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Theoretical framework of regional integration – selected issues

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Introduction

The aim of the paper is to present the basic theoretical framework of the regional integration functions and figures and put a stress on one of the most interesting form of regional integration – cross-border cooperation.

Regional integration can be understood as a convergent cooperation at the macro or micro level. Whereas at the macro level it is connected with the integration of large-scale geographical areas (such as already mentioned Mediterranean groupings), at the micro-level we speak about such forms of “new regionalism” as euroregions, working communities etc. These “new forms” are connected with the phenomenon of cross-border cooperation, which has been developing in Europe since 1950s.

Cross-border cooperation – its convergences and divergences

What is such a euroregion? What is a cross-border structure? There are at least two sorts of answers. First an idealistic one, second a pragmatic one. From the idealistic point of view cross-border structures present a unique opportunity for the integration process and are helpful to eradicate the regional disparity. As Jacques Delors commented the euroregions, “This is not the Europe of the Regions. It is something more simple and more innovative: the manifestation of a community of interests that transcends national borders, and the desire to break through these barriers to make life more easy.” From the idealistic point of view, euroregions can stimulate and deepen integration, can stand as a local reflection of EU’s supranationality and are able to set up a qualitatively new European order. As Manfred Dammeier , the ex-vice-president of the Committee of the Regions, said, “The regions and border regions in particular, have become essential players in the integration process.” Moreover, from the idealistic point of view, euroregions can be compared to bridges between nations which can bring neighbours closer to each other.

Euroregions are thought to be a modern structure in the EU, which develops the cooperation of citizens, municipalities and regions. Euroregions are said to be a great platform for bottom-up processes, to be a driving force of the European integration bustling with the local initiatives of active inhabitants. Well, this is the definition of euroregions from the idealistic point of view.

However, there is also a pragmatic definition of a euroregion. In this view, euroregions are structures that should contribute to regional development by applying to programs of European support, such as Interreg IIIA, and by receiving money for regional projects. Such projects can concern a wide range of issues such as development of human resources, infrastructure, common regional market, common regional investments, common labour market, education, culture projects etc. Euroregions from the pragmatic point of view stand as a relevant and useful regional actor, which participate in the process of regional development.

To sum up these premises: A perfect euroregion should fulfill both the pragmatic and idealistic definition. Related to the local and regional level it should act as a pragmatic actor receiving financial support. Related to the EU, euroregion should stress rather moral attitudes as integration, cooperation and partnership.

Well, that should be, however it is still a kind of imagination and a kind of utopia – at least in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE). You can hardly find a cross-border structure which would fully function in these ways in CEE. You can even hardly find here a cross-border structure that would be supranational not only declaratory. However this fact – that euroregions fail in achieving such a level of cooperation and efficiency – is not medially presented and it is rather omitted.

Concerning CEE, there still are more divergences than convergences in the process of building euroregions and developing cross-border cooperation. We can emphasize a few of such barriers:

- 1. *Insufficient legal framework*** – For example, the Czech Republic ratified the European outline convention on cross-border cooperation of the Council of Europe. However, it is based on terms which are too general. Quite progressive in setting a legal framework for cross-border cooperation were two amendment protocols of this convention. However, the Czech Republic did not ratify them. Such an insufficient legal framework causes CEE euroregions a severe complication. It is nearly impossible to establish cross-border structure as a legal subject. The problem is a difference between state legal systems. Nowadays there is no effective legal instrument in the Czech Republic to overcome this legal obstacle. On the other hand, there are good examples that euroregion can also exist and function well without legal subjectivity. The problem is that the lack of legal framework for cross-border cooperation stands often as a rhetorical excuse.

- 2. *Lack of political will*** – The lack of political will and the lack of political support cause euroregions existential difficulties, such as insufficiency of financial means, insufficient institutional background, lack of employees etc. It is quite common in CEE that the organizational structure and the range of aims of euroregions are set up too ambitiously in the beginning. After some time it is to turn out that such ambitious plans were not possible to realize, because it requires a lot of money which euroregions usually do not have in the beginning. Euroregions are not self-made subjects, they need political and material support. However they rarely obtain it.

- 3. *Lack of interest of regional or local authorities*** – It is amazing how rarely local and regional authorities take part in cross-border cooperation. Participation of local and regional authorities in euroregion's activity is very important, because it improves political legitimacy of a cross-border structure. However, this participation is still exceptional.

4. Prejudices of inhabitants – Last but not least barrier is prejudices of inhabitants. Cross-border activity should start by the propagation of the idea of a euroregion. This implies that the euroregion must be presented on a grass-root level. The euroregion should organize a wide range of cultural projects such as parties, balls, festivals etc. It shocks me that the identification of inhabitants with the euroregion is very low in many cases. Sometimes the inhabitants of a euroregion do not even know that they live in a euroregion!

Conclusion

How to eliminate these barriers, how to build a euroregion which would function perfectly? The first step is to stop watching through rose-coloured spectacles. We should admit that there are problems and that the majority of cross-border structures in CEE do not work in a way they present themselves. Central- or Eastern-European Euroregions often suffer from aforementioned difficulties, but it is not medially presented. If you skim relevant information sources about regional actors in the Czech Republic, you hardly find criticism of euroregions in this country. You quickly come to strong conviction that all euroregions in the Czech Republic work perfectly. It is definitely not true. Recently I have been leading a research on the cross-border structure along the eastern border of the Czech Republic. It included four cross-border structures. Two of these euroregions exist only formally, they develop nearly no activity. They rarely apply for financial support, they rarely realize cross-border projects, they are facing either an institutional or a personal crisis. The remaining two euroregions are not in such a bad situation, but they still have a long way ahead.

Maybe my remarks are too critical. There naturally are good examples of euroregions even in the Czech Republic and I hope that also elsewhere. The purpose of my speech was to stress the fact that the propagation of euroregions and the public awareness of them differs from reality.