Barriers of inter-municipal cooperation in the regions of the South Bohemian Region as seen by municipalities in 2004 – 2014

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Abstract:
In the past few years several research projects focused on the barriers of inter-municipal cooperation were carried out in the Czech Republic and abroad. As the research results reflect the respective local and regional specifics, the results and conclusions are diametrically different, depending on particular conditions in the respective country.

The presented work focuses on the issues of barriers of inter-municipal cooperation as seen by the individual South Bohemian municipalities. After the introductory theoretical part the results of a questionnaire survey focused on the analysis of selected issues of municipalities and towns in the South Bohemian Region are presented and discussed. The questionnaire survey was first done in 2004 and repeated ten years later in 2014 with the goal of comparing and mapping the changes in the attitude of South Bohemian municipalities as regards public administration, transport and other areas of interest. In the conclusion the results are interpreted as regards the development of opinions of the respective municipalities on the respective problematic areas and also in the context of changes that were implemented in area of public administration in the past few years.

Key words: South Bohemian Region · inter-municipal cooperation · municipality · region · regional development

JEL Classification: O180

1 Introduction

Today, cooperation is an essential part of well-functioning public administration and essential for the development of regions. Reasons for cooperation between various entities often lie in a “synergic effect”, i.e. together it is possible to achieve more than alone. Cooperation can generally be considered as the working together of a certain number of entities in order to achieve a certain common objective.

Contemporary inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic has its roots in the period immediately following the Velvet Revolution in 1989 when the relations of Czech municipalities with each other and with municipalities abroad were restored. At the same time, agreements and contracts from before 1989 started to be revised. They were based on the so-called cooperation policy within socialist countries or international cooperation of socialist countries with developing countries. The revision of documents was implemented across all municipalities, especially as regards potential applicability, actual fulfilment and the changed political situation. In 1990 territorial government was restored and other legislative changes were implemented, which strengthened the authority of municipalities and enabled them to develop other forms of cooperation, such as micro-regions, joint participation in business corporations and common-interest associations of legal entities (alliances). Also the activities of the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic were restored. In the entire 1990s new regional and national structures of cooperation were originating and there was further acceleration when the Czech Republic entered the EU in 2004. Late 2010s are connected with strengthening the relations between the private and the public sector or fragmentation of the existing forms of cooperation, as the case may be. For this reason a fragmented structure of over 20 possible means of cooperation with other municipalities is available for municipalities today. The cooperation has different intensity and spatial arrangement in the respective areas, which is caused by various barriers and obstacles of inter-municipal cooperation. In view of the specific nature of the problem area, the author also mentions in the introductory part of the research a comparison with a similar research carried out in Germany in 2012.

A large number of forms of inter-municipal cooperation represent a wide choice of opportunities for cooperation on the one hand but it is a limit and an obstacle of the development of inter-municipal cooperation on the other hand as it can lead to fragmentation of power and sources. According to Ježek, 2006, p. 185-189, a missing and coherent conception of inter-municipal cooperation plays an important role. In the past 20 years quite a large number of different forms of cooperation were formed and they gradually covered most of the area of the Czech Republic. However, the dynamics of their development seems to have been exhausted due to a missing conception which would enable to

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remove the blank spaces on the map of inter-municipal cooperation and cover the entire area of the Czech Republic. This step would actively help to provide effective public services within the scope of municipalities, infrastructure and to remove some disparities (for more information see e.g. Novotná, Volek, Alina, 2014, or Hálová, Alina, 2014).

2 Methods

A questionnaire survey aimed to analyse selected problems of municipalities and towns in the South Bohemian Region was first done among the representatives of municipalities in 2004 (the data was collected by means of printed questionnaires) and repeated ten years later in 2014 (the data was collected in an electronic form). The goal was to compare and map the changes in the attitude of municipalities in South Bohemia regarding transport services, public services and public administration (overall, the research included 9 areas and 41 main questions). In 2004 the research was done in cooperation with the Regional Authority of the South Bohemian Region, ČSAD Jihotrans a.s., České dráhy a.s. (Czech Railways), Jednota – Consumer Cooperative České Budějovice), Employment Office Písek, Union of Towns and Municipalities of the South Bohemian Region, RERA a.s., The University of West Bohemia in Plzeň and Czech University of Agriculture in Prague. In 2014 the research was done only in cooperation with the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the South Bohemian Region. All municipalities in the region were addressed (623) and the data was returned by 33.71% of them (210 municipalities) in 2004 and by 31.13% of them (190 municipalities) in 2014. After reduction, a representative set of 140 (22.47%), or more precisely 141 (22.63%) municipalities was selected from the obtained data. It reflected the structure of municipalities in the South Bohemian Region so that their size categories, location and character (central location vs. periphery) within the region were taken into account and also the fact whether or not the municipalities are located in areas where the support of the state is concentrated (pursuant to the Resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic No. 560 adopted on 17 May 2006 on Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic, and the updated resolution No. 141/2010). The border character of the South Bohemian Region lead the author to also use the work of Hampl, 2005 for the purpose of regionalisation of municipalities. Hampl divides border regions into two types: border regions of functional (nodal) type with strong regional centres and the resulting higher density of settlement, industrialisation and urbanisation and border regions of homogenous (zonal) type which have the character of a peripheral zone with a clear connection to outside – interior – centres. Classified as border regions in the South Bohemian Region are the municipalities of Vimperk, Prachatice, Český Krumlov, Kaplice, Trhové Sviny, Třeboň, Jindřichův Hradec and Dačice. The total number of interior and border municipalities was thus defined by the author with the ratio of 390 : 233 (i.e. 62.6% and 37.4%); this ratio was also used in the investigated sample of municipalities. However, it has to be said that the definition of a border region is not unified either in the EU or the Czech Republic and it is thus necessary to always define it for specific purposes because of the specific nature of local conditions (for more see e.g. Haggett, 1975, Anderson and O'Dowd, 1999, or Wilam, 2005).

3 Research results

In the past years several research projects focused on the barriers of inter-municipal cooperation have been completed in the Czech Republic and abroad. The research results reflect the respective local and regional specifics and therefore diametrically different results and conclusions are reached, depending on the specific conditions in the respective country.

Figure 1 Barriers of inter-municipal cooperation in Germany

Source: Schnabel (2012)
According to Schnabel, 2012, the biggest problems in Germany are adverse framework political conditions and narrow profiles of all available resources, while local “selfishness” and different interests of the individual participants are another significant barrier. Respondents perceive other obstacles to be less significant, with values in the range of several percent. Adverse framework political conditions mainly reflect the complicated German local and regional public administration in the respective federal states as well as the experience of municipalities from the 1970s when a wave of both voluntary and involuntary merging of municipalities was recorded.

In the Czech Republic a lot of problems arise from the size structure of municipalities so the most frequently stated barrier (and a stimulus at the same time) of inter-municipal cooperation is the lack of financial resources, which was confirmed by the Questionnaire Survey Aimed to Analyse Selected Problems of Municipalities and Towns in the South Bohemian Region done by the author in 2004 and 2014. “The lack of financial resources” is stated as an obstacle of inter-municipal cooperation by up to 80.4% of municipalities. After entering the EU the situation significantly improved and the value reaches only 56.7%, which is a decrease by approximately one fourth. The level of 80% in the perception of the lack of financial resources as a serious barrier of inter-municipal cooperation corresponds with similar results of research projects done e.g. by the Centre for Regional Development Research at the University of West Bohemia in Plzeň. As regards the barriers of inter-municipal cooperation, a significant percentage growth during the programming period of 2007–2013 was recorded by the time-consuming character and high administrative load of this cooperation and the implementation of projects. The summary of responses reveals that municipalities point out complicated and quickly changing legislation, lack of preparation of the programming period, involvement of other partners etc. Therefore it is not surprising that almost 20% of municipalities do not use the opportunities of the European funds or does not get involved in inter-municipal cooperation at all. Contrary to Germany, municipalities do not state political conditions as a barrier, but quite significant discontent with the current model of public administration still appears in other questions, with only 10–15% of municipalities considering it a good base for further positive development of municipalities. More than a half of municipalities also think that the current model should be significantly changed in future, no matter if it is the change of funding of municipalities or bigger and more effective involvement of public in democratic decision-making.

Figure 2 Barriers of inter-municipal cooperation in the South Bohemian Region (Czech Republic)

Source: The author's own research (within the Questionnaire Survey Aimed to Analyse Selected Problems of Municipalities and Towns in the South Bohemian Region), 2004, 2014.

According to some experts, the origin of discontent with the current model of public administration can be found in reforms dating back to 2000–2003. With effect from 1 January 2003, district offices were dissolved and their activities were transferred to regional offices, municipalities with extended competence and other administrative offices with the goal of decentralization and deconcentration. In connection with low support from the state, this change makes a lot of small and medium-sized municipalities feel there is a missing connecting link in the territorial government which would provide municipalities with methodological and consulting support and help them promote their interests. In 2014 the author discussed these issues repeatedly with the representatives of four local action groups (Region Pošebři, Přemyslovske střední Čechy, LAG Sedlčansko and Vyhlídky) within the project We are learning through film (registration number 12/017/4210a/120/000085). Contrary to the issue of e.g. direct election of mayors, all representatives of municipalities unambiguously agreed on the issue of a missing connecting link in territorial government.
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Figure 3 Satisfaction of municipalities in the South Bohemian Region with the contemporary model of public administration

Source: The author's own research (within the Questionnaire Survey Aimed to Analyse Selected Problems of Municipalities and Towns in the South Bohemian Region), 2004, 2014.

If no reform steps are made in public administration in the next few years, which is very likely in the context of current political distribution of power, the role of a certain connecting link in a region can be played by a basic form of inter-municipal cooperation – micro-region or LAG. It can play a positive role both in the development of a region and in the participation of public, the opinion of which is sometimes overlooked and disregarded, this fact being indirectly admitted by the representatives of municipalities in the area of systemic identification of needs / engagement of public. While this systemic participation was declared by 30.6% of South Bohemian municipalities in 2004, it was only 20.5% of municipalities ten years later.

Figure 4 Systemic identification of needs / engagement of public in the municipalities of the South Bohemian Region

Source: The author's own research (within the Questionnaire Survey Aimed to Analyse Selected Problems of Municipalities and Towns in the South Bohemian Region), 2004, 2014.

In terms of the discussion about the missing connecting link of public administration and the role of inter-municipal cooperation, it can be said with pleasure that as the engagement of municipalities in different forms of inter-municipal cooperation progressively grows (the % change in the number of engagements between 2007 and 2014 is +49.34%). Features of local development conducted in a community manner gradually start to be exercised more in the regions – especially thanks to the engagement of different partners on a local level while implementing the strategies. This helps the respective areas raise the quality of life and maintain sustainable future. By community-driven local development the author means a method of including partners on local level, including the civil society and local economic entities in order to create and implement local integrated strategies which help in a given area to create a more sustainable future. In the programme period of 2014-2020, community-driven local development is one of integrated tools (CLLD), which is a mechanism for targeting of EU financial means that enables a multiple-fund financing of more complex projects.
Figure 5 Exercising the principles of local development conducted in a community manner in municipalities of the South Bohemian Region

Source: The author’s own research (within the Questionnaire Survey Aimed to Analyse Selected Problems of Municipalities and Towns in the South Bohemian Region), 2004, 2014.

The qualitative and quantitative growth of the forms of inter-municipal cooperation is an important pre-supposition of regional development, but it is not a guarantee of success in itself. Apart from direct obstacles of inter-municipal cooperation, such as the above-mentioned lack of financial resources or high administrative load and a time-consuming character of cooperation, a number of indirect obstacles influencing the development potential of mainly small municipalities can be identified. According to Žárská, 2009, it is mainly a demographic structure with a concentration of inhabitants in the post-productive age, low transport accessibility and insufficient technical and civil amenities, low financial capacity of municipalities limiting their development investments, limited administrative ability leading to problems with securing the whole scale of government competences by quality and qualified staff (for more information see also Szarková, Andrejčák, Matkovčíková, 2014) etc.

4 Conclusions

Of all the above-mentioned obstacles and problems of inter-municipal cooperation, the author considers the missing conception of inter-municipal cooperation to be the most significant one. Problems and imperfections connected with implementing a selected form of cooperation were often solved by creating another form of cooperation enabling to fulfil new goals and priorities of cooperation. While in the first 15 years micro-regions were a dominating form of inter-municipal cooperation, local action groups are among the fastest growing forms of inter-municipal cooperation nowadays – between 2007 and 2014, the number of participating municipalities grew by 32.12% and in some regions local action groups became the main form of inter-municipal cooperation (administrative district of the municipality with extended competence of České Budějovice, Prachatice, Víperk). As this means of cooperation is favoured by the European Commission and local action groups have a new role in the programming period of 2014–2020 (local action groups become the lowest segment of the implementation structure of local development policies), local action groups are expected to become the main form and the driving force of inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic at the turn of the programming period of 2014–2020 and 2021–2027. Strengthening local action groups at the expense of micro-regions is easier because micro-regions and local action groups often operate on the same area and they are interlinked with a common functional and organizational structure (the formation of some local action groups was initiated by micro-regions – e.g. the local action group of Strakonicko, while it was the opposite case somewhere else – e.g. the micro-region of Jindřichohradecko-West). Recently, the position of local action groups is strengthening so much that there are first opinions speaking about the fact that local action groups are threatening municipal government. This opinion can be considered as an extreme one, but only to a certain extent. If there is intensive engagement in inter-municipal cooperation, there can be a situation when a municipality limits its activities and tasks at the expense of the activities of inter-municipal cooperation. Schnabel, 2012, warns against a state when a municipality is involved in a large number of inter-municipal cooperations which are not subject to any direct control of its municipal council and the municipality only influences their activity in an indirect way through its representatives (often a mayor) in their authorities. Inter-municipal organization always has its own budget to which the respective involved municipalities are obliged to contribute. These municipalities have in fact lost their dispositional sovereignty over a large part of their own budget.
The influx of financial resources from the national sources and the sources of EU oriented on the cooperation of municipalities with subjects in the area can have a negative impact not just on inter-municipal cooperation on a regional level, but also on the cooperation of municipalities with subjects from other countries. The latter cooperation, with the decline of 40.7% and the existence of other barriers (e.g. language and cultural barrier, currency risk), is currently among not very prospective forms of cooperation. Experience with the operation of cross-border impulse centres and Euro-regions in the previous period clearly showed that the formation and development of new forms of inter-municipal (cross-border) cooperation can be initiated with financial stimulation. However, such cooperation does not have a long-lasting character and is not sustainable in the long run.

As regards the perspectives of inter-municipal cooperation, the analyses done by the author prove that inter-municipal cooperation has positive benefits as far as the development of the respective districts of the South Bohemian Region is concerned. Despite this fact, the view of inter-municipal cooperation is not equivocal in professional and political circles as it often reflects local specifics, different historical development and experiences etc. (e.g. Poland, Scandinavia vs. Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary, France). British sociologist and political scientist Michael Keating who was concerned with the link between the performance and effectiveness of public administration in the context of the size of municipalities, gathered a comprehensive set of arguments in favour and to the disadvantage of small municipalities and when the positives and negatives of integration are to be evaluated, he recommends to consider the following four factors (Keating, 1995, p. 117-134):

- the effectiveness factor – the relation between the size of a municipality and the relative price of services provided to citizens,
- the local democracy factor – the relation between the size of a municipality and the democratic character of local politics,
- the distributive justice factor – the relation between the size of a municipality, the tax burden on citizens and the level of services provided for citizens (a question of budget determination of taxes in the Czech Republic),
- the development factor – the relation between the size of a municipality and the perspectives of its further development.

Other authors concerned with these issues include e.g. Swianiewicz, 2002, Vajdová, Čermák, Illner, 2006, Galvasová, et al, 2007, Halachmi, Boorsma, 2013, Teles, 2015, etc. In their works, they reach the same conclusions as Keating, 1995, i.e. that the results of expert research projects are not always equivocal in this area, like for example in the view of an optimum municipality size.

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