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Cross-border cooperation areas in north Bavaria and west Bohemia: Analysis and evaluation

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Nicolai Teufel, Jörg Maier, Martin Doevenspeck¹

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AREAS IN NORTH BAVARIA AND WEST BOHEMIA – ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

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Abstract

The EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area was established in 1990 and is acknowledged and appreciated by political actors. It serves here as a heuristic for a multitude of spatial processes. On the one hand, it reflects the changing political and economic conditions of cross-border cooperation between Bavaria and the Czech Republic on a line of contact between two peripheral regions remote from political and economic centres. On the other hand, a spatial analysis of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS and, in particular, discussion of its spatial delimitations and alternative spatial configurations provide insights into debates surrounding the increasing macro-regionalisation and metropolisation of cross-border cooperation. In this article, the authors analyse modes of cooperation in the north Bavarian and west Bohemian border area. The EUREGIO EGRENSIS is often referred to as the most important institution of cross-border cooperation for the border region due to the long-standing trust between the actors involved. However, there is a certain reluctance among political actors in Bavaria and the Czech Republic to discuss the spatial, thematic or institutional expansion of cross-border cooperation. Based on the positive evaluation of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area and trends towards larger cooperation regions, the idea of a meso area in the central European zone was discussed with stakeholders in the border area – roughly the area between the cities of Nuremberg, Erfurt, Chemnitz and Plzeň. Despite socioeconomic similarities and manifold functional interdependencies, this idea was met with scepticism.

¹ Assisted by Jaroslav Dokoupil, Professor of Economic Geography at the West Bohemian University of Plzeň.

Keywords

European integration – cross-border cooperation – spatial planning – Bavaria – Czech Republic

1 Starting positions and research questions

1.1 Border area research in the north Bavarian and west Bohemian border area

The starting position of this study is the observation that the last 15 years have seen a trend towards large-scale forms of cooperation in EU regional policy. This started with the INTERREG 2C programme and includes approaches like macro-regions and macro-regional strategies (e.g. for the Danube, Alpine and Baltic regions) (Köhler 2009). This process is continuing despite the wide range of options in terms of the size and form of cooperation areas and despite the fact that macro-regions have only been empirically proven to be an effective means of generating growth in individual (politically committed) cases (cf. Görmar 2010; Gänzle 2015). A contrast is provided on the smaller scale by Euroregions, a spatial configuration that can be judged as well-established and politically accepted (cf. article by Chilla/Sielker in this volume). They particularly promote endogenous development in areas near the border, while macro-regional strategies and a focus on metropolises lead to ‘tunnel effects’ in the direct border area and can transform such regions into mere transit areas.

A second basis for this study is the goal of advancing geographical border area research, a traditional sub-field of political geography. In keeping with the historical development of the discipline of geography, from the late 1970s/early 1980s the topic of ‘the border’ was increasingly approached in German-speaking areas using behavioural and decision-making theories and geographies of perception. In the mid-1990s the consistent adoption of the behavioural perspective put the focus on the social construction of reality. Border research in the working bodies of the Academy for Spatial Research and Planning (*Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung*, ARL) has to date concentrated primarily on questions of cross-border state cooperation, development strategies and functional interrelations (cf. Scherhag 2008).

Particularly for the north Bavarian and west Bohemian border area, one thematic focus of geographical research is the analysis of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS (Jurczek 1993; Troeger-Weiß 1996; Birk 2000). Considerable attention has also been given to the effects of the eastward expansion of the EU and integration associated with this, as well as its consequences for the economic development of the Bavarian-Czech border area (e.g. Maier 2003). This article can therefore present a detailed analysis of the effects of changes in the border regime and the advancing process of transformation since 2004 on the functional and institutional integration process within an established cooperation area.

The discussion takes up the aspects specified above and discusses them in light of possible implications for the expansion of the existing EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area. The article thus, firstly, closes the research gap for the period since 2004.

To date only one paper has been published on this period, focusing on general social and economic structural change in the north-west Bohemian / north-east Bavarian border region (Maier 2015), but not specifically on questions of cross-border cooperation. Secondly, the article draws conclusions concerning the future spatial structure of cross-border practice and analyses the embedding of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS in *policy networks* on the regional, national and supra-national scale (cf. Scott 2015).

In theoretical and conceptual terms, the present study can be linked to discussions on deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, rescaling, *soft borders* (Sielker 2014) and *borderwork* (Rumford 2008). In order to do justice to the complexity of the integration structures and processes, researchers in the field of *border studies* such as Rumford (2012) and Johnson/Jones/Paasi et al. (2011) call for the adoption of a multiple perspective on border demarcation processes, based on a common research field of political and regional aspects of cultural and economic geography and its related disciplines (cf. Paasi 2005). Rumford (2008) extends the state-centric perspective often found by focusing on *borderwork*. This term describes the fact that border demarcation processes are not simply a state action; borders are rather increasingly shaped by non-governmental organisations, businesspeople and normal citizens. Depending on the field of cooperation (e.g. tourism, transport), different spatial configurations of functional integration can thus emerge. This is connected to processes of the deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of state borders, dynamic borders and the rescaling of cooperation areas (cf. Scott 2015). In the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War, the idea of a *borderless world* and the deterritorialisation of borders dominated *border studies*. More recent research, in contrast, emphasises the increased complexity of border demarcation processes and the simultaneity of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, for instance in the context of multi-level governance in border areas of the European Union (Chilla/Evrard/Schulz 2012).

1.2 The trend towards large-scale forms of cooperation in the EU

To make it clear that the author's interests lie not just in existing spatial configurations but also look to the future and envisioned spatial scenarios, brief reference is made here to the development of transnational cooperation in Europe. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, guiding principles and strategies were formulated for the spatial development of large transnational territories; since the mid-1990s they have been supported by development programmes (INTERREG), and even by strong EU policy in the form of macro-regional strategies. In the 2014–2020 funding period Germany participated in six INTERREG-B programmes. Here the discussion of alternative spatial configurations can draw on the article on the programme area of Central Europe (cf. Ahlke 2017: 2).

This article is not concerned with a discussion of the scales adopted for the macro-regions but rather with the issue of a meso level; the distinction made by Görmar (2010: 582 et seq.) thus provides a basis here. He differentiates between two types of macro-regions: those with specific development opportunities and problems, and those that desire strategic cooperation. Görmar (2010: 583) suggests that this 'bottom-up' approach – from the regions themselves – to cooperation also includes

smaller spatial configurations. In the present project this provided encouragement to think about a region that crosses national borders and to investigate the interests of the political decision makers (cf. Section 4.3).

1.3 Objectives and research questions

The goal of the research project on which this article is based is the analysis of the further development of existing forms of cooperation, taking into consideration the opportunities and risks in the northern Bavarian and Bohemian border area. In the form of an evaluation including consideration of deterritorialised types of cooperation, the necessity and opportunities of rescaling the established configuration of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area are elaborated and discussed with the municipal and business stakeholders involved. The empirical study inquires into the following aspects of functional and institutional integration:

- > The compilation of the changing parameters on the regional and higher levels over the period 2004 to 2014,
- > A review of the cross-border integration processes of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area between 2004 and 2014 in terms of its importance for municipal policy cooperation and for cooperation between businesses, and in terms of its prominence among the population,
- > An evaluation of the potentials and risks of a spatial expansion of the existing cooperation areas within the aforementioned cooperation levels.

2 Empirical approach

The data necessary to answer the research questions was obtained from a triangulation involving document analysis, a written survey and expert interviews. This enabled a multiple perspective on border demarcation to be adopted, as Rumford (2012) suggests, establishing both a synchronic and diachronic level and an institutional and functional level. The project was carried out firstly by project participants and secondly in the course of seminars and theses conducted with and by students at the University of Bayreuth between May and December 2016. Cooperation with colleagues at the west Bohemian University of Plzeň overcame the problem of language deficits, avoided misunderstandings and enhanced intercultural understanding.

A systematic evaluation of reports from the EUREGIO EGRENSIS was used to analyse the qualitative and quantitative extent of existing cooperation and its development over time. In addition, cooperative initiatives were identified that extend beyond the cooperation area, such as twinning arrangements between towns, school exchanges and administrative cooperation.

A total of 17 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key stakeholders. The experience to date with the EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area was also consid-

ered, as was the desired thematic and spatial expansion of this spatial configuration. When making the preliminary choice of interviewees care was taken to include representatives from all arenas of governance, such as the public administration (mayors, heads of district authorities) business (chambers of commerce, industry and trade) and civil society (German-Czech society). Furthermore, a division into five sub-areas (Upper Franconia, Upper Palatinate, Middle Franconia, south Thuringia, west Bohemia) was intended to ensure a regionally distinct evaluation, reflecting the various regional interests.

3 Outline of the spatial situation in the case study area

The spatial situation in the north-west Bavarian and north Bohemian border area displays many socio-economic commonalities but also reveals border-related disparities, as discussed below. Recently, primarily since 2010, in parallel with positive economic developments in Germany, numerous initiatives have been developed in Upper Franconia, e.g. the Epicurean Region Upper Franconia (*Genusregion Oberfranken*). Increasing international interconnections led to the export rate increasing to 51.6% in 2015 (Statement by the *IHK* [Chamber of Commerce and Industry] *Oberfranken-Bayreuth* 2015). Also linked to this was the fact that in 2017 the number of employees liable for social security contributions was the highest it had been since the 1990s (cf. Fig. 1). Map 1 shows the population trend between 2000 and 2013 and reveals that the majority of municipalities, especially in eastern Upper Franconia, were characterised by negative population trends.

Comparison with the situation in the two regions of Karlovy Vary and Plzeň in west Bohemia shows that while the centre Plzeň clearly displayed strong growth between 2005 and 2009, large parts of the two regions, especially near the border, were characterised by considerable declines in population figures. A clear decline in direct foreign investment has also been seen since the banking crisis of 2009. In response, Czech economic and structural policy has attempted to stimulate regional development through introducing new strategic industrial areas, usually located on abandoned ex-military airfields. Two of these, in Most-Joseph and in the Zatec-Triangle, are of considerable significance for the integration areas in west Bohemia (Hercik/Szczyrba 2012: 147 et seq.).

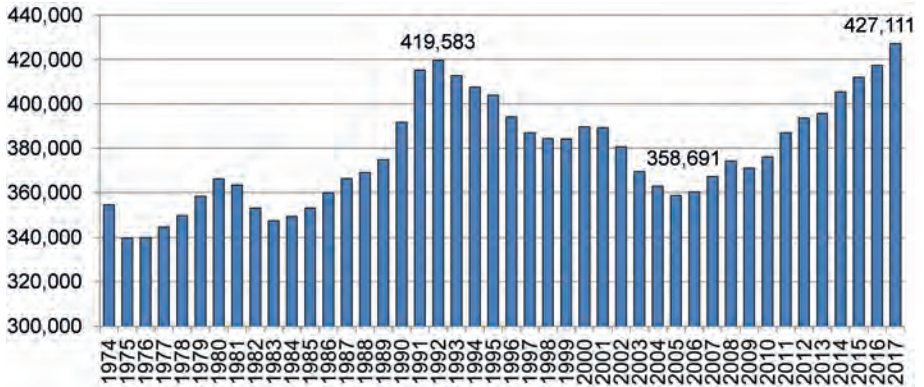
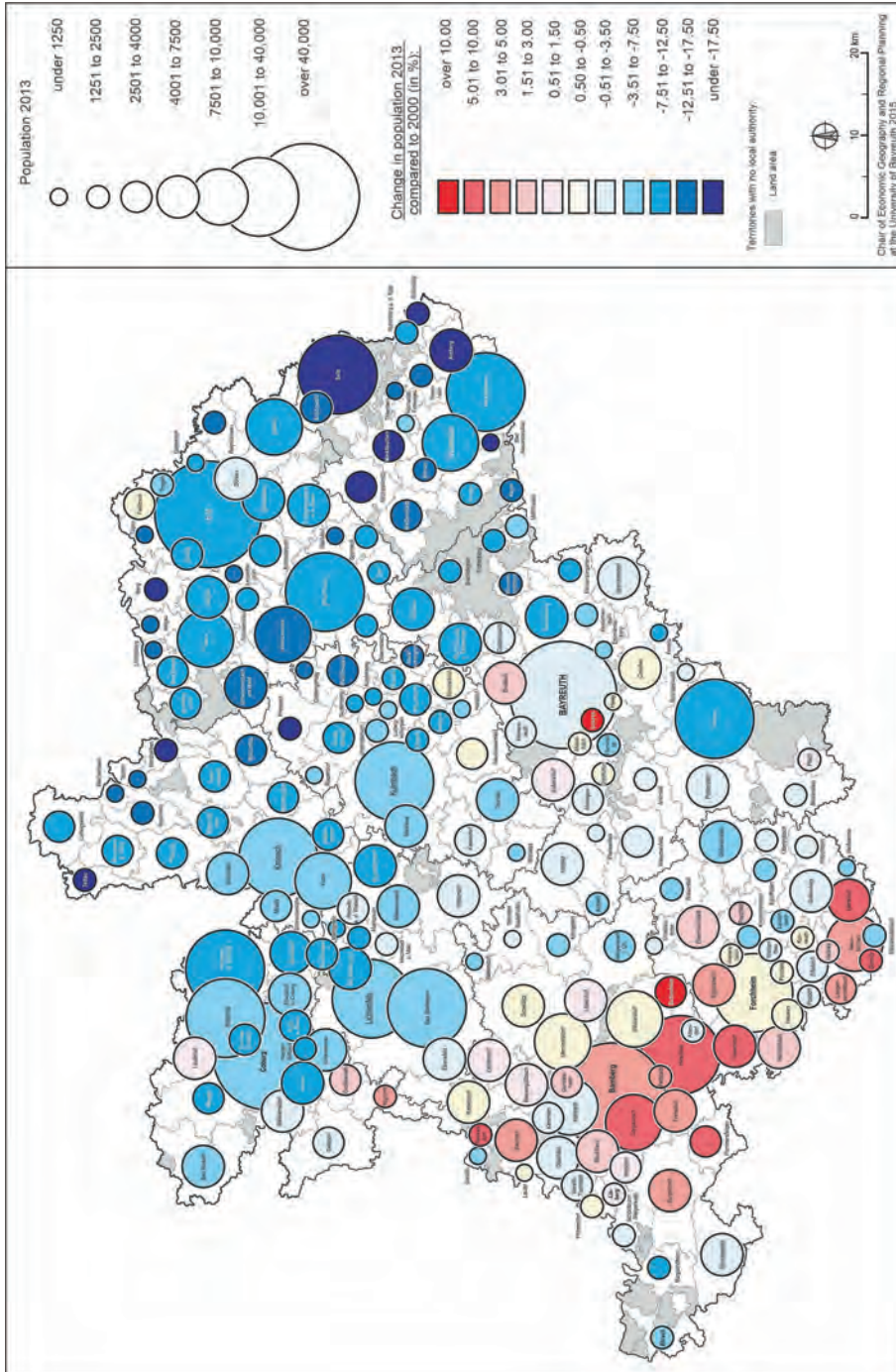


Fig. 1: Development of numbers of employees liable for social security contributions in Upper Franconia/Source: data from the IHK Oberfranken-Bayreuth

The business community in Upper Franconia is also interested in a further expansion of relations with west Bohemia and the Czech Republic. Compared with earlier sensitivities the ambiance has changed significantly in recent years. In a survey carried out in October 2014 a majority of those asked favoured a ‘growing together’ of the regions on the two sides of the border (Statement by the *IHK Oberfranken-Bayreuth* 2015). In the course of a field trip conducted by the University of Bayreuth on cross-border tourism in the research area, it could be demonstrated that far-reaching interlinkages existed, especially from Germany to the Czech Republic. In the Bohemian spa triangle such links are of particularly high quality and are promoted by bilingual signs and language skills in the tourism industry. Conversely, numerous municipalities have discovered the potential of Czech holidaymakers and shoppers, as the coordinator of the town centre of Marktredwitz reports:

‘[...] well I don’t want to exaggerate, but we have a catchment area of over 30,000 people in the Czech Republic, who come to Marktredwitz every year to shop [...] but also for day trips and we now have a really high proportion, which is also actively promoted by the marketing association. So we now have a Czech Facebook page about our marketing association. [...]. That just amplifies everything’ (Interview 1, 18 May 2016).



Map 1: Population change in Upper Franconia between 2000 and 2013 / Source: Bayerisches Landesamt für Statistik und Datenverarbeitung (Bavarian State Office for Statistics and Data Processing)

This partial assessment in the project area led to a series of guiding theses:

1. Phases: Cooperation processes within the EUREGIO EGRENSIS area along the German-Czech border have progressed in a discontinuous, wavelike fashion since 1990: (1) 1990–1993: Enthusiasm/euphoria after the fall of the Iron Curtain, (2) ‘Colonisation’ of Czech areas close to the border, (3) Normalisation, (4) 2004–2007: Renewed euphoria due to the Czech Republic joining the EU and Schengen area, (5) Normalisation and emancipation of the Czech areas close to the border.

2. Parameters: Since the creation of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS in 1992 its work has been influenced by the continued transformation of the border regime. From an external EU border after the fall of the Iron Curtain to an internal border of the EU (2004) and a Schengen border (2007) to the complete opening of the German labour market for Czech citizens (2011).

3. Forms of cooperation and structural policy: Until 2000 the European Union focused primarily on promoting small-scale areas close to the border with the aim of furthering European territorial cohesion. This was followed by a focus on large-scale forms of cooperation and metropolises, with the aim of encouraging growth in the centres to become the ‘most competitive economic area in the world’ by 2010 (Commission of the European Communities 2005). Cross-border cooperation in local areas is subsidised mainly by INTERREG-A funds, which continue to account for the majority of INTERREG funds.

4. Regional development in northern Bavaria: 1960s/1970s: ‘zonal border development’; end of the 1980s move towards endogenous regional development (‘from the region for the region’) and in the 1990s continued development with regional management and regional marketing; since 2011 dynamic economic development which is highly dependent on the automotive industry and positive regional awareness.

5. Regional development in west Bohemia: Until 1989 socialist planning policy with a focus on the centres of Prague, Plzeň and Brno and in the peripheries with the aim of ‘retaining’ the population; after the fall of the Iron Curtain again a focus on the centres (but diverging development, e.g. Plzeň vs Karlovy Vary since the end of the 1990s) with more traditional administrative tools (similar to German federal policy) and moderate outward migration in the peripheries (until 1992/93), there is no endogenous regional development but rather traditional infrastructure and settlement policies.

4 Results of the evaluation of different cooperation areas

A long-term, detailed analysis of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS is possible thanks to its many years of activities, its prominence among decision makers and its political acceptance. It thus serves as a basis for the evaluation of cross-border cooperation areas in the case study region and is consequently the subject of in-depth consideration. The European metropolitan region of Nuremberg is then discussed. Finally, an alternative spatial configuration is outlined, illustrating the possibility of a cooperation area on a meso level between the Euroregions und macro-regions.

4.1 The EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area

After changing ruling authorities and border regimes, forced migration and expulsion, and a double frontier location during the time of the Iron Curtain, the early 1990s saw the founding of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS, named after the historical Egerland. The aim was to promote and coordinate on a regional level the potential of cross-border cooperation in the 'quadrangle' of Bavaria, Bohemia, Saxony and Thuringia. The accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in 2004 and to the Schengen area in 2007 further changed the border regime and the parameters for cooperation. Although this allowed the largely free passage of people and goods, language, cultural (cf. for the situation before 2004, Birk 2000) and administrative boundaries continue to represent barriers to more advanced integration.

The territory of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS comprises, on the Bavarian side, eastern Upper Franconia, northern Upper Palatinate and the district of Kronach (1,058,096 inhabitants), the Saxon and Thuringian Vogtland and the western Ore Mountains (822,892 inhabitants), and the north-western Bohemian districts (*okresy*) of Karlovy Vary, Sokolov, Tachov and Cheb (360,861 inhabitants). In the north it borders the Erzgebirge Euroregion and in the south the Bavarian Forest – Bohemian Forest – Lower Inn Euroregion (EUREGIO EGRENSIS 2010: 5) (cf. Map 2). Outside the cooperation area are the cities of Erfurt, Chemnitz, Nuremberg and Plzeň, which are connected by well-developed transport links that cross the EUREGIO EGRENSIS.

In 1992 when the Euroregion was founded, the conceptual focuses were cross-border regional and municipal development in different structural areas through the support of cooperation between public and private planning agencies; cross-border regional, project and implementation management; information management, involving the transfer and distribution of information especially in the context of EU advice (information about European funding opportunities), conflict management in cases of diverging regional or municipal developments through discussion in EUREGIO EGRENSIS committees, regional marketing and public relations, and strengthening the competitiveness of the 'quadrangle' of Bavaria, Saxony, Thuringia and Bohemia.

Eine europäische Grenzregion stellt sich vor ...
Evropský příhraniční region se představuje ...
A European border region introduces itself ...

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Bohemia Working Group
Arbeitsgemeinschaft Böhmen
Pracovní sdružení Čechy
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www.euregio-egrensis.cz

Central Europe tourism portal
Tourismusportal "Mitte Europa"
Turistický portál "Uprostřed Evropy"
www.mitte-europa.eu
www.uprostred-evropy.eu

Map 2: The EUREGIO EGRENIS /Source: EUREGIO EGRENIS (2016: 3)

The EUREGIO EGRENSIS was not, however, the only approach to cross-border regional development in the 1990s. Among the others were the ÖKOREGIO EGRENSIS – a sort of parallel organisation with an environmental focus – and the Festival Mitte Europa, a festival that was first organised by the singer Thomas Thomaschke at the beginning of the 1990s and which has become established as a cultural event that brings people in this area together. There is also a whole series of other cross-border projects such as the summer academy in Eger (Frankenberger/Maier 2011).

Forms of functional integration can also be identified, for instance commuter travel particularly from Saxony and the Czech Republic to Bavaria, and the founding of subsidiaries on the Czech side of the border by German companies (Schramek 2014: 118). The expert report by Chilla/Weidinger (2014: 62) further identifies other functional interlinkages and integration potentials in the field of tourism for the northern Bavarian-Bohemian border area.

In terms of institutional setup the EUREGIO EGRENSIS does not have independent legal form but consists of an amalgamation of federal-state based working groups in Bavaria (language), Saxony/Thuringia (transport) and the Czech Republic (tourism) with a joint steering committee. The decision of principle to establish a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation was passed by all the working groups. To help achieve the project goals the EUREGIO EGRENSIS primarily focuses on the cross-border management of externally funded projects, which may be run by partners (Schramek 2014: 124 et seq.).

A field trip in Hohenberg an der Eger and Cheb for students at the University of Bayreuth investigated the degree of prominence of the Euroregion. Short qualitative interviews on the German side of the border revealed that almost all those asked connected something with the term EUREGIO EGRENSIS. This was particularly true for specific projects (e.g. state garden show in Marktredwitz/Cheb 2006), the support of local institutions (e.g. the youth hostel Hohenberg an der Eger) and tourist measures.

Compared to those questioned in Germany, the EUREGIO EGRENSIS was seldom familiar to those questioned in Bohemia. People could not link concrete projects with the EUREGIO EGRENSIS. Those who had heard of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS in the Czech Republic were usually active in cross-border organisations themselves or knew of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS through projects on the German side. The structures of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS were completely unfamiliar.

Cross-border cooperation and projects, and the EUREGIO EGRENSIS in particular, were very positively evaluated as being useful on both sides of the border. ‘Connecting people, breaking down borders, getting to know the mentality of neighbouring countries, cultural exchange’: this assessment is not, however, concretely related to the work of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS but rather to cross-border cooperation in general. Suggestions for the EUREGIO EGRENSIS were related to a reduction in bureaucracy, the extension of existing cycling paths and the intensification of cooperation between the German and Czech police forces and policymakers.

Projects carried out during the summer semester of 2016 as part of the MA course in Human Geography at the University of Bayreuth included numerous expert interviews with economic and political actors in the border region. The interviews with representatives of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS focused particularly on the organisation, its structure, fields of engagement, projects, cooperations and actors. It became clear that the Euroregion working group of Bavaria and the Euroregion working group of Bohemia had fundamentally different structures, gave different answers to certain questions and in some cases had different views. This applies, for instance, to the enlargement of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS, which was viewed positively by the Bavarian working group but more negatively by the Bohemian working group. Language was seen as a problem by both working groups. The four focuses of the organisation (business, civil society, politics, culture) were repeatedly emphasised. In the interviews with stakeholders who were part of business networks and had strong links to businesses (chamber of commerce and industry, Bavarian trade association [*Bayern Handwerk International*] and the regional development agency of Plzeň) it became clear that the EUREGIO EGRENSIS did not play an important role in this field. It emerged in particular here that the ambitions of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS were not matched by the reality of the situation. The stakeholders interviewed suggested that the EUREGIO EGRENSIS had very little influence on businesses located in the region.

In light of the findings from the interviews conducted so far it can thus be concluded that the focus of the work of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS is primarily in the fields of civil society, culture and politics. A representative of the chamber of commerce and industry of Middle Franconia-Nuremberg commented that due to its 'excellent and long-term experience' the EUREGIO EGRENSIS was a 'complete organisation' (interview on 7 July 2016). The interviews in the districts of Tirschenreuth and Wunsiedel similarly reveal that the working groups are of particular importance for their members, especially the districts and municipalities. This also relates to the fact that the EUREGIO EGRENSIS provides funds that help numerous smaller socially-relevant projects to be realised. Furthermore, its own projects make a significant contribution to cross-border exchange.

The questions relevant to the EUREGIO EGRENSIS that were put to selected persons in the qualitative interviews focused on the spatial location and experiences with this, and on possibilities for further developing the area in conceptual and spatial terms. Opinions about the importance of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS at the beginning of its activities were predominantly uniform – the cross-border cooperation was after all a new way of overcoming the divisive effect of the border. The start of this political-intercultural cooperation was facilitated by awareness among the population on both sides of the border of the spatial configuration of the historical administration known as the *Sechsamterland*, the territory of which encompassed the area of Marktredwitz/Cheb in the 18th century. The objective of being a partner of the municipalities, associations and civil society organisations on both sides of the border considerably improved understanding in the border area. Several interviewees also suggested that this contributed to the small-scale character of the approach.

As almost all the important institutions of Upper Franconia are represented on the steering committee and in other positions they see no need for a spatial extension of

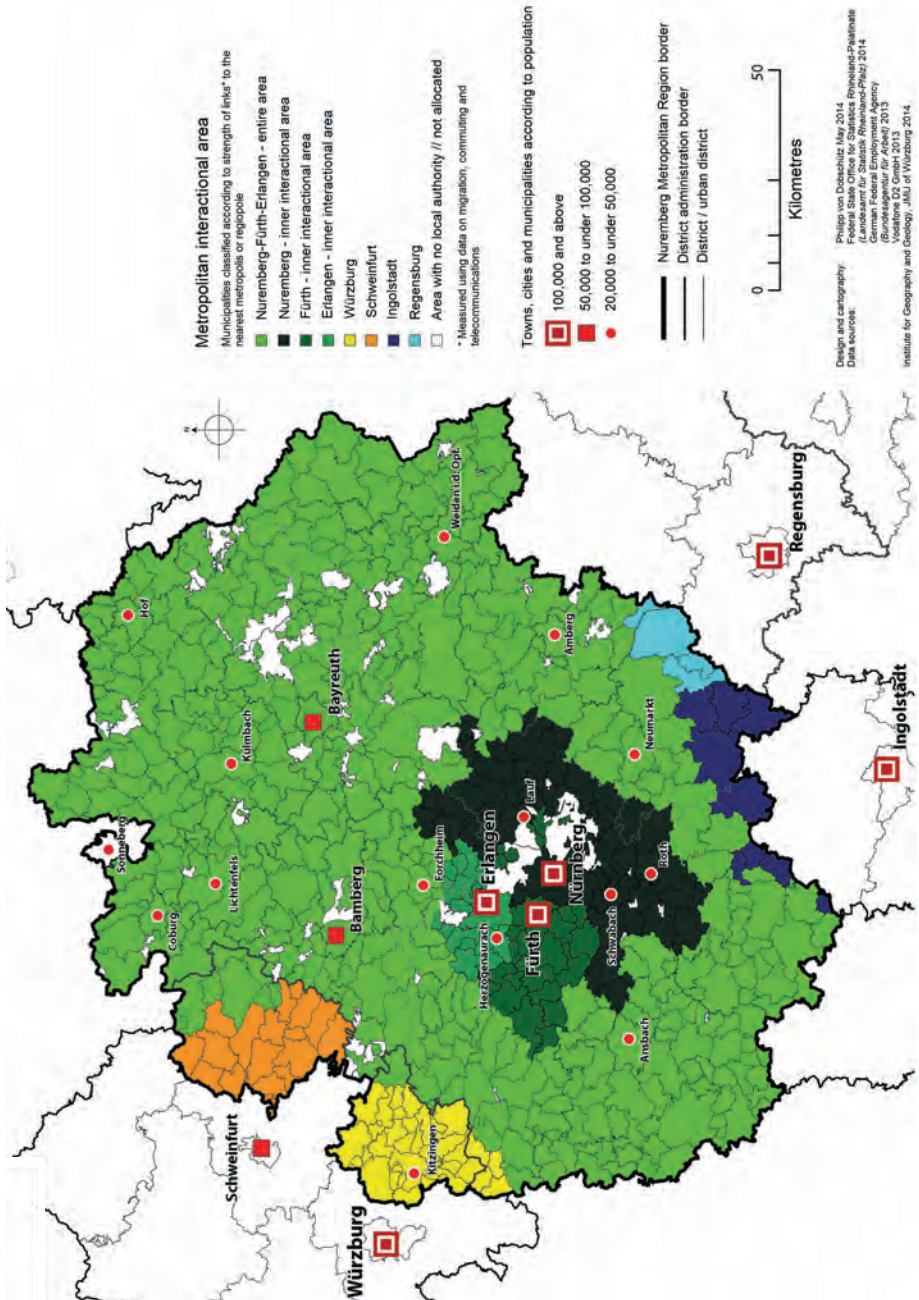
the region. The tasks of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS are dependent not on the form of the area but rather on EU programmes. It therefore seems logical that the region was recently selected by the Bavarian State Government to coordinate the processing of current projects. Critical comments were made in relation to the fact that – except for the notable cross-border state garden show of 2006 – there was a lack of ideas and projects on a larger scale that would reach beyond the regional level. Several of those interviewed were surprised that this was the case, especially at a time when large-scale thinking was actually more in the spotlight. One consequence of this is that businesses and universities have increasingly ‘bypassed’ the region and developed relations both with the city of Plzeň and its institutes and with other locations in the Czech Republic.

When the approach applied to the Bavarian working group is extended to the east Thuringia and Saxon working groups then the feedback is that in Saxony the federal state often has to provide higher funding compared to Bavaria, which is a reason to undertake fewer projects with the Bavarian side. In east Thuringia it was also possible to receive Saxon state funding for small projects for several years, although this is no longer available. This reinforces the impression that the EUREGIO EGRENSIS is to a great extent a Bavarian-Bohemian cooperation.

4.2 The European metropolitan region of Nuremberg cooperation area

Although this was not the focus of the study, the expert interviews quickly demonstrated that the subject of alternative cooperation areas, and one meso area in particular – the European metropolitan region of Nuremberg – cannot be ignored. The expert report by Chilla/Weidinger (2014) attempted to involve the European metropolitan region of Nuremberg in a new regional level with Munich and Prague. However, the concerns and reservations of the state authorities meant that this approach was not further pursued.

The experts interviewed here also indicated that spatial extensions of the metropolitan area of Nuremberg, one of the small European metropolitan regions with 3.5 million inhabitants, were conceivable. The basis for this was primarily the expansion of the metropolitan region of Munich due to economic activities in the area of Ingolstadt, which also led to intensified commuter links with the southern district of Roth (cf. Map 3). Similarly relevant is the still non-existent extension of the European metropolitan region of Nuremberg to the west and – apart from Sonneberg and discussions in the district of Hildburghausen – also to the north. Several interviewees therefore favour an eastwards extension towards west Bohemia.



Map 3: Metropolitan interactional area of the metropolitan region of Nuremberg /Source: Philipp von Dobschütz, Julius-Maximilians University of Würzburg, Institute of Geography and Geology

in the committees of the European metropolitan region of Nuremberg this is viewed in the same way, even if the metropolitan region has certainly developed in terms of focuses (for instance in relation to clusters like medical technology or the health sector). Strategies linked to establishing contacts with locations in west Bohemia confirm this in the tourism sector, both towards the Bohemian spa triangle and in connection with the joint Bavarian-Czech exhibition held on the occasion of the 700th birthday of Emperor Charles IV. However, this was less about a spatial extension of the region and more about new cooperative partners and locations, especially in the international context (not least because this meant increased funding), as emerged clearly in an interview in the European metropolitan region of Nuremberg for the field of medical technology.

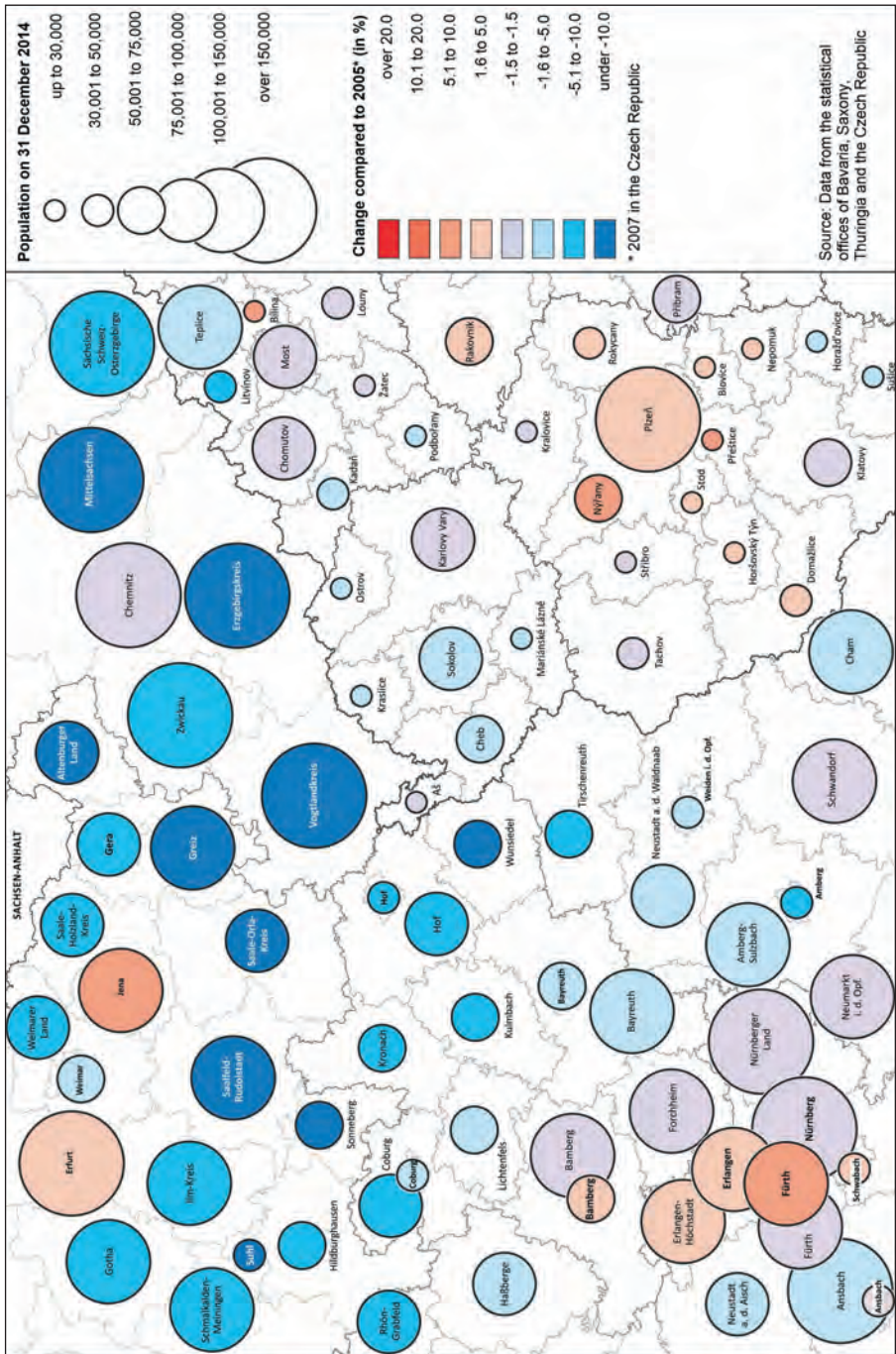
‘They are active in China, they have focal points worldwide. They’ve created hubs too in the meantime, in Boston they have a subsidiary, so they spread their net globally. [...] I don’t know what they’ll say if you tell them: “What do you think of this region as an area of experimentation and focus for medical technology and the health sector?”’ (Interview on 7 July 2016).

This quote clearly shows that expansion into neighbouring regions is not central to strategies for the future; the focus is rather more on international, issue-based cooperation.

4.3 A newly conceived functional spatial category

Chilla/Weidinger (2014) outlined the opportunities provided by meso areas in the central European core area. Such configurations emerged from regional planning visions, but still seem to lack concrete links to the relevant locations. In the 1990s such spatial categories would have been referred to as ‘urban networks’. However these entities were rather political partnerships with occasional thematic focuses; they were not characterised by spatial reach into the area as a whole or by continuous active cooperation. In contrast the authors of this article have pursued a classical geographical path to create a region. Thus if the area between the four cities of Nuremberg, Erfurt, Chemnitz and Plzeň is considered, it can be noted that it has many commonalities (homogeneity) and diverse functional interlinkages (cf. Map 4 and Chapter 3).

This starts with the remarkable natural areas, which also play a large role in tourism. Without doubt, the area has the highest density of spas in Europe. Rural areas are key here, but there are considerable business competences both in the industrial and the services sectors, with a typical economic structure of small and medium sized enterprises and a large number of *hidden champions* in Middle Franconia and Upper Franconia, northern Upper Palatinate, Thuringia, western Saxony and, last but not least, western Bohemia with Plzeň. Sectors like the automotive supply industry, the plastics and textile industry, medical technology, logistics and automation are increasingly major players, including in cross-border cooperation (cf. Maier 2015).



Map 4: Population change in the Nuremberg-Erfurt-Chemnitz-Plzeň area between 2005 and 2014 / Source: data from the statistical offices of Bavaria, Saxony, Thuringia and the Czech Republic

But is there support for this meso area and is there a willingness on the part of businesses, the administrations and policymakers? As answers we take the results of the interviews conducted as part of this study. A series of interviewees remarked that large-scale development strategies are less established in the border areas in the eastern part of the EU than in the west. The lack of motivation for such spatial categories was criticised, especially as all the cities are located on the edges, and rural areas dominate the centre. One of the interviewees believed that there was a lack of flagship projects and 'landmarks' with supra-regional significance that could become focal points in the area. Despite the homogenous structure of the area, most of those interviewed (with the exception of the academics) believed that the area proposed was too small in the context of the EU greater urban areas and that it lacked common interests.

While those in the city of Nuremberg were open to the discussion, those in the city of Erfurt saw connections rather as lying in the Erfurt–Weimar–Jena region and in cooperation with the Central Germany metropolitan region, despite growing relations with Nuremberg such as the new high-speed train link. The position of Plzeň was also clear, as the city works with the Danube-Vltava region and directly with the city of Regensburg. There is a lack of incentive for representatives of the city and district of Plzeň to develop relations with Nuremberg. There are at present no joint projects with corresponding funding. Here too the attitude towards the proposed idea of a meso area is dominated by political pragmatism; for the interviewees in Plzeň there is a lack of concrete projects and funding.

5 Summary

The EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area was established in 1990 and is widely acknowledged and appreciated by political actors. It serves here as a heuristic for a multitude of spatial processes. On the one hand, it reflects the changing political and economic conditions of cross-border cooperation between Bavaria and the Czech Republic on a line of contact between two peripheral regions remote from political and economic centres. On the other hand, a spatial analysis of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS and, in particular, discussion of its spatial delimitations and alternative spatial configurations provide insights into debates surrounding the increasing macro-regionalisation and metropolisation of cross-border cooperation.

Particularly on the supranational level, the last 15 years have seen serious changes resulting from the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in 2004 and to the Schengen area in 2007, and from the complete opening of the labour market to Czech citizens in 2011. A moderate increase in functional interlinkages can consequently be noted. The economic trends characterising the northern Bavarian border area can be described as positive. In contrast western Bohemia is stagnating and the area around Karlovy Vary–Cheb in particular has been forced to find alternative development paths following the withdrawal of Russian capital (Lungová 2016). Political actors on both the Bavarian and the Czech side of the border can be seen to be somewhat reticent about cross-border cooperation. Reference is made either to

the Munich–Prague axis or to the established cooperation areas of the two Bavarian-Czech Euroregions.

For the period between the EU accession of the Czech Republic until 2016 cross-border integration in the research area can be described as positive, especially in terms of cooperation between enterprises. The fears that both sides had in connection with the EU accession of the Czech Republic have not been realised, so that there is now a broad spectrum of cooperation; here a central role is played by the regional chambers of commerce, industry and trade. While the EUREGIO EGRENSIS is often said to have a blind spot as far as economic cooperation concerned, its role in the field of municipal political cooperation and numerous cultural projects is undisputed. In this field it benefits from the longstanding trust of and between the actors involved, so that it is usually named as the most important actor in cross-border cooperation in northern Bavaria. On the other hand, among large parts of the cross-border population, particularly on the Czech side of the border, there is a widespread lack of knowledge of the activities and tasks of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS, and in some cases even of its existence. However, cross-border cooperation per se is almost always supported and the developments since 2004 are usually described as positive. Nonetheless, there are no signs of a hybrid regional border area identity emerging and the coming together of civil society on both sides beyond the purely project level remains a task for future generations.

Within the period of observation a multitude of spatial configurations for cross-border cooperation emerged, some of which overlapped or competed with one another. They ranged from attempts to enlarge the European metropolitan region of Nuremberg to the European Region of Danube-Vltava to large-scale metropolitan networks like the Central European metropolitan hexagon and the INTERREG-B Danube, Alpine and Central Europe regions. Based on the positive evaluation of the EUREGIO EGRENSIS cooperation area and trends towards larger interconnections, the idea of a meso area in the central European zone was discussed with stakeholders in the border area – roughly the area between the cities of Nuremberg, Erfurt, Chemnitz and Plzeň. Despite socioeconomic similarities and manifold functional interdependencies, this idea was met with scepticism. The reasons cited for this included a lack of political stimuli for the coordination and funding for such a project, the dominance of rural areas in the centre of the territory in question and insufficient common interests. At the same time, numerous actors commented on the lack of large-scale interactional areas particularly in comparison with west German border areas. Ideas that went beyond political pragmatism took the form of clearly defined issue-specific cooperation and included flagship projects, especially a cross-border health region that could bundle much of the potential in this field that is found in the area. Issues related to spatial changes are seldom discussed due to the positive economic trends found even in the peripheral regions of the cooperation areas.

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