

# The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cross-border cooperation between Czechia and Austria

Michal Šindelář\*

Grammar school Kodaňská, Czechia

\* Corresponding author: [michal-sindelar@centrum.cz](mailto:michal-sindelar@centrum.cz)

## ABSTRACT

Cross-border cooperation plays an important role in deepening European integration. Thanks to the existence of cross-border cooperation, border regions can overcome negative effects of the border and the adverse impact on their development, which leads to improvements in the daily lives of local residents. The Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented closure of borders between most EU countries, which meant that communication between cross-border actors became more difficult and many cross-border activities were cancelled. After the first waves of the pandemic subsided, twenty interviews were conducted with mayors of Austrian municipalities in the Czech-Austrian border region. The topic of these interviews was the level of cross-border cooperation with Czech entities (municipalities, schools, societies etc.) and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cross-border cooperation. The main findings from the interviews are that cross-border cooperation is positively evaluated. More than half of the mayors see cross-border cooperation as slightly increasing in recent years and about a fifth as decreasing or not developing. The main obstacles to cross-border cooperation are bureaucracy and language barriers. There are many joint activities in the border area, some of them have a long tradition and take place every year. Due to the border closure, the organisation of these activities was first postponed and then cancelled in 2020. On a positive note, according to the mayors, most of the cross-border events were already taking place in 2021. It can be concluded, that the pandemic caused a one-year gap in cross-border activities.

## KEYWORDS

borders; cross-border cooperation; Czech-Austrian borderland; Covid-19

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## 1. Cross-border cooperation

Cross-border cooperation can be defined as institutionalized cooperation between adjacent administrative units, which are at a lower level than the state, thus it is, in short, regional cooperation across a national border (Perkmann 2003). Cross-border cooperation is seen as a multifaceted and diverse process, which is related to the fact that the inhabitants of border areas are aware that the border line not only divides them but also unites them through identical challenges on both sides of the border (Del Bianco 2006).

Cross-border cooperation plays an increasingly important role in the regional development of border areas, whether as part of the internal potential of the territory or as part of European integration at the regional or local level. It is no longer only the state as the main political actor, but also the European Union acting externally on border areas, as well as, for example, the Euroregions, which represent one of the important forms of institutional anchoring of cross-border cooperation at the regional level (Havlíček et al. 2018). The European Union has 40 internal land border regions, which account for approximately 40% of its land area and where almost 30% of the EU population lives (Cross-border cooperation in the EU 2020).

Camagni et al. (2019) argue that legal and administrative barriers continue to affect the economic growth of European border regions, despite the creation of a single European market. It is estimated that the removal of legal and administrative barriers would allow European border regions to be about 9% richer than they currently are. Border regions generally have less access to public services such as hospitals and universities, and individuals, businesses and public authorities face specific difficulties in working between different administrative and legal systems (Cross-border cooperation in the EU 2020).

It can be argued that regions that progressively remove border barriers and establish contacts with neighbouring regions show a greater potential to progressively reduce the gap between the border periphery and the inland core. And while physically the border is removed relatively quickly, e.g. the fall of the Iron Curtain or the entry of a new country into the Schengen area, economic links develop gradually, over a period of years. But customs, prejudices, perceptions of neighbours and other socio-cultural characteristics change much more slowly (Scott 2012).

Although the European integration process has achieved significant results and helped to remove many obstacles in mutual cooperation, many barriers remain, mainly stemming from divergent legal and administrative provisions. It is cross-border cooperation that plays a major role in removing these barriers (Böhm and Kurowska-Pysz 2019), leading to an easier everyday life for the inhabitants of European border regions.

## 2. Czech-Austrian relations and the cross-border cooperation

The history of Czech-Austrian relations is long and rich. Similarly, the Czech-Austrian border has undergone a significant transformation and change of function. From the perspective of cross-border cooperation between Czechia and Austria, 1989 was a major turning point, when the Iron Curtain fell and the state borders were reopened. The political upheaval and the changes, which were his consequence, started a process of overcoming the bipolarity of Europe that had lasted for decades. Since 1989, the two border regions have been gradually connecting, re-establishing contacts, building new border crossings and getting to know each other (Šindelář 2019).

After 1989, the Czech-Austrian border region could be described as a bridge between the neighbouring states (Jeřábek et al. 2004). The Czech-Austrian border functioned in this so-called alienated border regime (Martinez 1994) after Czechia joined the European Union in 2004. EU enlargement accelerated the process of so-called debordering and contributed to a change in the function of the state border. From a partially open border it was possible to define the Czech-Austrian border as a contact border (Martinez 1994). After 2007, when border controls were completely abolished and thus the last restrictions fell, we started speaking of the border area as cooperative instead of fully open. This means that emergence and development of various forms of cross-border cooperation can be expected (Perkmann 2003).

The origin of cross-border cooperation between Czechia and Austria dates back to the immediate period after the fall of the Iron Curtain, at that time still in the form of individual contacts between citizens and later work abroad (Heintel and Weixlbaumer 2002). In the beginning, these were ad hoc contacts between municipalities, various associations (mainly cultural and sporting events) or schools. We are talking about a “wild” phase (1989–1992 initiated “from below”. Later on, systemic cooperation was established and expanded – the so-called managed phase (1992–1995) promoted “from above” – especially in the field of tourism, cooperation in disaster management and in solving some common problems of the municipalities (Havlíček 2005).

A further impetus for the strengthening of cross-border cooperation came in 1995, when Austria joined the EU, which also allowed this part of the border region to be included in the EU pre-accession programme Phare CBC and the INTERREG programme, which in turn allowed the use of European subsidies (Heintel and Weixlbaumer 2002). The possibility to draw on subsidies was one of the main reasons for the establishment of cross-border structures between Czechia and Austria, which are the Pomoraví/Weinviertel/Zahorie Euroregion,

established in 1999 (renewed in 2021 after a passive phase), and the Euroregion Silva Nortica, operating since 2002. This period is known as the European phase (1995–2004).

In the period before Czechia accessed to the EU, other factors must be emphasised. Firstly, the fear of losing jobs in border areas played a role in Austria, so a restrictive transition period of up to seven years was negotiated on the issue of free movement of labour (the same was applied to new EU members by Germany), which ended in 2011, and secondly, Austrians protested against the launch of the Temelín NPP. The conflicting past remains present in the background of relations. The expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia and the subsequent settlement of the borderlands is still a controversial topic, especially for Germans from Bavaria and some Austrians (Šindelář 2019).

Apart from the impetus of the accession of Czechia to the EU and the possibility of drawing money from European funds, cross-border cooperation has seen greater development only with the launch of the Austria-Czech Republic Operational Programmes for the years 2007 to 2013, which continued in the period 2014–2020, and in the current Austria-Czech Republic Operational Programme 2021–2027, which was approved by the European Commission in June 2022 with a budget of approximately €86,000. This last fourth period, which lasts until today, is called the integration phase (2004+) (Havlíček 2005).

### 2.1 The main reasons for cross-border cooperation between Czechia and Austria

If we look at the main reasons for cross-border cooperation in the Central European region, the main ones are listed by Jeřábek et al. (2004): firstly, overcoming mutual animosity and prejudices between people in border areas, which are considered as a historical heritage, i.e. establishing good neighbourliness. Secondly, reducing peripherality and isolation, promoting economic development and improving living standards. And thirdly, achieving rapid assimilation into an integrated Europe while maintaining the highest possible degree of autonomy.

Isolation and some peripherality are also mentioned by Heintel and Weixlbaumer (2002), who state that the northern belt of Lower Austria is the most economically weak region in the whole of Austria. The main reason for this is simply the distance from major centres of population (centres, core areas); other reasons may be the region's less accessible location and the associated population decline, the loss of economically active people, the lower level of civil society, etc. The same opinion is shared by Jurczek (2006), who adds that border regions have very little endogenous potential compared to the centre of the country, both from a material (e.g. infrastructure) and immaterial point of view (human capital).

How has the Czech-Austrian border area changed in recent years? The once closed borders have become open borders, and the isolated municipalities have become a space of mutual contacts, i.e. a “space of mediation” (Jeřábek et al. 2004). The region, which was long described as “dead”, has been given a new chance to develop (Weixlbaumer 2005), and despite today's relatively large economic differences, there has been a certain economic convergence between these two countries. Compared to Austria, however, Czech municipalities have had to cope with a lag of several decades until today, as they were isolated from municipalities in neighbouring countries during the socialist era and their participation or involvement in any cross-border cooperation was practically excluded.

### 3. Covid-19 and its impact on the Czech-Austrian border region

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused many changes in Europe. One of its main consequences has been the temporary border closure in March 2020, which was introduced as a measure to prevent the uncontrolled spread of the disease and concerned the internal Schengen borders. National borders regained the role of a barrier to protect against a neighbour – implicitly suspected of being infected (Espinoza, Castillo-Chavez, and Perrings 2020). This had a major impact on cross-border cooperation, including the Czech-Austrian border region, among other things, as it dramatically reduced all flows across the border.

The most visible manifestation of the impact on the border is, of course, the temporary closure of the border and/or the introduction of extensive restrictions on the mobility of the population as a means of limiting the spread of the virus. However, border closures usually come too late. Once the virus is detected in a location, the subsequent border closure has a more limited epidemiological effect as well as significant economic and social impacts (Scott and Casaglia 2021). Subsequent waves of Covid-19 have brought back border closures as one of the favoured measures of EU member states. This has caused many difficulties in border regions where many citizens and businesses are fundamentally dependent on the other side of the border. It can be argued that border areas have been more affected by border closures than other territories (Ramírez 2020).

On the other hand, the majority of European citizens accepted the need for temporary border closures to protect public health. Even opinion polls conducted in Czechia during the first pandemic wave in spring 2020 showed that about a third of the Czech population would agree to closing the borders for a longer period of time and 5% would agree to closing the borders even permanently (National Pandemic Alert 2020).

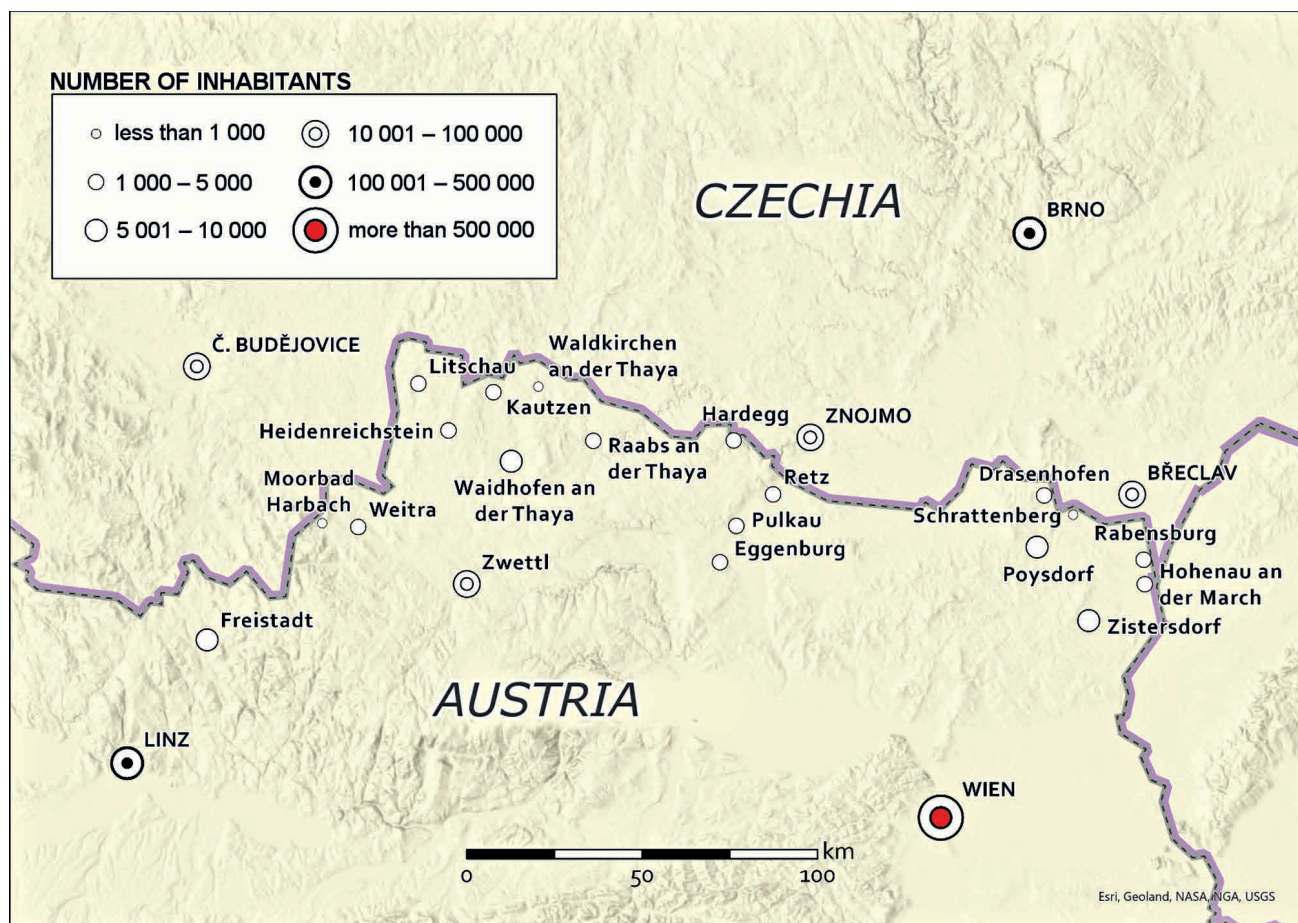
The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the social and economic vulnerability of nations, countries and societies. These factors are reflected in the patterns of border formation that have emerged with different impacts within societies: age, health, employment, level of job flexibility, housing conditions, etc. (Scott and Casaglia 2021). Another factor or complication is/was the 'dual' nature of the border. Each border regime between two countries resulted from their own entry procedures, which were mostly poorly coordinated with each other, complicating the situation of people who had to cross the border in both directions in their daily journey back and forth for work, education, etc. Moreover, the controls were often inappropriate, based on bureaucratic criteria such as nationality, not, for example, on health status, without taking into account the territorial reality of people's lives (Böhm 2021).

Moreover, during the closure of the borders, significant tendencies of so-called rebordering are evident, not least because most of the measures that were based on social distance were introduced on a strictly national basis, which is in exact contrast to the actions that the European institutions would have wished to see (Brunet-Jailly and Vannet 2020). These limitations made cross-border projects very difficult to implement. The pandemic has shown that national

borders, already considered part of the European past, are firmly anchored in the minds of most politicians and citizens (Böhm 2021 in Castan Pinos and Radil 2020).

#### 4. Analysis of structured interviews

In the autumn of 2021 and in the spring of 2022, a survey was conducted in the form of structured interviews with mayors and vice-mayors of Austrian municipalities. A total of 45 municipalities were approached, located within a distance of about 20 km from the Czech-Austrian border in the entire Austrian border area from Bad Leonfelden, located near Vyšší Brod, to Hohenau an der March, which lies in close proximity to the point of the contact of the Czech-Austrian-Slovak borders. By June 2022, 20 interviews had been carried out (Fig. 1), from which several findings emerged, which are presented in the next section of the article. The main questions or points of the interviews are as follows: How would mayors generally describe the cross-border cooperation so far? Is the trend of cross-border activities in recent years (independent of the Covid-19 pandemic) decreasing or increasing? What projects have been implemented in recent years? Are there any



**Fig. 1** Municipalities where interviews were conducted.

Source: D. Doležal

cross-border activities taking place in your municipality? What kind and how often? What are the barriers to further development of cross-border activities? And how much has the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated border closure affected cross-border cooperation? It must be emphasised that these are the answers of Austrian mayors.

#### 4.1 Cross-border cooperation in general

As far as the evaluation of cross-border cooperation is concerned, it is generally described as good or very good, but several mayors believe that there is still room for improvement and intensification of cooperation. The administration of The Small Projects Fund (SPF) in Austria has been transferred to the regions, to the so-called Regionalbüros, which has greatly eased the bureaucratic complications of drawing down funds, was often mentioned and positively evaluated (in contrast, in Czechia is The Small Project Fund administered by individual Euroregions). The interviewed mayors are satisfied with this set-up. They praised the work of the Silva Nortica Euroregion, which is said to be very active, initiating various projects and also involved in their implementation. Cooperation within the Podyjí/Thayatal National Parks is also seen positively.

Other comments that were made on this topic are that as long as projects are taking place, whether between municipalities or associations, everything runs smoothly. Primarily it is about co-organising various cultural events and tourism assistance/consultation. However, the potential for cooperation is and has been far from exhausted.

Another view is that the Waldviertel and South Bohemia have very similar natural, cultural, historical assets that could be used even better together. There could also be more joint meetings, as the old border is still present in people's minds. Another mayor expressed the view that the world does not end at borders and that cross-border cooperation could lift the region in all directions.

Several positive references were made to the 2009 Lower Austrian Regional Exhibition held in Telč, Horn and Raabs an der Thaya with the motto: Czech-Austria: divided, separated, united/connected.

Another mayor added that from time to time there are various talks about possibilities and plans for the future, but at this stage the joint activity usually ends. Another mayor added that the cross-border cooperation works well and that it is mostly about invitations to various cultural events in some Czech municipality.

It should be stressed that cross-border cooperation does not only concern municipalities that are close to the national border, but also regions (Waldviertel, Weinviertel, South Bohemia Region, Vysočina Region, South Moravia Region), which often negotiate with each other and solve obstacles of cross-border cooperation.

In response to the next question, which asked whether the trend in cross-border cooperation is increasing or decreasing over the last 5 to 10 years, half of the mayors said that the trend has been upward in recent years. Another third thinks that the level of cross-border cooperation is stable and that it is about the same as before. And about a fifth of the mayors think that the trend is decreasing and that there are fewer joint projects than before, seeing the closure of the border in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which many projects were interrupted or terminated and then not resumed, as one of the causes.

Another fact that was found in the answers to this question is that the size of the municipality or the distance from the state border does not play a very big role here. For example, the mayors of municipalities adjacent to the border with Czechia near border crossings, such as Schratzenberg (800 inhabitants) or Retz (4,200 inhabitants), see the level of cross-border cooperation as rising, the similarly situated municipality of Litschau (2,100 inhabitants) and Kautzen (1,100 inhabitants) describe it as declining and, conversely, in Zwettl (30 km from the border with Czechia, 10,700 inhabitants) there is a clear increase in cross-border activities, while in Mistelbach (33 km from the border, 11,700 inhabitants) the level is very low.

#### 4.2 Examples of cross border projects related to covid-19

The following topics of the interviews are cross-border projects that have been implemented with Czech partners in recent years and the impact of the pandemic on these projects. Some mayors highlighted 2019, when many one-off events were held to mark the 30th anniversary of the opening of the border and the fall of the Iron Curtain. In 2020, the pandemic understandably made cooperation more difficult, few joint events could take place and even planning for others was negatively affected. At first, joint events were postponed indefinitely, then largely cancelled, but in a large number of cases resumed again in 2021. In the next section of the article, examples of projects/events in individual municipalities are given.

Every year since 2009, an event called the Young University of Waldviertel-Vysočina (Jung Universität) has been held in Raabs an der Thaya for around 100 schoolchildren from both states between the ages of 11 and 14 who participate in joint workshops, lectures and other activities. Due to the pandemic, this event was cancelled in 2020 and was postponed to 2021, and held as normal in 2022.

The partner municipality of Raabs in Czechia is Jemnice, whose new leadership was very keen to cooperate with the Austrians, but due to the border closure, the cooperation has been subdued for the time being.

In the village of Kautzen, the so-called Peace Trails (Friedenswege) have been connected in recent years thanks to the help of the SPF. Two are located on Austrian territory, two on Czech territory and two cross the state border. The trails deal with various themes, such as the Jewish element in the region or reconciliation between peoples. The trail between Kautzen and Nové Hradky focuses on the violent loss of the homeland after the World War II. These trails were opened in 2022; the pandemic did not affect their preparation.

In the district of Waidhofen an der Thaya, an association of fifteen municipalities called Future of the Thaya Valley (Zukunftsland Thayatal) has been established, which, in addition to regional development, also seeks cross-border cooperation with municipalities in Czechia. Specifically in the field of tourism and culture, smaller projects have already been implemented, including joint concerts of Thayaland music schools in Třešť or exhibitions of Czech artists in Dobersberg, which are always satisfactorily attended, according to the mayor.

With the help of the SPF, the Barefoot Trail project (Barfußweg) in Schrattenberg was implemented with the main partner Valtice, who have been cooperating for many years. The project has the function of a bridge between Czechia and Austria. The hiking trail also gives visitors a glimpse of the neighbouring country. Before the pandemic, around 15,000 people a year visited this marked route. In 2020, the border crossing on the trail was dammed, and from 2021, the entire length of about 5 km can be walked again.

In addition, a Feast (Kirtag) is held once a year in Schrattenberg. According to the mayor, this is a unique event in Europe, as a brass band from Czechia plays for dancing Austrian guests in Austria, so in his opinion the event cannot be more cross-border any more. Due to Covid-19, the already announced and prepared event was not held in 2020 and was cancelled, but in the following years the tradition was renewed again.

The cross-border cooperation between Moorbach-Harbach and Horní Stropnice is intensive. Every summer, the two municipalities jointly celebrate a Border celebration (Grenzfest), in 2019 named to Peace celebration (Friedensfest). Like other cross-border events, the border celebrations were cancelled in 2020, but they were held again in 2021, as well as in 2022.

For more than fifteen years, the international cultural festival Crossings (Übergänge) has been held every two years between Gmünd and České Velenice, with many guests from outside Czechia and Austria. The 2020 edition had to be postponed until 2021, when it could be held again to the satisfaction of the mayors.

The municipality of Weitra is involved in many activities with Czech partners, such as the Welcome Neighbours (Willkommen Nachbar) event, which organises various trips to Czechia, the Mensch und Fisch exhibition and the cross-border health trails

(Grenzüberschreitende Gesundheitswege), co-organised by the municipality of Nové Hradky.

In the smaller municipalities close to the border, the role of the mayor and his relations and contacts on the other side of the border are again emphasised. There is often an exchange of schoolchildren, which is linked to cross-border cooperation between schools. There are also joint sporting (cross-border runs or bike rides) and musical events.

In Freistadt there are annual joint meetings of firefighters, in Hörschlag a meeting of schoolchildren and musical groups from both countries was organised and in Litschau bilingual information leaflets were produced and a cross-border map of cycle paths was created. A trans-regional project was the planning and implementation of one of the longest EuroVelo cycle routes, the Iron Curtain Trail.

On the other hand, the Twinning Days (Tage der Partnerstädte) of Znojmo and Retz, which are normally very active in cross-border activities, could not take place in 2020 and 2021 and were cancelled without compensation, and the mayors' debates could only take place online. The cooperation between the Music school in Retz and the Art school in Znojmo is long-standing, halted by the pandemic and then restored. The two towns also have a joint Facebook account so that they can inform Czechs and Austrians about events, such as Cross-border wanderings (Grenzüberschreitende Wanderung).

The INTERREG supported Portz Insel (Backsteinbrücke) project, which enabled the reconstruction of a 17th-century brick bridge near Mikulov, its connection to the cycle path leading to Drasenhofen and the creation of a nature trail in its surroundings, is worth mentioning. The municipality of Drasenhofen also organises a partnership ball with Mikulov.

The Thayaland/Podyjí National Park is also very active in cross-border cooperation. The park administration signed a declaration of cooperation with 28 other Austrian and Czech municipalities in June 2022 with the aim of nature conservation, tourism development, culture and educational projects. In previous years, the Castle Trail (Burgen- und Schlösserweg) and the Crafts along the River (Das Gewerbe am Fluss) have already been created.

#### 4.3 Cross-border cooperation and its main obstacles

The next question asked about the main obstacles or barriers to cross-border cooperation with Czechia. The language barrier was identified as the main obstacle in almost every interview, which is already a permanent and long-standing problem that was already mentioned during the 2016 and 2017 surveys (Šindelář 2020). For this reason, sometimes an interpreter or translator has to be present at the meeting. Two of the mayors are of the opinion that the language barrier is mainly on the side of the Austrians, as the Czechs have some knowledge of German and

this leads to the fact that more initiatives come from the Czech side or that Czech mayors more often make the first step or look for a partner on the other side of the border.

Another identified obstacle was the amount of bureaucracy and the municipalities' own financial resources needed to pre-finance or co-finance projects. One barrier mentioned was the complicated common history and prejudices that are present among both Austrians and Czechs, but mostly only among older residents.

Furthermore, elections and the change of mayor or municipal council play a role, as cross-border activities are mostly based on personal acquaintances and relationships.

Mayor of Litschau complained about the lack of various funds or grants to help reduce the costs of cross-border activities. He said that there used to be a subsidy call in Austria called *We are neighbours* (*Wir sind Nachbarn*), from which one could get a one-off 500 Euro relatively uncomplicated for a cross-border activity of any kind. He adds that people have less and less time and desire to deal with complicated bureaucracy and therefore often any idea dies in the beginning due to lack of motivation or lack of funding or financial risk.

The last finding is that according to most of the mayors, cross-border cooperation is perceived by the local population to be quite low and the initiative usually comes from local people involved, from schools or from various interest groups. However, from their point of view, there is a lack of such actors who would be active and interact with similar actors on the other side of the border in the region.

## 5. Conclusion

The position of the Czech-Austrian border region has changed dramatically since 1989. From an isolated peripheral area divided by the Iron Curtain, it has become an open place for all kinds of contacts on the former Iron Curtain border without border controls and any restrictions. Nevertheless, the study region is rather at the beginning of this long-term process in terms of cross-border cooperation, and EU financial support has played an important role in bringing the Czech-Austrian border region closer together. The notion of the border as a development opportunity or a space of mediation (Jeřábek et al. 2004) is illustrated by the increase in cross-border cooperation activities that has taken place in the Czech-Austrian borderland over the last 30 years.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on individual states and especially on border regions (Klatt 2020). The closure of internal borders during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic denied the basic narrative of European integration, i.e. freely permeable (internal Schengen) borders. The pandemic

caused situations where decisions were made by nation states without coordination with neighbouring states at the European or regional level.

The main aim of this article was to evaluate cross-border cooperation in the Czech-Austrian border region and the impact of the pandemic on cross-border activities.

Twenty interviews with mayors of Austrian municipalities revealed that cross-border cooperation is positively evaluated, but could certainly be intensified. In some cases, mayors see no added value in cross-border projects, although the Small Projects Fund has always been positively evaluated. The person of the mayor and his/her commitment and acquaintances (the situation often changes after an election with a change of mayor) on the other side of the border also play a bigger role than the size of the municipality and its location near the national border.

The majority of mayors observe an increasing trend in cross-border activities, about one fifth of them consider it to be decreasing in recent years. The main obstacle to the development of cross-border cooperation is the language barrier, which was named by almost all mayors interviewed, and the same conclusion was also reached by a survey in the Czech-Austrian border region in 2016 and 2017 among the mayors and local population. For this reason, sometimes an interpreter or translator has to be present at the meeting/talks.

Various cross-border activities take place in the study region, some only sporadically, but many of them are annual. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all of these activities were first postponed, then cancelled in 2020. A positive finding is that this was a gap of about one year and that it can be observed that from 2021 onwards joint Czech-Austrian events can be organised again as in the years before the pandemic and that many mayors are willing and interested to plan, prepare and organise/co-organise these events.

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