

Institutional thickness of a shrinkage region with discontinuous development in a border periphery in Czechia

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ABSTRACT The article examines the effects of the social networks of a range of actors on the local development of municipalities located in Czech peripheral border regions. Its main goals are to shed light on and understand the role of social interactions in the development activities of individual municipalities in border-region peripheries and reveal the spatial differentiation of these municipalities. The borderland Cheb district (western Bohemia) is affected by the shrinkage process, and the concept of institutional thickness is used as the explanatory framework. One of the key conclusions is that the more disadvantages there are, the more important institutional thickness is as a development factor. The research data are drawn from 24 semi-structured interviews with the mayors of municipalities that within the system of state administration are municipalities without extended powers. The research also confirmed the diversity of individuals holding the position of mayor and the differences in the specific role mayors play in local development, as well as how important it is for municipalities to be active in microregional associations. It also showed that the internal differentiation of development opportunities and the formation of formal and informal ties are also determined by the quality of horizontal and vertical cooperation.

KEY WORDS shrinking region – institutional thickness – regional development – periphery – borderland municipality – mayor – Czechia

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Introduction

The uneven development of peripheral regions has been the subject of several Czech studies in the new millennium (Havlíček et al. 2008; Jančák 2001; Marada 2001; Marada et al. 2019; Musil, Müller 2008; Chromý, Skála 2010; Chromý et al. 2011; Pileček, Chromý, Jančák 2013). These studies have shown that a region's development is influenced not just by its position in the settlement hierarchy but also by various socioeconomic and sociocultural factors. In recent years, many scholars in the field of regional development have agreed that social and economic development is strongly determined by institutional factors (Rodríguez-Pose 2013). Drawing on Chromý et al. (2011), one of the most influential of these 'soft' factors is the quality of the social environment, which refers to how strongly actors identify with the region they live in – i.e. their regional anchoring. Given the mobilising effect of identity in local development, Chromý et al. (2011) concluded that the key role in development is played by a combination of local identity and the existence of a sufficiently dense network of primary actors. This is consistent with the main idea behind the concept of institutional thickness, which considers dense networks of actors to be a vital aspect of development (Amin, Thrift 1994).

Generally, in Czechia, local development has been strongly impacted by settlement continuity and discontinuity. The border areas, where the original German population had to leave their homeland after the Second World War (Kučera, Chromý 2012; Kučera, Kučerová 2012), still have worse overall socioeconomic success than other areas of the country marked by continuous (uninterrupted) development (Šerý, Klementová 2018; Šimon 2017). Sociocultural continuity is important both for activating a region's endogenous sources and for the region's overall socioeconomic success or stability (Osoba 2017). Local development is therefore institutionally and culturally determined and, according to Rodríguez-Pose (2013), every region moreover has its own place-specific institutional structure out of which the differences in the economic performance of the regions then unfold. However, the institutional theories largely ignore the micro-level differentiation of economic success. It is still unclear why some places are more successful at setting up a new development strategy than others, despite their similar structural preconditions (Boschma 2017). Many institutionalists thus believe that these spatial differences mainly derive from informal institutions because they help territories highlight the willingness and capacity of local actors to adopt new knowledge (North 1990, Rodríguez-Pose 2013).

This article, therefore, seeks to contribute to a better understanding of these informal institutions in a region that is on the external periphery of the Czech–German state border and has been in the process of shrinking over the last decade. Our main ambition is to find out how the personal social networks of local actors impact the development of their municipalities. We also want to

present a picture of the spatial differentiation of municipalities from the perspective of how well they cooperate vertically, because policy-making is not limited to horizontal relationships and instead also involves a vertical dimension (Sotarauta 2010), which is to say, it also depends on how well the actors involved in development on the local level cooperate with actors on a higher hierarchical level. We pursue these goals through specific research questions. The first question focuses on the actors themselves, as the main precondition for overcoming negative structural factors is collective effort and a willingness to cooperation (Sotarauta 2010, Döringer 2020). It examines how differences between mayors are reflected in social interactions and whether these interactions lead to the formation of social networks. The second question further explores the nature and type of ties that exist within any such social networks and asks what effect different institutional arrangements (Rodríguez-Pose 2013) have on the formation of mayors' contacts with other actors.

Specifically, we focus on local mayors because, as Komárek and Chromý (2020) have investigated, they are often the only ones in their region who are concerned with ensuring the prosperity of their local society. Mayors also play an especially important role in mobilising endogenous development potential by building social networks, formulating local strategies, and resolving problems, which makes them leading figures in development (Sotarauta 2005). Moreover, peripheries are often constrained by the small number of actors involved in developmental issues and the proactive role of political decision-makers, which then makes a willingness to cooperate with other actors even more important (Döringer 2020). In a study of the influence of mayors on local development, Bernard et al. (2011) found that an important role in development is also played by the managers of various regional associations – Voluntary Associations of Municipalities (VAMs) and Local Action Groups (LAGs) – and in the state border regions by interstate groups (e.g. Euroregion) as well. These regional associations are headed by executive managers, who coordinate relationships and cooperation between geographically remote actors. Czechia has a disintegrated settlement structure and a very large number of self-governing municipalities, which means that the number of mayors in the Czech geographical space is much larger than the average in most European countries (Hampl, Müller 1998). In the Czech administrative structure, there are municipalities in the public administrative system that, as well as performing the function and activities of self-government, also have responsibilities that have been transferred to them from the state level of administration (in a 'mixed model' system). These municipalities can be further divided into administrative districts (AD) of 'municipalities with extended powers' (MEPs), of which there are 205 in Czechia. On the regional level, the Czech administration is divided into fourteen self-governing units – these are regions (NUTS 3), and the regions are made up of districts (LAU 1). The geographical area analysed in this paper is the Karlovy Vary

Region in the western part of Bohemia, and it comprises three AD MEPs (Cheb, Mariánské Lázně, Aš).

To comprehensively analyse the situation in the selected region, we decided to use the concept of ‘institutional thickness’ (Amin and Thrift 1994) as our explanatory framework. We applied the concept of institutional thickness in this analysis much in the same way it was used to analyse regional differentiation in internal peripheral areas in eastern Bohemia by Komárek and Chromý (2020), whose findings are compared and discussed in this paper. As well as contributing to the current knowledge in the field, this paper also provides insight into the effect that actors’ participation in social networks has on local development in a region with discontinuous settlement (Kuldová 2005; Kučera, Chromý 2012; Kučera, Kučerová 2012).

The paper is organised into several parts. It begins by presenting the general theoretical foundation for focusing on the research problem and a discussion of the key concepts. We then explain the method we used to collect and evaluate data, which is followed by an analysis of the institutional environment in the borderland Cheb district in conformity with the main theoretical framework. The article concludes by presenting the main findings and discussing them in the context of the significance of networks and interactions for local development.

The social interaction of lead actors in the shrinkage regions

The core-periphery group of theories is the basic theoretical framework for research on peripheral areas (Friedmann 1973). Unlike core regions, peripheries are regions that have not adequately exploited the sources of development. A region’s peripheral status is largely the result of a process of peripheralisation, a fuzzy concept that, according to Kühn (2015), is determined by multiple factors. He also notes that the periphery is a less spatial fact than a social configuration. Drawing on a statistical cluster analysis conducted by Musil (1988), we distinguish two different types of peripheries: internal and external (Musil, Müller 2008; Havlíček et al. 2008). On the other hand, regardless of their location in relation to the core, both types of periphery have the characteristics of shrinking rural regions, these characteristics being depopulation, lower density, and a larger share of elderly population (OECD 2022). These demographic changes also have economic impacts, and, according to Sepp and Veemaa (2017), it is the combination of demographic and economic factors that drive regional shrinkage. This process is thus largely driven by macroregional trends unaffected by local actors (Heeringa 2020). However, local government institutions are proving effective in dealing with or mitigating the impacts of shrinking regions. The lead actors in local government, through their networks of contacts and leadership capacity, can

mobilise different entities to form partnerships (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012). Research on leadership is currently very popular among scholars, and focusing specifically on place leadership is one of the central components in understanding why and how some places can transition toward a new path of development, while many others with similar structural preconditions stagnate (Sotarauta et al. 2022).

For social interactions, in particular, the social capital of individuals and the collective (Lin 2008) is one of the basic factors that facilitate cooperation between actors. These interactions are also made easier by the proximity of actors, and not just in the geographical sense. Boschma (2005) has defined other types of proximity as well – such as cognitive, organisational, social, and institutional proximity. Although every local actor is a part of some network of contacts, the advantages that are derived from such networks are not strictly implicit, as they derive from several factors – such as the absolute size (membership base) and density of a network, structural characteristics, mutual trust and reciprocity, and, last but not least, the quality of the milieu (Kučerová 2011). Regional variations in social capital have been the subject of numerous studies in Czechia (e.g. Sýkora, Matoušek 2009; Jančák et al. 2008; Jančák et al. 2010; Chromý, Skála 2010; Majerová, Kostecký, Sýkora 2011; Pileček, Chromý, Jančák 2013; Marada et al. 2019). The relative significance of social and human capital was found by Hampl, Dostál, and Drbohlav (2007) to be directly proportional to a region's development potential. This finding is supported by Baňski (2009), who argues that social capital is the main factor behind the economic success of peripheries.

Social capital can take various forms (Kučerová 2011; Pileček, Chromý, Jančák 2013). Putnam (2000) distinguished two basic forms of social capital according to the prevailing strength of the relationships involved: these are the bridging and bonding forms of social capital. In bridging capital, the relationships are between more remote and less densely occurring groups. Bonding capital is characterised by stronger inner-group relationships, as a result of which members of the group can deal with negative influences from the external environment. Woolcock (2001) talks about a vertical (linking) form of social capital, where the ties of local development actors to important actors that rank higher in the hierarchy of public administration secure their advantages in the form of access to information or financial resources. In most cases, these are hierarchical relationships between actors in different power positions, usually on the regional, national, and supra-national levels (Sýkora, Matoušek 2009). According to Bernard et al. (2011), social capital is a source of considerable endogenous potential for the development of small municipalities. Unlike larger towns or cities, in small municipalities, the developmental potential lies mainly in getting local actors involved in the various social networks that determine the local development of these municipalities. The character of networks, how they are set up, and how (well) they function are also important considerations. Even though Sotarauta (2010) argues about the

importance of the vertical dimension of relations, Beugelsdijk and Van Schaik (2005) have empirically demonstrated that the active approach of actors within social networks in a horizontal milieu is more important for the economic success of regions than the hierarchical arrangement is.

The strength of the ties that exist between actors within a network is not usually equal. Granovetter (1973) considers weak ties or 'bridges' to be more important because in strong relationships the actors involved tend to share and circulate the same information. By contrast, when there are weak ties between actors and a lower rate of interaction, there is a greater chance of new information being transmitted between actors. Bušíková (1996) sees the possibility and especially the ability of local actors to establish weak ties as an important aspect of social capital, and the basic attributes of relationships between actors are the reciprocity, intensity, and permanence of relationships. Vajdová et al. (2010) analysed networks of institutional actors in local development in Czechia and found that the institution of public administration and mayors in particular play a key role in the local development of the area they represent.

Municipal governments and regional associations are thus key institutions on the local level, but there are various definitions of what an 'institution' is and what it does. Three decades ago, North (1990) defined an institution as 'the rules of the game' that fundamentally influence the development of every region. In recent decades institutions have received increasing attention even outside the field of research on regional development and have become important in various scientific fields. Nelson (1998) distinguished two types of institutions: formal (e.g. organisations with a fixed address, but also, for example, laws) and informal (e.g. cultural and historical values, customs, people's behaviour). Both forms of institutions have a close connection to local development, but the influence of informal ('soft') institutions, such as a trust or effective leadership skills, is difficult to quantify. On the other hand, through the participation of actors in particular networks, we can better understand not only institutional arrangements but also highly complex informal relations (Sotarauta 2010). The socioeconomic development of regions and territorial communities' benefits from the existence of informal relations in that these institutions enable the smoother transmission of information.

The concept of institutional thickness and the development of border peripheral regions

The basic paradigm of the studies that have been conducted to date has been based on a view in which institutions are seen to be an integral part of a region's economic development. In the context of the global divide, studies have focused on mapping the sociocultural factors that have an effect on development and in

some cases on the type of interactions development actors engage in. Amin and Thrift (1994) found that social and cultural factors play an irreplaceable role in the successful development of regions. They explained this effect with the concept of 'institutional thickness'. According to their findings, there are four basic factors that determine institutional thickness: (1) a sufficient number of institutions in the public, private, and non-profit sector; (2) a high rate of interactions between individual actors (the significance of both formal and informal ties), where existing ties can grow over time to become a 'social milieu' that is shaped and formed by the shared values and rules; and (3) a no less fundamental component of institutional thickness is that there is a clearly defined power structure that leads to the representation of collective interests instead of the assertion of individual objectives. These premises can be fulfilled when there is (4) an awareness of the mutual importance between actors across the structure. In the view of Amin and Thrift (1994), by contrast, the relationship between institutional thickness and regional development does not form naturally and it arises instead from many other factors and possibilities. The concept of institutional thickness put forward by Amin and Thrift (1994) might seem to suggest that regions with a large number of institutions are probably more successful than regions that do not have a particularly large number of institutions. This, however, is not automatically the case. Amin and Thrift relate the concept more to the legitimacy of trust, the source of which they identify as lying not so much in the institutions themselves as in the process by which institutions are created. The concept also appears in the work of Granovetter (1985), who argues that small businesses on the local and regional levels have a better chance of succeeding in a globalised world when they are 'anchored' in a network of relationships. Even the existence of a sufficient number of institutions, however, and regular interactions between them is no guarantee that a region will experience successful economic growth. What matters, therefore, is not just how the interactions between actors are organised but the content or substance of these interactions, as not all contacts or connections are equally valuable and beneficial, and not all of them lead to a shared vision that has the power to sufficiently mobilise the actors in a region (Blažek, Uhlíř 2020; Fialová, Chromý 2022).

There is currently a debate among scholars about how useful the concept of institutional thickness is for studying issues of regional development. Several scholars have commented critically on this concept (Henry, Pinch 2001; Raco 1998; Farole, Rodríguez-Pose, Storper 2011), even though everyone still agrees that a significant role is indeed played by a region's institutional composition. On a theoretical level, Rodríguez-Pose (2013) extended the criticism of the quantification of institutions by arguing that the effectiveness of the institutional environment is not determined by how many institutions there are but by effective institutions in the region having the right structure. Beer and Lester (2015) argue

that the effectiveness of the institutional milieu depends on the quality of the people who are in the positions who occupy positions in the governing apparatus in the region, and depends also on it being free from corruption, nepotism, and other undesirable influences. Scholars from Lund University contributed to a re-definition of the concept with their criticism of the lack of a spatial dimension to institutional thickness (Zukauskaite, Plechero, Trippl 2017). Given the increased role that institutions play in regional development processes on various measurement levels, it is necessary to understand in what ways individual institutions cooperate. Zukauskaite, Plechero and Trippl (2017) therefore propose that the current concept should also take into account the different forms of co-existence of institutions. An analysis of the social interactions between actors across different hierarchical levels provides a better picture of the presence of individual institutions in space and helps to reveal which institutional levels are supporting development, and which levels, by contrast, are impeding development.

Data and research design

We drew our data from interviews that we conducted with representatives of local municipal administration (mayors). To conduct a comprehensive analysis, it/we used spatial statistics methods to help obtain a representative sample. We used semi-structured interviews, which, Coulsona and Ferraria (2007), for example, argue are ideal for obtaining a comparative perspective. The researcher can at any point enter the interview while it is under way, and the qualitative approaches to the research make it possible to get a better understanding of phenomena that are difficult to grasp based on hard statistical data.

The district of Cheb is a territory located in the western part of the self-governing region of Karlovy Vary along the Czech-German state border (see Fig. 1). We examined twenty-four of the forty municipalities that are located in the district of Cheb. The basic units we analysed are municipalities without extended powers, located in the area of three municipalities with extended powers (MEPs) – namely, the municipalities of Aš, Cheb, and Mariánské Lázně. Administrative centres (i.e. the central cities in individual MEPs of individual MEPs) were eliminated in advance from the selection process because, from the perspective of development opportunities, it is not possible to meaningfully compare the lowest level of Czech administration with what are hierarchically the highest levels (primarily because of the differences between them in terms of significance, size, various financial opportunities, staffing capacity etc.). The role of actors at the higher levels is therefore in the research reflected in mayors at the local level. The individual municipal governments included in the research were selected in a way that prevents the distortion of spatial autocorrelations, which are typically manifested as the



Fig. 1 – Location of study area

formation of positive and negative clusters of the indicator that is being measured (Spurná 2008). The degree of spatial autocorrelation between our interviews was measured using the ArcGIS program. Applying Global Moran's I criteria to the interviews revealed no qualitative evidence of spatial autocorrelation, and this was again confirmed using more detailed local G statistics.

The all data were collected in period of time between April and June 2020. The semi-structured interviews with mayors contained twelve basic questions and each interview lasted around 30–60 minutes. All the data we obtained had to be recoded in numerical form and therefore the answers provided by individual respondents were converted to a Likert scale (Likert 1932) ranging from 1 (the worst/the lowest evaluations) to 4 (the best/the highest). To evaluate the findings respondents were initially divided up into groups based on their informal position in the municipal council and the length of time they occupied the position of mayor.

Institutional arrangements in Cheb district: factors behind the formation of ties between local actors

The entire region in our analysis has the characteristics of an external border periphery that has been shaped by a combination of discontinuous development and the impacts of shrinkage. Given the region's location close to the state border,

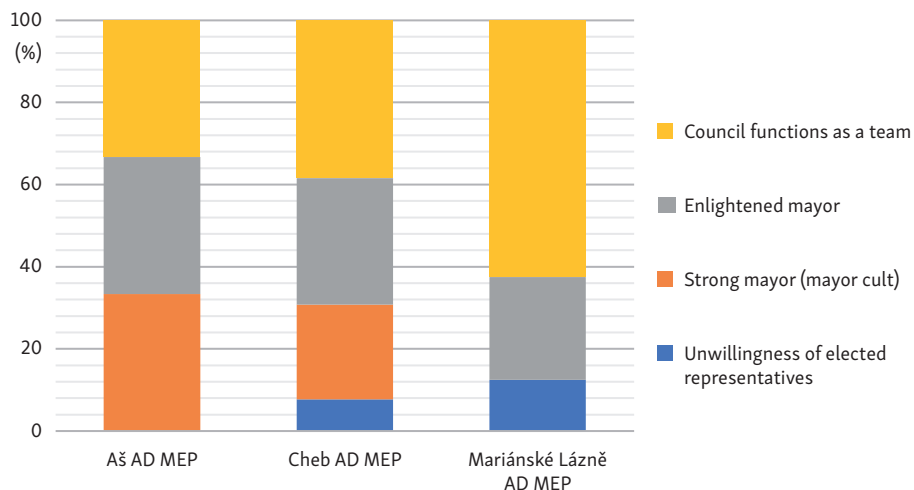


Fig. 2 – Positions of mayors within their municipal council in Cheb district in 2020. Council functions as a team – mayor is a member of one group; Enlightened mayor – participation of elected members of council is insufficient; Mayor cult – mayor has dominant role; Unwillingness of elected representatives – very passive and unstable council; $n = 24$. Source: Author's field survey (from April to June 2020).

it has considerable development potential, and this potential lies in the social interactions and networks that exist between subjects engaged in local development and actors on the other side of the state border (Hampl 2003).

One of the most important points that need to be noted is that there are different types of mayors in terms of what kind of position they occupy within their elected (municipal) body and their relationship to other elected representatives (see Fig. 2). Almost all the mayors agreed that the municipal council plays an essential role in the management of the municipality. The role of elected representatives in the council, however, varies significantly between municipalities, and, according to the mayors' responses, there are two reasons for this. One is political instability, which often results from disputes over what the future development in the municipality should be like (Bubeníček, Čmejrek, Čopík 2010) and from the frequent turnover of personnel officials of elected representatives within the municipal councils as a result of long-term tensions between some individuals. The second reason is the unwillingness of elected representatives to work on the development of the municipality alongside the mayor. Feeling isolated as an actor working for development has a negative effect on cooperation on the supralocal level.

In conformity with the concept of institutional thickness, individual actors are expected to cooperate, but if this is to be the case, any dysfunction in the municipal

councils of local governments is undesirable. In this respect, the municipal councils in Mariánské Lázně AD MEP were the ones found to function best in our study area, as the mayors in these municipalities stated more often than others that the representatives in their council function as a team. Figure 2 shows that in the municipalities in Cheb AD MEP and Aš AD MEP, there exists what can be called a 'strong mayor'. In such cases, local development is dependent on the skills of the mayor, who, either because of the strong position he or she is in or because the other council members remain passive, is the one who determines the direction of development (Mouritzen, Svava 2002). The most balanced category across the region is the case of the 'enlightened mayor', a situation in which the representatives are typically more active, but their cooperation is not yet on a level that we could call collective activity. In most cases, these are municipalities in which the position of mayor has long been occupied by the same person, but the other elected representatives have been in office for a shorter period. Simply put, the number and especially the types of social interactions depend on how long the mayor has been in office. Naturally, the longer the mayor has been in office, the larger his or her network of contacts. The interviews also revealed that mayors tend to develop informal ties when they interact more and work together on shared problems, and an informal format makes communication between them easier. Mayors are then able to share useful information and experiences more easily.

The nature and intensity of the ties formed vary according to the different types of mayors (see Fig. 3). Most cases of ties formed through informal interactions are found among mayors who have been in office for multiple (four-year) electoral terms or have the necessary knowledge of the local milieu from their previous employment. Conversely, in the case of part-time mayors, for whom being mayor is not their primary employment, we found that they tend to have just one or two ties in their network of contacts. The less time that part-time mayors have to spend being a mayor has an effect on the nature of the ties they form and on the type of ties they tend to form in a geographical sense, as they more often form ties with others in a neighbouring municipality. The fact that part-time mayors are only able to meet occasionally means that there is no chance for their relationships to change from being formal to informal.

Cooperation between municipalities and ties with public administrative units higher up in the hierarchy is also influenced by the political orientation of the mayor, though the majority of the mayors we interviewed were not members of any political organisation and most did not even have any obvious political orientation. Nevertheless, party membership proved to be an important element of cooperation, as useful information and experiences are often shared at the meetings of regional party branches.

Among the determinants of institutional thickness are how involved municipalities are in cooperation on a supralocal level, and what form this cooperation

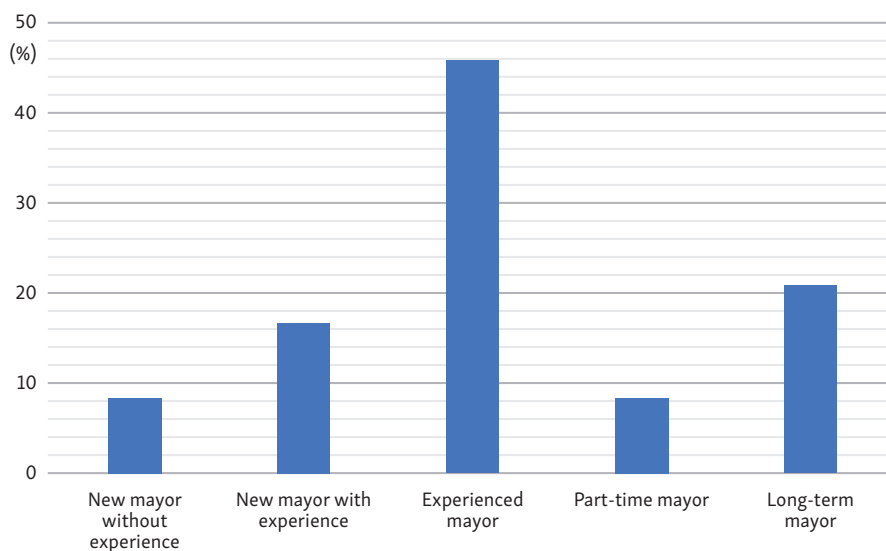


Fig. 3 – Types of mayors by their form and length in office in Cheb district in 2020. Source: Author's field survey (from April to June 2020). New mayor without experience – mayor in first electoral terms without any experience; New mayor with experience – mayor in first electoral terms with some experience from a public administration; Experienced mayor – person has been in office of mayor for 2–3 electoral terms; Part-time mayor – person has another employment; Long-term mayor – person has been in office of mayor 4 and more electoral terms; $n = 24$.

takes. Officials in public administration, represented here by the mayors of individual municipalities, are key actors in regional cooperation. Figure 4 shows that almost all the municipalities engage in cooperation, and in most cases they do so through voluntary associations of municipalities (VAM) and local action groups (LAG). In the region there are five VAMs – Aš VAM, Cheb VAM, Kamenné vrchy VAM, Mariánské Lázně VAM, Slavkovský les VAM – and two LAGs – LAG 21 and LAG Kraj živých vod. The frequency of social interactions between mayors in these groups is not the same in every VAM and LAG.

To compare the benefits of membership in a VAM, it is helpful that some municipalities are members of more than one association. The results in Figure 5 indicate that the mayors consider the best cooperation to be the cooperation between mayors in the VAM in Aš AD MEP. How well a VAM functions depends, among other things, on the skills and abilities of its manager. According to the mayors in the area of Aš AD MEP, the most important contribution that VAM managers make is that they share information and experiences. That the municipalities in Aš AD MEP have set up a well-organised form of cooperation among themselves gets some confirmation from the fact that municipalities in this region have repeatedly been named 'Village

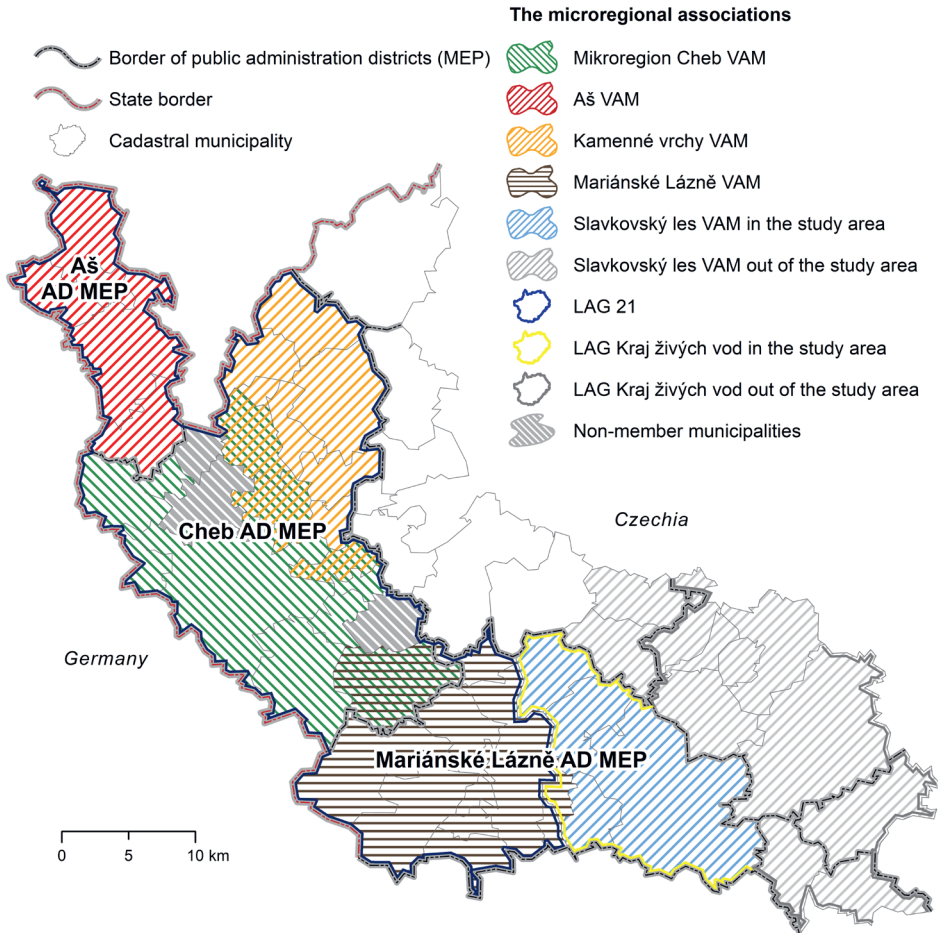


Fig. 4 – Microregional associations in Cheb district in 2020.

of the Year' (a nationwide contest). The reasons for this success are the frequent communication and regular meetings between mayors which transformed what were originally formal ties into friendly relationships, which was made possible to some degree by the small number of municipalities in the VAM (there are just 5). An instrumental role in this success can also be attributed to the mayor of Krásná municipality, who is both an elected representative of the region and a member of the Committee for Rural Development in the self-governing region of Karlovy Vary. A similar situation with respect to the benefits of membership in a VAM is observed in the eastern part of the Mariánské Lázně AD MEP. The Slavkovský les VAM unites mayors not just from the region that we analysed, but also from other districts in the self-governing region of Karlovy Vary and the self-governing region

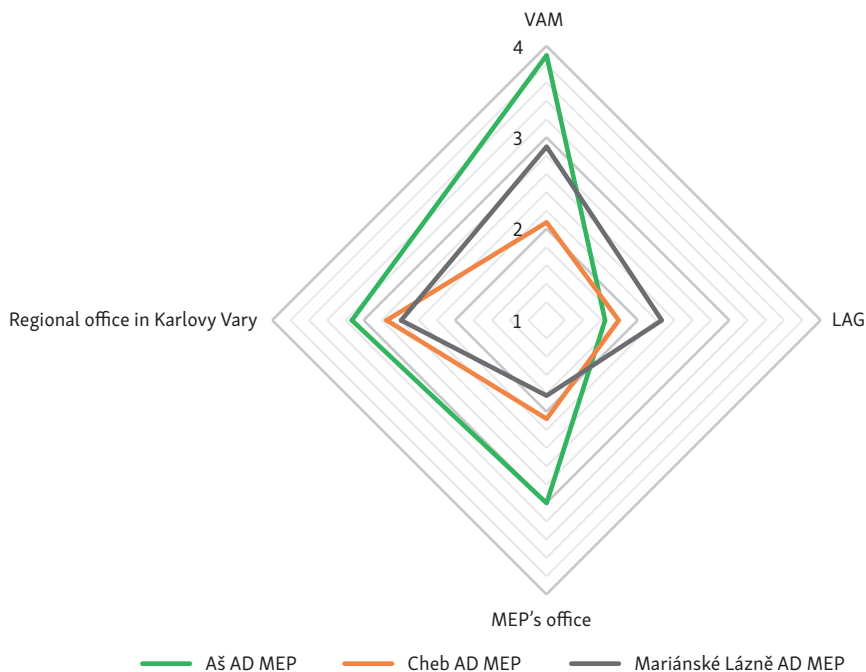


Fig. 5 – Mayor's perception of horizontal and vertical cooperation in Cheb district in 2020. Horizontal environment – cooperation within VAMs and LAGs; Vertical environment – cooperation with the office of MEPs and Regional office in Karlovy Vary. Evaluation: Ranging from 1 (the worst/the lowest) to 4 (the best/the highest), $n = 24$. Source: Author's field survey (from April to June 2020).

of Plzeň. The ties in this association are not as informal as those in the Aš VAM, but thanks to good connections with the LAG Kraj živých vod, this VAM is also engaged in successful cooperation on the micro-regional level.

Figure 5 shows that the very opposite situation is observed in the area of Cheb AD MEP. Except for the Kamenné vrchy VAM, which functions relatively well, the overall evaluation of cooperation within Cheb AD MEP was negatively impacted by the Cheb Mikroregion VAM, which received the worst assessment of cooperation, because there has been no success in getting any cooperation under way. The same situation can be seen in the western part of the Mariánské Lázně AD MEP as well, where the VAM has gradually become less and less active. In both cases, most respondents agree that the work of the VAM has only a minor effect on the local development. Figure 5 also shows how the mayors rate their cooperation with the LAGs, and it is assessed in the same way as above. The manager of the LAG plays an important role. In the analysis, Mariánské Lázně AD MEP came out best overall in the assessments of the contributions made by LAGs, and the Kraj

živých vod LAG did especially well. The reason respondents most often gave for this positive assessment in the interviews was the well-functioning cooperation between their VAM and LAG.

If we look just at cooperation between municipalities, irrespective of membership in an association, we find that all the respondents engage in some form of cooperation with their close neighbours. In areas with a poorly functioning VAM in particular, there is a very high rate of social interactions between mayors themselves. As noted above, how long a mayor has been in office is a very important factor because it influences the nature and intensity of the ties he or she has with others. Newly elected mayors who have been in public administration for a shorter period tend to have more formal relationships with other nearby mayors. Figure 6 shows the nature and intensity of the ties of selected mayors. In most cases, these are mayors who have been in office for a long time, and consequently their ties with others are primarily informal. Ties of a formal nature are more common among new mayors. The interviews also revealed that even most of the ties mayors have with others on a hierarchically higher level (with the MEP's office) are informal. The data also show that bilateral relationships between mayors are most common in places where it is difficult to engage in vertical cooperation with the MEP. There are, however, two sides to this form of cooperation: cooperation with administrative officials and cooperation with the political agencies of the MEP. In the former case, the respondents shared the view that there were no problems with this cooperation. Municipalities cooperate with the management of their MEPs in multiple different ways, and again they very much differ spatially. The municipalities with the best organised vertical structure of cooperation are in Aš AD MEP. Because of the smaller number of municipalities in this area and the predominance of informal relationships (see Fig. 6) local administration there view the next level up in the hierarchy of public administration as an important partner in development. In other MEP areas with a larger territory, the vertical milieu is built primarily on formal relationships and vertical cooperation does not benefit local governments very much. Cooperation with the MEP also depends on the geographical position of the municipality in relation to the centre of the MEP and on the fact of whether the mayors involved also meet up within the frame of other regional associations. Vertical cooperation with the self-governing region of Karlovy Vary is influenced by how much each individual mayor participates in the regional government and by the political orientation of the mayor. More than political (dis)agreements, however, it is the participation of the individual mayors in the regional government of self-governing region of Karlovy Vary that contributes most to vertical cooperation within the region.

Where an MEP shows a lack of interest in the municipalities within its public administration units and where the VAM is also poorly organised, individuals active on a supralocal level acquire even greater supralocal significance (see Fig. 7).

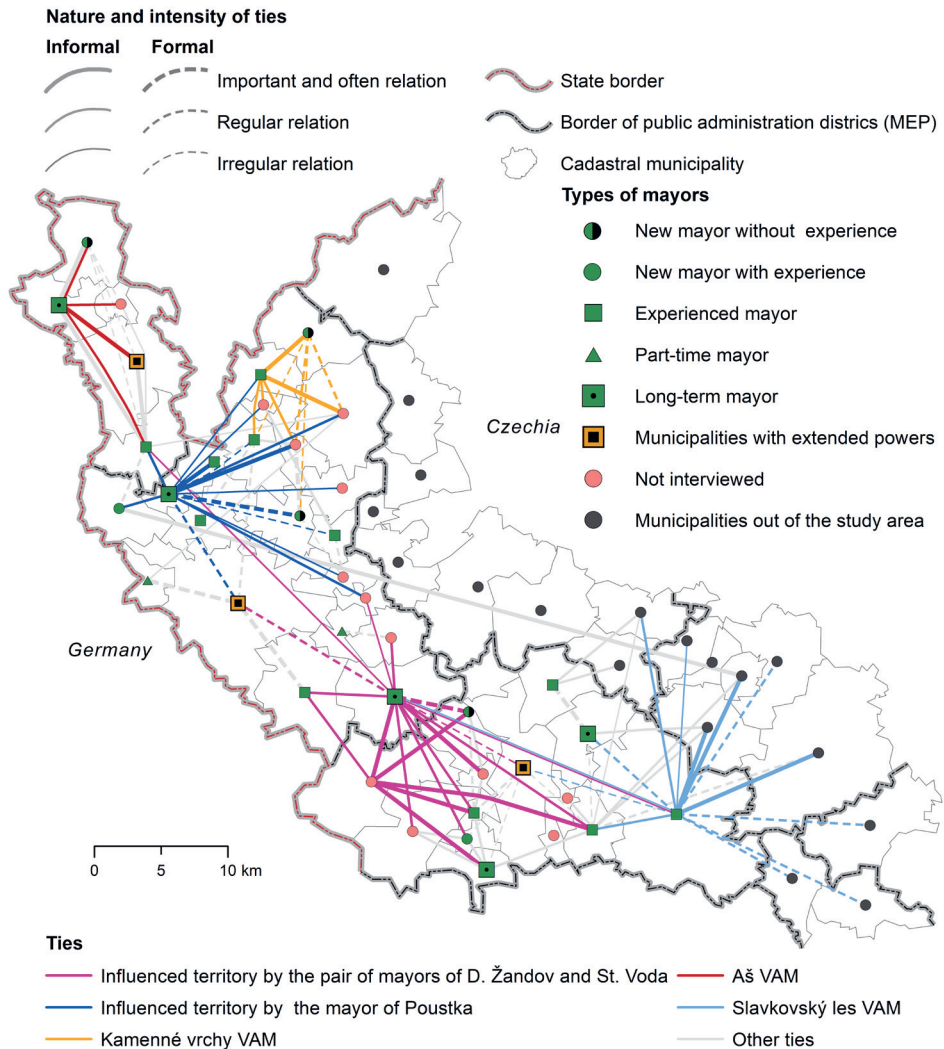


Fig. 6 – Nature and intensity of mayor's ties in Cheb district in 2020. Source: Author's field survey (from April to June 2020), n = 24.

These individuals whose impact extends beyond the borders of their municipality are a significant source of support for other mayors in a on the same horizontal level. Among the mayors in the area we studied, the ones most active on the supralocal level included the mayor of Poustka and the mayors of Dolní Žandov and Stará Voda municipalities. These mayors were found to have a significant influence even in well-organised VAMs.

Although municipalities in the border region are found to engage in a higher rate of cross-border cooperation, cooperation with neighbouring municipalities on the other side of the state border is not as common as cooperation within municipalities within the studied region. Some municipal governments within the region came together and formed an interstate group that includes municipalities on the other side of the state border; other (municipal) governments, by contrast, preferred to form a direct partnership with one municipality across the border. Participating in interstate groups is essential for mayors as it is a way of building cross-border ties. One of the oldest Czech-German regional associations is

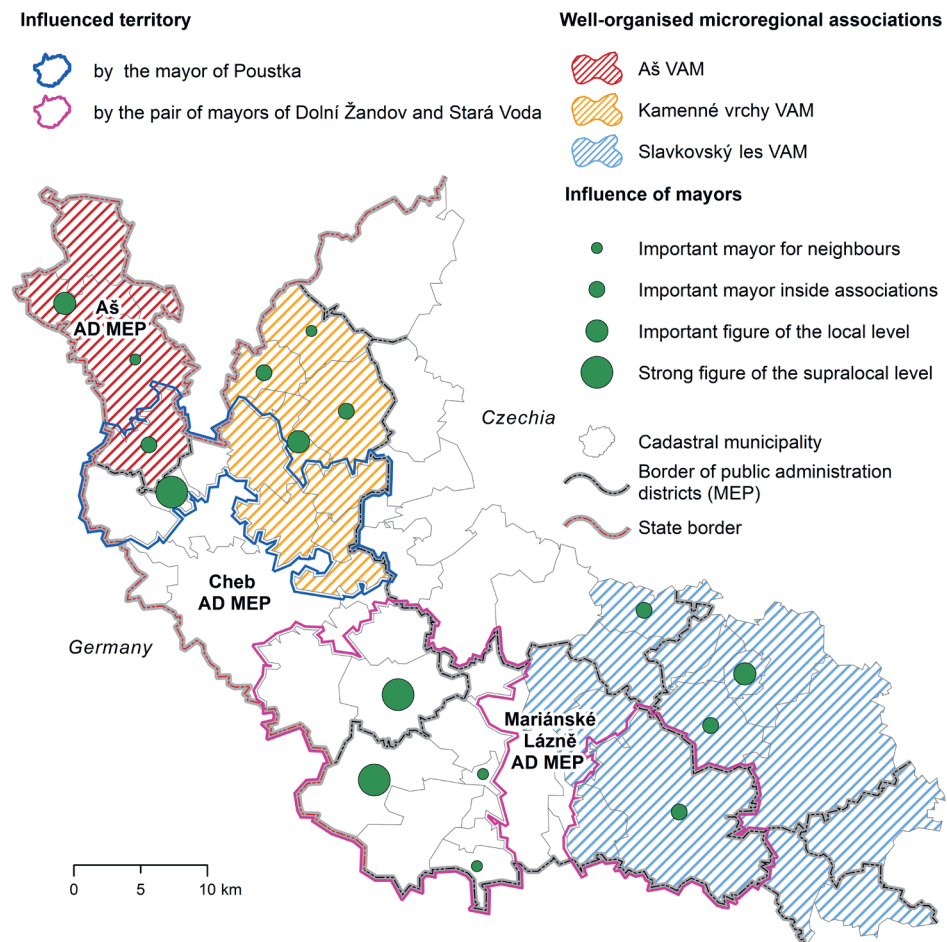


Fig. 7 – Municipalities' cooperation and the supralocal significant figure in Cheb district in 2020. Source: Author's field survey (from April to June 2020), n = 24.

the Euroregion Egrensis, and eight municipalities in the study area belong to it. Evaluating the work of this cross-border cooperation through this association and more generally plays an essential role in development activities. The managers of these cross-border associations and are identified by members as being key figures for establishing regular contact between members thanks to their human capital in that language skills belong to the most important component. In some cases, mayors with better languages skills can communicate daily with colleagues in Germany, while elsewhere they have to rely on the manager of the given association to play an intermediary role in these contacts. This can act as a barrier because information is more easily and more effectively shared when key actors can interact and communicate directly. Some respondents said they did not see communication problems as an impediment to cross-border cooperation, and that problems arose more out of different expectations on either side of the border. Czechs regard cooperation as important for the purpose of getting infrastructure projects done, while the other side tends to favour 'soft' projects. The main obstacles to cooperation are therefore a language barrier and cultural differences. The Aš AD MEP is the area that is most active in cross-border cooperation. All the municipalities belong to interstate groups, which confirms the positive effect of membership in such groups. When we focus on the nature of the relationships with German mayors, we find that formal ties predominate, which is due to less frequent contact. Nevertheless, even this kind of (ir)regular contact in several cases evolved into a friendly relationship when a mayor was in office for a long period of time.

Discussion

Among the studies focusing on Czech peripheral areas, there are still very few studies that have applied the concept of institutional thickness as an explanatory framework. Many empirical studies have focused on the issue of how to define such areas or they have focused mainly on the role of social and human capital. These are concepts, however, that are connected to institutional thickness. Other obstacles to comparing current research that seeks to explain the different development of peripheral areas were found by Komárek and Chromý (2020) to come from the use of theories that overlook the effect of the quality of the local milieu and the different roles played by actors in local development. In their study, we therefore find primary use is made of qualitative research methods that focus on distinguishing the role of different local actors and the ties between them, just as this paper has done. The interpretation of the concept of institutional thickness applied in this paper is that a region's development is driven by diversity and by the number of institutional forms that exist in the region near the state border (Amin, Thrift 1994). A key source of data in this paper was a survey conducted

using semi-structured interviews with municipal mayors in a time period between April and June 2020. The influence of three municipalities with extended powers of state administration (Aš, Cheb, Mariánské Lázně MEPs) was indirectly observed through interviews with the mayor-respondents.

The main objective of this paper was to use the perspective of the actors involved to obtain a deeper understanding of the impacts of mayors' social networks on the development of their municipalities. Earlier studies (Vajdová et al. 2010; Komárek, Chromý 2020) have shown that mayors are a crucial and often the only figure in a municipality who actively tries to drive development, and a lack of action on their part can seriously limit development opportunities. Their importance and proactive role in searching for cooperation with other actors of local development are particularly evident in shrinking regions. By working together, they can mitigate and overcome negative structural settings (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012, Sotarauta 2010, Döringer 2020). Our goal was achieved by answering two research questions: how differences between mayors are reflected in social interactions and whether these interactions lead to the formation of social networks; what effect different institutional arrangements (Rodríguez-Pose 2013) have on the formation of mayors' contacts with other actors.

The studied region within border periphery is characterised by settlement discontinuity, a shrinkage process, a weaker identification with the region among its inhabitants (Chromý, Skála 2010; Chromý et al. 2011; Kuldová 2005; Kučera, Chromý 2012; Kučera, Kučerová 2012; Šerý, Klementová 2018), and, consequently, weaker endogenous development potential. As a result, mayors, as key actors in local development, play an even more important role than they do in regions with a continuous settlement history. Overall, the region can be described as an institutionally weak region based on the above (Rodríguez-Pose 2013). Due to this, the settlement system of the Cheb district is currently made up of a smaller number of municipalities than in case of inner periphery, and this has ultimately proved to be an advantage. This can be observed, for example, in the Aš AD MEP, where frequent and regular cooperation occurs within the framework of its VAM, partly because of the small number of municipalities in this area. On the other hand, the quality of the horizontal milieu does not depend primarily on the number of actors that are a part of it. The formation of ties, whether in a horizontal or vertical direction, primarily depends on the abilities of an individual mayor, but another significant factor is how engaged mayors are in various regional associations or in structures higher up in the hierarchy of public administration, which in many cases makes it easier for them to form contacts with mayors of municipalities located further away. In the eastern part of Mariánské Lázně AD MEP, we found that through a well-organised regional platform it is possible for actors in different units of regional administration to develop strong ties and relationships. It is possible, therefore, to challenge Komárek and Chromý's finding (2020) that

borders of public administration units pose significant barriers to the formation of ties. Social interactions are fostered most by regional associations, where we see a high level of participation from all the actors involved (regardless of how many there are) and find capable figures with leadership skills. In most cases, these figures are the managers of these associations. In a spatial analysis of regional associations, local mayors were found to have a supralocal impact on the area in VAMs with a poorly organised management. These mayors, whose impact extends beyond the boundaries of their municipality thanks to their high level of (primarily bridging) social capital, are an important source of support for other mayors in the same horizontal milieu. Cooperation between mayors and actors on a higher level of the hierarchy of public administration is fostered by proximity, not just spatial (geographical) proximity, but also and above all other types of proximity. According to Boschma (2005), the frequency of social interactions does not just depend on the geographical distance between actors, as it also depends on their social and organisational proximity. This conclusion is confirmed by our findings and illustrated by the case of Aš AD MEP, where mayors have overcome the negative spatial proximity of their municipalities by getting involved in institutions at the regional level. Geographically the whole area of Aš AD MEP is somewhat cut off from the rest of the country and is largely surrounded by Germany, but the spatial location of its municipalities does not have as much of an influence on local (municipal) development as organisational proximity does, wherein actors are able to make use of knowledge acquired, for example, on the regional level.

Understandably, informal ties also predominate in smaller associations in terms of number of members, but even in this case the number of ties is more a secondary factor, and the nature of the ties depends more on what type of mayor is in office (e.g. strong etc.), how long the mayor has been in office, the type of mandate the mayor has, or even the mayor's political party affiliation or individual skills (e.g. language skills). We found that among mayors who had been in office for a long time and who were able to work full time as mayors, the majority of the relationships in their networks were informal. By contrast, part-time mayors (i.e. individuals who also have another job) or mayors just starting out did not have well-developed social networks and most of their relationships were more formal. Mayors are a diverse array of individuals, and what influence their social networks have on local development also varies considerably. This is also an example of the potential of cross-border cooperation, where an important role in the formation of ties between actors on opposite sides of the state border is played by the human capital of the actors involved in this cooperation. By contrast, social capital proves to be an important factor in cooperation that has already been forged, making it easier to share information and knowledge. Local cross-border cooperation in this case represents from the perspective of institutional thickness an important source of development potential.

Conclusion

We can state in conclusion that institutional arrangements (Rodríguez-Pose 2013), despite the similar structural preconditions, vary considerably across the region we analysed. These differences are determined by the differing quality of the horizontal milieu, which shaped mainly by the willingness of actors of local development to cooperate (Döringer 2020), the quality of the leaders of regional associations (Sotarauta et al. 2022), and the frequency and intensity of vertical ties between key actors in local development.

Informal ties predominate in horizontal networks, while more formal ties prevail in the cooperative ties that exist between actors on different hierarchical levels. The interviews with 24 mayors from border periphery clearly revealed how important the overall internal cohesion of an association is, and this is often more easily achieved if an association has a smaller or narrower membership base of just several municipalities. Shared membership in some association or other group, whether a political party or a regional association, is found to be important for the vertical transmission of information, as it helps to break down barriers that exist mainly because of spatial distance between subjects, and this finding is fully consistent with Boschma's (2005) theories.

This study contributes to the literature on uneven development of peripheral areas with shrinkage characteristics. Based on the study, we can confirm what several institutional researchers say, which is that institutions become place-specific through the adoption of place distinctiveness (North 1990, Fukuyama 1995, Rodríguez-Pose 2013). We can also summarise that institutional thickness as a driver of local development (Amin, Thrift 1994) is most evident in areas with the most unfavourable geographical conditions. Even though shrinkage has made collaboration even more difficult, it is the mayors in the most peripheral areas of the study area that have the greatest need to develop joint projects. According to Kühn (2010), these activities rely on strategic partnerships – both partnerships between departments within the local public administration and also cooperation between public and private actors. In contrast with Komárek, Chromý (2020) the effect of internal public administrative borders for the formation of ties and relations among actors has not been demonstrated.

Although we tried to at least indirectly deal with all the institutions in the given environment, we did not address the relationships between mayors and representatives of the private and non-profit sector, who in local development represent an important, but in Czechia a less common, partner in public administration. Cooperation between these different spheres especially is an issue that can have an interesting connection to this paper, as the participation of the private and non-profit sector depends on various conditions that lead to their different levels of participation in the development activities of municipalities.

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