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Summary of Research Conducted within the
EUREGIO-INFO Project

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Abstract

Tomáš Pražák: **Summary of Research Conducted within the EUREGIO-INFO Project**

As part of the EUREGIO-INFO project (CZ.11.4.120/0.0/0.0/20_032/0002847 – Interreg V-A Czech Republic–Poland), the research was carried out in collaboration with a project team composed of partner organizations: the Regional Association for Territorial Cooperation of Těšín Silesia, the Silesian University in Opava, the Association for Development and Regional Cooperation 'Olza', and the WSB Academy. The aim of the research, which consisted of structured interviews, a questionnaire survey, and focus groups, was to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the everyday life of residents in the Těšín Silesia Euroregion.

The results show that respondents most frequently mentioned restrictions related to shopping, visiting family and friends, sports, and tourism. These findings were confirmed in other parts of the research, where respondents commented on which areas were affected by government measures connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. The greatest limitation was the inability to shop on the Polish side of the border. The imposed restrictions also impacted opportunities to visit gastronomy services in Poland, tourist destinations, and sports infrastructure. Residents particularly criticized the temporary border closures and mandatory quarantine after crossing. Due to these measures, many respondents stated that they became more aware of the significant influence these restrictions had on their everyday life and that they felt a stronger sense of division between the two nations as a result.

Key words

Cross-border cooperation, Covid-19, Euroregion, Těšín Silesia

JEL: R11, R23

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global epidemic of coronavirus, an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Border closures also had a significant impact on the lives of cross-border travelers. In border regions, labor market mobility within the EU plays an important role, especially among post-communist countries where significant differences in economic and living standards persist. For some local residents, crossing the border is a part of daily life, and commuting for work is one form of cross-border mobility. The Polish-Czech border region is no exception. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments worldwide attempted to support the business sector to mitigate economic hardships. Nevertheless, the private sector faced numerous problems, including lower demand, disrupted supply chains, and a decline in investment. Governments worldwide began to distinguish between companies that were allowed to operate—either with or without customer contact—and those that had to temporarily cease business activities.

This paper summarizes the results of three research surveys conducted within the EUREGIO-INFO project (CZ.11.4.120/0.0/0.0/20_032/0002847), aimed at assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents of the Czech-Polish border region. The research was conducted between 2022 and 2023 and included a quantitative survey, in-depth interviews, and a series of six focus groups. The objective was to gain a comprehensive overview of how the pandemic affected daily life, employment, education, healthcare, tourism, and public administration in the Euroregion Těšín Silesia.

1. Review of Relevant Literature

According to Kajzar, Kostková, and Pellešová (2020), society is constantly evolving, and trends associated with economic, social, and lifestyle changes subsequently influence tourism. Therefore, tourism plays an important role in our society, including in the Czech Republic and the Moravian-Silesian Region. The pandemic (Murgaš & Petrovič, 2020) affected almost all countries with varying intensity. Its manifestation in the form of infections and deaths, due to the absence of an effective treatment, prompted government responses that significantly improved the situation in their countries, influenced people's lives, and thereby their quality of life. Although the pandemic differs from natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or wildfires in terms of duration and the size of the affected population, its negative impacts were much greater.

Globally, according to AL Fadla (2020), there was an incredible disruption of business activity, especially in service-providing sectors. Most businesses were looking for ways to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly true for owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, who had very limited options. Such businesses sought ways to identify their position and to balance between employees, customers, and legislation. These owners had to pay attention to both short-term and long-term survival.

According to Šindelář (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic also influenced cross-border cooperation in selected regions. Cross-border cooperation can be defined as institutional cooperation between neighboring administrative units that operate below the level of the national government. In short, this refers to regional cooperation across national borders. According to Böhm (2021), the pandemic disrupted cross-border cooperation throughout the entire Czech-Polish border area, as mutual borders were closed between the two countries.

This was an unprecedented act, as both countries had joined the Schengen Area in 2007. Poland reinstated border controls at all internal Schengen land, air, and sea borders from March 15 to June 12, 2020. The pandemic restricted the free flow of people and complicated the functioning of local economies in the Czech-Polish border region. The Polish government also introduced, as of March 27, 2020, a mandatory two-week quarantine for Polish citizens returning from abroad, which also applied to cross-border commuters. This led to two types of responses: one group decided to stay in the Czech Republic and found accommodation there, while the other group quit their jobs and lost their income as a result.

Cross-border commuting for work is a typical side effect of the free movement of people within the EU. According to Novotný (2021), cross-border commuting refers to foreign workers who live in their home country. If such workers commute between another country and the Czech Republic, it is important to recognize the specific rules that apply to taxation and social security for these individuals.

2. Research Methodology

The quantitative research was carried out between March 1 and April 15, 2022, by the Median company using standardized CATI, CAWI, and CAPI methods on a representative sample of 1,000 residents of the Czech part of the Euroregion Těšínské Slezsko. The aim of the survey was to determine how pandemic-related measures affected everyday life, especially in the areas of border crossing, shopping, work, education, healthcare, and cross-border relations. The results were statistically processed and interpreted using descriptive analysis.

The qualitative research was conducted between June and September 2022 through five in-depth interviews with representatives from public administration, healthcare, education, employment, and tourism. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed for a more detailed insight into specific problems that could not be uncovered by quantitative data. Subsequently, thematic focus groups were conducted between March and June 2023, attended by experts from the respective fields. These discussions allowed for confronting the findings, formulating proposals for solutions, and identifying key trends.

The quantitative survey among 1,000 residents of the Czech side of the Euroregion showed that the most frequent reasons for crossing the border before the pandemic were shopping, tourism, and visits to friends and family. Pandemic-related measures significantly limited this activity. Respondents cited the temporary border closures and mandatory quarantines as the main barriers, which negatively affected everyday life and contributed to a feeling of separation between the two nations.

Both the qualitative interviews and focus groups confirmed that pandemic measures most affected employment, family life, and the daily functioning of communities. Cross-border workers had to adapt to new conditions, including mandatory testing or temporary relocation due to the inability to commute. In many cases, interpersonal relationships were disrupted, and the sense of isolation increased, especially among seniors and families living on both sides of the border.

3. Specific Impacts in Individual Areas

The cross-border life in the Těšín Silesia Euroregion was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic across several sectors of public life. Restrictions on movement and temporary border closures disrupted the everyday routines of residents who commonly crossed the border for work, shopping, or social contact. In the **employment sector**, cross-border workers faced new obligations such as frequent testing and quarantine, which often led to job loss or relocation. The **healthcare system** experienced delays in planned treatments and limited access to services across the border. In **education**, joint school projects and student exchanges were suspended, while communication shifted to digital platforms. The **tourism and leisure sector** suffered from a sharp decline in visitors due to closed borders and general uncertainty. Finally, the **public administration** had to adapt quickly to new conditions, often with insufficient digital infrastructure and coordination, which complicated crisis management in a cross-border context.

3.1. Employment and Labor Market

A significant impact was observed among commuters who often work through agencies without a direct relationship to Czech companies. A lack of information, complex conditions, and testing-related costs led in many cases to the termination of employment or a change in place of residence. According to the research, it would be appropriate in the future to include employment agencies among official communication channels to ensure that cross-border workers receive timely and accurate information. Many workers also experienced increased stress due to legal uncertainty and rapidly changing rules. The absence of clear guidelines caused confusion and limited the ability to make informed decisions. Strengthening institutional cooperation across the border could help minimize these negative effects in future crises. The crisis also affected small entrepreneurs who relied on cross-border cooperation and trade with partners or customers from the other side of the border, leading to loss of income and long-term instability in local economies.

3.2. Healthcare

Access to cross-border healthcare was only partially disrupted by pandemic measures. Quantitative data showed that most respondents used health services exclusively on their own side of the border. Nevertheless, there were delays in routine procedures and increased pressure on healthcare facilities. A significant advancement was the introduction of telemedicine and electronic prescriptions, which became the new standard. Experts from focus groups identified legislative restrictions and capacity issues as the main barriers to further cooperation. In emergency situations, cross-border transfers of patients became more complicated or entirely impossible. Additionally, there were discrepancies in pandemic regulations and insurance coverage, which created uncertainty for patients seeking care abroad. These challenges underscored the need for clearer protocols and agreements between neighboring health systems in the region.

3.3. Education

In the field of education, no significant cross-border activity had been recorded even before the pandemic, which experts attribute mainly to legislative barriers, particularly on the Polish side. The pandemic brought complications for pupils and teachers participating in exchange or joint programs. Most communication and cooperation moved to the online environment, which led to the development of digital skills and acceleration of school system digitization. Institutional relationships were maintained, although travel and physical activities were limited. Some planned joint educational projects had to be postponed or canceled entirely due to uncertainties and administrative difficulties. Teachers also pointed out the lack of a unified framework for remote cooperation across the border. These limitations highlighted the need to strengthen bilateral agreements and improve the flexibility of school cooperation in times of crisis.

3.4. Tourism and Leisure

Tourism and leisure activities were significantly affected by the pandemic. Accommodation and food services, travel agencies, and spas saw a decline in clientele. In addition to the pandemic, economic uncertainty and the security situation in Europe also had a negative impact. There was an emphasis on the need to restore Czech-Polish relations and invest in promoting the region, especially through a unified information system, more multilingual websites, and support for local businesses. Participants suggested specific measures such as the creation of guidebooks, travel packages, and mobile apps. Many local businesses dependent on cross-border visitors reported long-term losses and expressed concerns about their future sustainability. The loss of spontaneous cross-border tourism also weakened informal cultural exchange and local ties. Strengthening tourism infrastructure and joint marketing strategies was identified as a key step toward post-crisis recovery.

3.5. Public Administration

The pandemic had a significant impact on the functioning of municipalities and public administration, especially in the initial phase when measures were introduced chaotically and without sufficient digital preparedness. However, cross-border cooperation continued, albeit in a limited form, thanks to existing relationships. Experts from focus groups appreciated the long-term value of cooperation between municipalities, which was not solely dependent on project funding. In the future, the Euroregion could serve as a coordinator of information and support, especially in crisis situations. One major challenge was the lack of harmonized crisis communication between Czech and Polish authorities, which led to confusion among local residents. Municipal officials also reported difficulties in accessing timely information and guidance from national institutions. Strengthening the role of regional actors and formalizing their participation in crisis management structures could improve coordination in similar situations.

4. Recommendations for Future Crisis Situations

One of the common themes across all research components was the negative perception of temporary border closures, which significantly limited everyday activities and contributed to feelings of isolation and division in the Czech-Polish border region. Focus groups and the project team emphasized the importance of accurate and timely communication with residents and the need for coordinated action by the governments of both countries. It became clear that communication strategies and transparency are essential for public trust and the effectiveness of measures during crisis situations.

Another important finding was that the pandemic also created opportunities for positive change, particularly in the areas of digitalization, information technology development, and enhanced cross-sector cooperation. Collaboration between municipalities, schools, healthcare institutions, and businesses can become even more effective and sustainable thanks to new experiences. Specific results of research, also with communication strategy is available on Euregio Info website: <https://www.euregio-info.olza.pl/cz>.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be formulated for managing future crises in the Czech-Polish border area:

- Ensure coordinated communication between the Czech and Polish sides, especially in the case of border measures.
- Create unified information channels and contact points for residents, workers, and entrepreneurs in the region.
- Support the digitalization of public administration and education as tools for managing crisis situations.
- Systematically include relevant stakeholders (e.g., employment agencies, schools, healthcare facilities) in crisis planning.
- Invest in the promotion of the region, trust-building, and cross-border networks that can withstand extraordinary events.

Conclusion

The main objective of the research presented in this paper was to determine the strength and direction of the impact of epidemiological measures on the daily life of border residents, including the integration of inhabitants from both the Polish and Czech sides of the Euroregion Śląsk Cieszyński – Těšínské Slezsko. In addition, the report formulates recommendations for the further development of the identified cross-border markets in the Euroregion area.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the daily lives of residents in the Czech-Polish border region. The research results show that the most significant impacts were caused by the temporary closure of borders, chaotic communication of measures, and the disruption of everyday cross-border activities. At the same time, the strength of regional cooperation, institutional adaptability, and the potential for innovation became evident. The research findings can serve as a basis for developing more effective policies and preparing for future crises that respect the specific nature of life in border regions. The pandemic, however, also brought some positive changes, such as an increased focus on digitalization and the development of competencies in information technologies. These changes will help individuals and communities better cope with future crises and adapt to new circumstances.

They also opened up opportunities for more flexible forms of cooperation, remote work, and access to services regardless of geographical barriers.

The Euroregion holds great potential, which—if used appropriately—can improve the quality of life for regional residents. To achieve this, COVID-related restrictions should be lifted as soon as the epidemiological situation allows, followed by joint efforts on both sides of the border to remove identified barriers that hinder the proper functioning of individual cross-border markets. When talking about barriers, in addition to language barriers (particularly technical language), one must also consider mental barriers (such as the low attractiveness of the Polish part of the Euroregion for Czechs and vice versa) as well as numerous administrative and legal barriers. These arise mainly from differences in the existing legal regulations on both sides of the border—regulations, laws, and decrees. They are especially evident in areas such as cross-border business operations, employee hiring procedures, or rules for crossing borders for children and youth.

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