi 1999). They are based on treaties between states and they are usually marked with boundary symbols. A borderland is a territory affected by the existence of a border. It is perceived as a peripheral from the standpoint of the central part of a state and usually its economy lags behind the development of the central part of a state. The unemployment rate tends to be higher there. In their widest definition, inner border regions (Euroregions) make up 40% of the EU's territory and 37% of the EU's population. The EU has various tools to enhance the cohesive situation in the borderland (Medeiros *et al.* 2021).

For a long time, the study of borders perceived state borders as static entities, physical phenomena represented by precise lines. The intensifying process of globalisation is usually connected with a weakening of various borders and this is trackable primarily on the example of state borders. Border infrastructure and regime naturally influence various relations in space,

predominantly in the borderland. The social construction, Fredrik Barth's concept of "us and them" (Opilowska 2020, 4) and the effect of borders are not overlooked by border scholars, who do not consider borders as something given and precise. The concept of re-bordering and de-bordering allows for the analysis of how borders affect the perception of space, its appropriation, organisation of territoriality and the mobility of people and goods. De-bordering and re-bordering are usually connected with some long term political-economic processes; however, with a migration crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, nowadays we experience the process of re-bordering. De-bordering was a logically frequent topic among scholars because of the trends of European integration in the last decades, e.g. multilevel-governance, regional cohesion policies and paradiplomacy, as Böhm (2021) states. Re-bordering has become a popular topic over the previous five years because of the European migration crisis, Brexit and COVID-19 pandemic (Klatt 2018, Medeiros et al. 2020, Opilowska 2020).

### Characteristics of the Czech borders

Czechia shares borders with Germany (810 km), concretely Bavaria and Saxony, Poland (762 km), Austria (466 km) and Slovakia (252 km). The borders of Czechoslovakia, especially the Czech part of the state (the future Czechia) were anchored in the borders of a historical Czech kingdom. Its borders were predominantly determined by mountain ridges that surround the heartland of the Czech state, called Bohemia. The current Czech borders are mostly natural, with the exceptions of the Eastern part of the Czech-Austrian border and the Moravian-Silesian part of the Czech-Polish border. These borders can be perceived as natural barriers for transport, communication or military operations. Their border effect was strengthened by the post-war population ethnic exchange and the related decline in the borderland population (Vaishar-Zapletalová 2009, 90). There are a few exceptions in the territories which were incorporated into the historical territory of Czechia after World War I, e.g. the Hlučín Region, Valtice Region and Western Vitoraz Region, and which were lost, e.g. the eastern part of Teschen Silesia.

World War II brought the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and their replacement by Czech, Slovak and Romani newcomers from various regions of Central Europe. The population transfer affected almost all of the Czech borderland except the Czech-Slovak border and the eastern part of the Czech-Polish border. The former ethnic German territory called Sudetenland has its own social and economic climate, including frequent social-pathological phenomena and high support of extremist political parties (Vaishar-Zapletalová 2009, 91).

According to the Ministry of Regional Development (2013), the districts (LAU1) with an above-average unemployment rate are Liberec, Vsetín, Opava, Znojmo, Sokolov, Děčín, Most, Chomutov, Bruntál, Teplice, Hodonín, Šumperk, Karviná, Ústí nad Labem, Jeseník, Semily, Karlovy Vary and Český Krumlov. These districts, with one exception, lie along the border. The Ministry of Regional Development (2013) also defines socially disadvantaged districts and they are almost the same as the districts mentioned above (Svobodová et al. 2018, 572-573). Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to characterise the Czech borderland as one unit. We can distinguish (post)industrial and highly urbanised northwest and the northeast borderland with structural problems and high emigration towards the central parts of the state from predominantly rural and moderately urbanised rest of the borderland, with small and medium-sized towns with an ageing population and dozens of attractive tourist and nature protection sites, which can be a limiting factor in the infrastructural and industrial development of the region. The economic situation of each border regions is different and these differences are affected significantly by the neighbouring country and its economy.

The Czech-Bavarian and Czech-Austrian borders formed part of the Iron Curtain and were impermeable and strictly guarded. Many settlements in the border area were intentionally destroyed. The Czech-Saxon and Czech-Polish borders were internal boundaries of the Eastern Bloc and were also guarded, but they were partly permeable with local border traffic for the

inhabitants from the municipalities within 15 km from the border, at the few selected border crossings on the border with Poland. The border with Slovakia was an internal border with administrative and statistical importance.

### **The transformation period**

The fall of the Iron Curtain and the Eastern Bloc and the new impacts of globalisation and the vision of future accession to the EU meant a great transformation in the character of the Czech society and borders. The borders of Czechoslovakia became a relevant subject of the research conducted by geographers and economists. It was possible to experience relatively free travel to the Western states, including Germany and Austria, after more than 40 years. Particular local border traffic was introduced along the tourist routes across the borders with Germany and Austria, then the external borders of the EU. Unfortunately, the post-socialist transition led to more significant economic disparities between the borderland and central regions of the state that have not been diminished even by the European regional policy.

CBC was supported both by public institutions and special entities, such as Euroregions or co-working communities. Nowadays, almost all municipalities in the borderland are members of Euroregions which were established in Czechia since 1991. The first Euroregions were established on the border with Germany. Thirteen Euroregions make up about two-thirds of the territory of Czechia. These are the Euroregions of Bohemian Forest, Egrensis, Erzgebirge, Elbe and Neisse on the Czech-German border, Neisse, Glacensis, Praděd, Silesia, Teschen Silesia and Beskids on the Czech-Polish border, Beskids, White Carpathians and Pomoraví on the Czech-Slovak border, and Pomoraví, Silva Nortica and the Bohemian Forest on the Czech-Austrian border. The main goal of the Euroregions was to boost cross-border contacts and cooperation through microprojects<sup>1</sup>, and to prepare Central European borderlands for EU accession before 2003 (*Branda 2009*). Despite massive formal involvement in CBC and Interreg (or PHARE) programmes, in the above cases one can identify three main barriers to cooperation: lack of shared identity, language and mentality differences, and economic disparities. The only Euroregion in Czechia with a significant cross-border identity is Teschen Silesia, typical of its specific culture and dialect, mixing Czech and Polish words. Both the size and structure of the budgets of the Euroregions are varied.

In 1993 the federal republic of Czechoslovakia peacefully split into two states, Czechia and Slovakia. The territory was divided along the existing border between the Czech and Slovak parts of the former federation but this border was unclear and, in some cases, it cut through villages or across access roads. The successor states founded a compromise via negotiation and financial compensations for the people who were dissatisfied with incorporation into another state. The most delicate problems were connected with two settlements on the borderline. The settlement U Sabotů<sup>2</sup> had historically been part of the Czech municipality Javorník. However, it had social and cultural ties to Vrbovce and the nearby Slovak town Myjava, and its inhabitants voted for inclusion in Slovakia in a referendum. The settlement Sidonie, more precisely, its right shore of the former border river Vlárka, part of a Czech town Brumov-Bylnice, had originally been part of the Slovak municipality Horné Srnie but was incorporated into Czechia as a replacement for U Sabotů (*Filipko 2007*). The last treaty determining the borderline entered into force in 1997. Economic, social and political mutual relations in the borderland were separated. These facts led to the increasing marginalisation of the already peripheral Czech-Slovak border mountainous and rural area, which was farthest from the trends coming from Western Europe (*Řehák 2007*). The newly established border with new border crossings was permeable for the citizens of Czechia and

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<sup>1</sup> People-to-people, civic association and social integration projects, e.g. common cross-border international competition for pupils, tourist publication, Christmas markets, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Nowadays known as Šance within Vrbovce municipality

Slovakia only with their ID cards. Inhabitants of border areas on both sides faced complications until the Schengen area accession in 2007. Generally, the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and then the EU accession improved mutual relations between Czechs and Slovaks on the level of both authorities and citizens. The Czech-Slovak border is special because of many mixed marriages, properties and businesses on both sides of the border.

Czech-German relations and on a smaller scale Czech-Austrian relations in the 1990s were affected by the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and attempts of the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft to review this act, which are sensitive initiatives especially for the inhabitants in the borderland. The reaction to these efforts in Czechia was connected with the establishment of nationalist Czech borderland clubs (*Zich* 1998). The image of (West) Germany as an enemy of the Czech nation was presented by Communist propaganda. The Czech-German declaration signed by the Czech and German government in 1997 and the establishment of the Czech-German Fund for the Future meant alleviation of the tensions and the beginning of the CBC also had a positive effect on collaboration. From an economic point of view, the Czech-German border became the most important because of the inflow of German capital to Czechia.

The Czech-Austrian border became a conflict zone due to the Czech nuclear power plant located in Temelín, 50 km from Austrian territory. Austrian citizens and their political representation were against the construction of the power plant and they strove for impeding the Czech accession to the EU. The most active voices were articulated by the politicians of the Upper Austrian State, the Freedom Party of Austria and various civic associations. A formal truce between the Austrian and Czech governments, under the auspices of the EU commissioner Günter Verheugen, was signed in the Austrian town Melk in 2000, where the Czech government undertook to comply with safety measures in the power plant and to inform Austrian authorities about all incidents in the power plant, while the Austrian government committed not to block the Czech accession to the EU and to prevent blockades on the Czech-Austrian border (*Böck-Drábová* 2006). The agreement is not binding and it did not ultimately end the protests and blockades on the border crossings; however, these occurred with less intensity after the Czech accession to the EU, most often in connection with several failures, building modifications in the power plant or the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, Japan. Austrians also protested against another Czech nuclear power plant located in Dukovany, 32 km from the Czech-Austrian border. The protesters enjoyed the support of Czech ecological activists. To a lesser extent, there were protests against Temelín in Germany, especially in Bavaria, without blockades of the border. Nowadays, the situation with the Czech nuclear program can be considered as resolved.

The Czech-Polish border, especially its eastern part, experienced a massive wave of cross-border shopping tourism at the beginning of the 1990s. Many Czechs went to the markets in Cieszyn or Rybnik and took advantage of the weak Polish currency. Peaceful relations were occasionally disrupted by acts of vandalism committed by Polish or Czech nationalists connected with the question of Teschen Silesia (Těšínské Slezsko, Zaolzie) (*Boháč* 2017). Fortunately, old hatred has weakened with the ageing of the inhabitants, predominantly Poles, who perceive the loss of Zaolzie as an injustice. The Eastern part of the Czech-Polish border should be considered as a special case because population transfers were not extensive and 10% of the indigenous Polish minority live in Teschen Silesia. This minority is active through its organisations such as the Polish Association for Culture and Education (PZKO) as a part of an umbrella organisation for Poles living in Czechia: the Congress of Poles in the Czech Republic. They are also very active in CBC with Poland.

### **Membership in the EU and Schengen area**

On 21 December 2007 the Czech Republic joined the Schengen area, by which the country's membership in the EU became full-fledged. Border checks at the land borders and on intra-Schengen flights were cancelled. Politicians from Austria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia met up

at common border crossings and greeted the event as a step towards a united Europe. The elimination of border checks at the internal borders was accompanied by measures involving extensive cooperation of all member states applying provisions of the Schengen acquis in many aspects, such as setting a standard visa regime, improving coordination between the police, customs and the judiciary system and taking additional steps to combat terrorism and organised crime. All borders of Czechia became internal borders of the Schengen area, thus epitomising only administrative and psychological barriers. Czech borderland and border settlements became bridges between nations and laboratories of European integration where two societies are in regular contact. Especially, so-called divided towns are worth mentioning, e.g. Český Těšín/Cieszyn (PL), České Velenice/Gmünd (A), Vejprty/Bärenstein (D). Besides, some border towns gradually extended their influencing areas and began to give an impression of one urbanistic unit, e.g. Jířikov/Ebersbach-Neugersdorf, Varnsdorf/Seifhennersdorf and Grossschönau (D).

The membership in the EU brought the possibility of using the Interreg A programme funds focused on CBC, which supports cooperation between NUTS III regions from at least two different member states that are located along the borders. It aims to tackle common challenges identified in the border regions and to exploit the growth potential in the borderland. Czechia takes part in five Interreg A programmes along its five state borders. The border with Germany includes the sections with Bavaria and Saxony. Each programme has its specific funding priorities<sup>3</sup> with cross-border impact. Interreg A projects work with a higher amount of money and longer period than microprojects and suitable applicants are public and private research institutions, public administration entities and non-profit organisations or EGTCs. Interreg A programmes brought about, for example, the building of bicycle routes between Czechia and Austria near the Pálava region, new marked tourist paths between Czechia and Germany in the Bohemian Forest or joint projects of Czech and Polish schools. Everyday cross-border activities of health specialists, firefighters and policemen are beneficial for the peripheral areas.

Several Czech regions became active members of EGTCs in the 2010s. The purpose of EGTCs is to widen the cooperation between their members on a local, supranational and international level through the realisation of various cross-border projects and programmes. An EGTC may act as an independent legal entity and have members from at least two member states or one member and one neighbouring country. They may include local or regional authorities, bodies governed by public law or member states as members (*Böhmet al.* 2016). The EGTC TRITIA is a grouping formed by the Moravian-Silesian Region (CZ), Opole Voivodeship (PL), Silesian Voivodeship (PL) and the Žilina Region (SK). The EGTC NOVUM is a grouping composed by the Liberec, Hradec Králové, Pardubice, and Olomouc Regions (CZ), the Lower Silesian Voivodeship (PL) and several ecoregions. The priorities of these EGTCs, with Czech participation, usually involve transport, economy, tourism and environmental protection. Another type of cooperation with a perspective of transformation into EGTC is semi-formal cross-border initiatives such as CENTROPE and Danube-Vltava. CENTROPE is a grouping of the South Moravian region (CZ), the city of Brno (CZ) and various Austrian and Hungarian regions and cities. Danube-Vltava is a grouping of the Pilsen and the South Bohemian Regions and the Region of Vysočina on the Czech side and various German and Austrian regions and associations.

There are various permeability indices regarding cross-border public transport on the Czech borders. The highest permeability can be witnessed at the Czech-German border, then on the Czech-Austrian border because of its economic importance and solid traffic infrastructure. The Czech-Slovak and the Czech-Polish borders suffer from the lowest permeability of cross-border public transport, except for the border sections between the Moravian-Silesian Region and Silesian and Opole Voivodeships, where the presence of the indigenous Polish minority on the Czech side

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<sup>3</sup> Priorities predominantly deal with institutional cooperation, education and human resources, tourism and environmental protection. The budget for all Interreg A border projects for the period 2014–2020 is EUR 675 million, CZ-Saxony 157 million, CZ-Bavaria 103 million, CZ-A 98 million, CZ-SK 90 million and CZ-PL 226 million (*Plašilová* 2019).

and high population density ensure higher permeability, (*Medeiros et al.* 2021). The strong border effect on the Czech-Polish border is observable in the intensity of traffic for all means of transport (*Drápela & Bašta* 2018). Low permeability on the Czech-Slovak border is caused by its marginality and unfavourable physical-geographical conditions of the border region. The reason is similar on the Czech-Poland border, along with the historical fact of the expulsion of the ethnic Germans on both sides of the border and following resettlement.

Idyllic de-bordering under the auspices of the EU started to be endangered by growing euroscepticism in Czechia and the vision of the so-called Czexit, inspired by the British Brexit. Isolationist, localist and nationalist discourse became more robust with the start of the European migration crisis and several terrorist attacks in 2015. Several EU members imposed temporary border controls because of these events. This was not the case for Czechia, which was not an attractive destination for the immigrants and experienced only relatively minor problems with the transit of the immigrants heading to Western Europe through the Czech territory. However, random inspections were imposed on the Czech-Austrian border in 2015 and also large manoeuvres of the Czech army and police on the borders with Austria took place. Their goal was to justify the preparedness of the Czech security forces and the cooperation between soldiers and policemen for a border closure in case of a shift of the main Balkans migration route. Twenty former border crossings served as nodal points for Czech security forces (*Kottová* 2015). In 2015 and 2016 short-term blockades of the borders with Germany and Austria (Germany – Cínovec/Altenberg, Dolní Poustevna/Sebnitz – together with the German supporters of PEGIDA, Kraslice/Klingenthal, Austria – České Velenice/Gmünd) were organised by the supporters of Czech nationalist political parties as a protest against migration policy of the EU and the liberal approach of the German, Austrian and even the Czech governments (*Novinky* 2016).

Several protests were organised during recent years against the Polish Turów power plant and nearby lignite mine located only a few kilometres from the Czech border. These facilities cause water, air, noise and light pollution on the Czech side of the border. Czech, German and Polish environmental activists and everyday people from the borderland were involved in protests. The protests were held at the so-called Trojmezí (Three-borders) of Czechia, Poland and Germany near the town of Hrádek nad Nisou. The last big rally in August 2020 was against the enlargement of the mine and the plans to prolong the mining activities in Turów until 2044. Besides, the Czech government is dissatisfied with the Polish attitude of decision-making without waiting for the conclusions of bilateral consultations. Czechia is attempting to obtain justice from the European Commission or the European Court of Justice (*Lazarová* 2020).

### **The era of the COVID-19 pandemic**

COVID-19 is a respiratory infection that has spread around the world since the end of 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic, which officially came to Czechia in March 2020, led to many setbacks conducted by the states, including limitations or closures connected to cross-border contacts. This reterritorialisation was in contrast to the EU policy of open internal borders. In March 2020, the EU criticised massive COVID countermeasures in cross-border regions, rather promoting a European dimension of a struggle against the pandemic. Total border closures strongly affect people living in a borderland, especially commuters and people with family members on the other side of the border. This complication was most apparent on the Czech-Slovak border, where many mixed families live, and in the Czech-Polish region of Teschen Silesia, where many indigenous Poles live on the Czech side. Moreover, cross-border shopping and tourism were also cancelled. The tri-national railway running through Czechia, Poland, Germany, Czechia and Germany again on the route Liberec–Seifhennersdorf in the Euroregion Neisse, operated by the German private company Die Länderbahn, remained operational, but travellers were not allowed to get off the train outside their own country. The first Czech measures against the pandemic were soft and included temperature checks or quarantine for people arriving from high-risk countries. Before

the COVID-19 breakout, 60,000 Czech commuters (the so-called ‘pendlers’) were dependent on daily or maximally weekly cross-border commuting: 37,000 to Germany, 12,000 to Austria, 2,300 to Slovakia and 700 to Poland and vice versa (especially for Slovaks and Poles). The closure of borders with Germany and Austria was approved on 14 March 2020 and Poland and Slovakia also closed their borders with Czechia. A ban on the entry of foreigners came into force. Border closures in Czechia are usually due to the state of emergency. Most pendlers had to choose whether to stay in their home or find accommodation in the host country because of the quarantine obligations. Exceptionally, only a few could cross the borders with a negative COVID-19 test and well-based justification of the entry (employment in health or social services) and only a few border crossings continued to function. Border closures meant a threat for the local and regional economies in the Czech border areas. Closure of the borders brought to mind the dark memories of the Iron Curtain age and the government’s regulations were similar to those of Communist governments, resulting in similar fear of foreigners, who were suspected to be potential disease carriers. Border closures were implemented without consultations with existing cross-border institutions. They had to react to unilaterally adopted decisions and they attempted to protect the rights of pendlers (*Böhm* 2021). Czechia reopened its borders with Germany and Austria on 13 June 2020 and the Czech-Slovak border was reopened by both sides. Pendlers, as well as everyday citizens in the borderland, organised protests against the restrictions.

The most intensive protests on the Czech-Polish border took place in the divided town Český Těšín/Cieszyn in a region of traditionally strong cross-border cultural, educational and economic interactions. Banners with the message ‘I miss you, neighbour’ were erected on both sides of the border along the river Olše/Olza. Protests were also held in border-crossing Náchod/Kudowa Zdrój, which is vital for Polish workers commuting to the Škoda Auto factory in Kvasiny or JUTA textile factories in north-eastern Bohemia. Several Euroregions, e.g. Teschen Silesia, used lobbying strategies targeting the central governments and attempted to alleviate strict border measures that damaged both employees and employers. The Polish side was strict in controlling the border. Polish soldiers with machine guns were determined to shoot, as evidenced by a case near Opava (*iDNES* 2020). The citizens’ initiative Soboty pro sousedství/Samstage für Nachbarschaft/Soboty dla sąsiedztwa/Soboty pre susedstvo, whose Facebook group counts 1,700 members, became very active and well known in the borderland of Czechia. The group organised meetings along the border every two weeks. In spring 2020 unique protest meetings were held in the Czech-German border area based on common picnics with respect to the closed border. Groups of Czechs and Germans were a few metres from each other, they ate, talked and sang under police supervision. Such meetings took place in Klíny, where they were followed up with meetings of dissidents during the socialism or in Trojmezí even with a Polish presence. In Trojmezí there was a celebration of the Czech and Polish EU accession with the participation of mayors of nearby municipalities Hrádek nad Nisou (Czechia), Bogatynia (Poland) and Zittau (Germany) under the supervision of armed Polish soldiers. On 12 June Poland opened the shared border with Czechia, but the Silesian Voivodeship, severely affected by the pandemic, was closed until 29 June. Border openings were publicly celebrated. The tourism and event industry was heavily affected, and many tours and festivals were cancelled or postponed. Many people did not feel comfortable travelling abroad, even travelling to nearby destinations beyond the border. In September, the situation became unfavourable again and the Czechs were affected by the measures of all neighbouring states except Poland. Slovakia approved measures for Czechs, who had to stay in quarantine when entering Slovakia. Similar measures were adopted by Germany, but the Czech pendlers were granted an exception. Poland introduced mandatory quarantine on 28 December with an exception for the Czech pendlers.

## Conclusion

The text showed that CBC under the auspices of the EU in the last 30 years helped prevent quarrels and conflicts between the Central European states and promoted the reconciliation connected with

the injustices of the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Czech borderland was positively affected by various European programmes promoting de-bordering before and especially after the Czech accession to the EU. However, the economic situation is far from ideal in some marginal regions facing gradual depopulation. Joint cross-border identity in the Czech borderland is still rare. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic challenges the pillars of European integration and has the worst impact on border regions. The Czech borderland is no exception. The pandemic is still not under control. A re-bordering process associated with suspicion of neighbouring countries as zones of infection can become something common in a long-term perspective despite the efforts of cross-border institutions and associations. Böhm (2021) assumes that economic problems connected with the COVID-19 pandemic will lead to lower budgetary incomes of municipalities and regions, limiting their budget dedicated to non-essential CBC support. The number of submitted projects for Interreg funding decreased in 2020. Nevertheless, the author hopes that COVID countermeasures only a temporary issue and the process of CBC will continue with similar or even greater success.

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