

Northwest Bohemia: A Central European Border Region in Transition

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The opening of the iron curtain has resulted in spectacular social and economic changes within the border areas of the former socialist countries as well as an increase in public awareness of problems related to these regions. This brief study discusses selected problems of socio-economic change in Northwest Bohemia in terms of uneven development.

The region of concern was reshaped after World War II from the remnants of the former Sudetenland. In particular, communist leaders in the past intended it to become a centre of heavy industry and coal-mining. Despite this emphasis its structure is essentially heterogeneous in that it comprises sub-regions dominated by tourism, services and agriculture as well. Developmental problems arise not only from outdated economic structures which will be unable to stand world market competition, or from deficiencies arising from the uneven sectoral and spatial progress of political and economic transformation, but also from political and economic influences coming both from the national core (Prague) and from Germany. While paying attention to the fact that there is a superimposition of exogenous and endogenous factors of regional development, the study focuses on the individual responses of regional actors to the opening of the borders within the given set of structural conditions. Two main groups of social and economic actors are examined in closer detail: private entrepreneurs running small and medium-sized firms, and workers commuting to Germany on the basis of international regulations.

What kind of inter-regional communication across the borders can be seen? Which opportunities and which constraints concerning regional development and communication across the borders are felt by the actors? What kind of motivation causes them to look for and realize border-transcending activities (e.g. economic cooperation, work abroad)? Two enquiries of private entrepreneurs in the districts of Cheb/Sokolov/Karlovy Vary and of Usti/Decin and another enquiry of working commuters near Cheb were made in order to seek the answers to these questions.

With regard to cooperation of Czech enterprises with firms in the German border areas (Oberpfalz, Oberfranken, Saxonia), there are notable east-west differentials concerning willingness and realization of concrete projects. While numerous Czech entrepreneurs situated near the Bavarian border already put various forms of cooperation into practice, their colleagues in Northern Bohemia (districts of Usti and Decin) are quite reluctant to do so. Though there is a high degree of readiness to look for future cooperation on the whole, again it is the entrepreneurs from the Cheb region who more often plan concrete actions. These differentials are caused by the fact that cooperation with actors from the relatively wealthy regions in Bavaria are more attractive to Czech entrepreneurs than cooperation with enterprises from Saxony which are still struggling to overcome the post-unification economic crisis. For this reason, entrepreneurs in Northern Bohemia often reject cooperation. Experiences with existing cooperations tend to be ambiguous for most actors: on the one hand there is some satisfaction with the short-term rise which the individual enterprise has accomplished with the aid of entrepreneurs from abroad; on the other there is often a feeling of getting too little support from foreign partners and even of being exploited by western firms which benefit from having access to cheap resources (labour force etc.) in Bohemia.

Generally speaking, there is a strong tendency among Czech entrepreneurs to delimit their activities to the locality, because goods, markets and whole trade nets have not been established to their full extent yet. Many private manufacturers and salesmen try to serve local and regional needs first and only gradually expand their action space. Moreover, there is a rising consciousness of independence from the national centre which encourages engagement in locally bound activities.

Commuters from the Cheb region to Bavaria were asked about their motivation for working abroad and about the expenditure of the money they earned there. Being occupied as unskilled or low-skilled workers in the hotel industry and the textile and pottery industries of northeast Bavaria, they are facing the same poor working conditions as do

migrant workers from Southeast Europe. These conditions, however, are accepted because of the very high wage differences (a Czech factory worker earns up to 10 times as much when working abroad) and the short terms of occupancy. The main motives for taking up work in Bavaria are not only the opportunity to make money easily, but to earn savings, for instance in order to give one's children a secure future or to invest in private enterprises. However, the realization of long-term saving goals seems to be vague since the actual expenditure of savings turns out to be mainly consumptive; only to a small extent are earnings directed to investment in economic activities.

Individual activities thus concentrate on satisfying private needs (in the case of commuters) or on accomplishing economic success on a small-scale level, on a short-term basis and within a narrow spatial scope. Though they are at least partly strategies governed by a subjective logic which tries to reduce individual risks as well as to compensate for privations in the past, these activity patterns seem to contribute only little to regional development in the short run. Well-planned, expansive entrepreneurial activities as well as long-term investment of commuters in private economic activities are not an issue of the present and might only show up at later stages of transition.

Both categories of actors are subject to economic strategies of the West trying to benefit from the differences in wages and living conditions. The mobility of commuters is apt to extract potentials for regional development from the Czech republic in the short run. Long-term positive effects deriving from social and economic innovations which might be brought about by workers experiencing the Western way of working and living are still in the field of speculation; expectations of this kind may prove to be only an outflow of west European modernisation euphoria.

Finally the question is put: what potential for a self-reliant regional development can be identified? This implies a discussion of the concept of border-transcending planning regions (the so-called Euroregions) which is contrasted with the actors' perceptions of 'European' ideas (as opposed to action concepts related to the local level). As a result, it is recommended to strengthen the individual actors' willingness and ability to engage in local activities rather than in activities based on political concepts which were borrowed from much more favourable conditions within west European border regions.

References

- Bürkner, H. J. (forthcoming) *Northwest Bohemia: A Central European Border Region in Transition*.
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