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## **THE ROLE OF MICROREGIONS IN THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **1. The development of the local authorities in the Czech Republic**

There was a re-organisation of the local authorities in the Czech Republic after 1989. The first step was the disintegration of the municipalities. These municipalities were forced to unify undemocratically under the earlier Communist government. That's why they wanted to separate and were determined to develop on their own (the volume of this trend is indicated in Tab. 1).

Table 1. Volume of municipalities in the Czech Republic

Year	Volume of municipalities	Year	Volume of municipalities
1961	8726	1996	6233
1970	7511	1997	6234
1980	4778	1998	6242
1990	4100	1999	6244
1991	5768	2000	6251
1992	6097	2001	6258
1993	6196	2002	6254
1994	6230	2003	6249
1995	6232	2004	6249

Source: Czech Statistical Office (CSU).

At the beginning of the 1990s there were 4100 municipalities, however, in 1993 there were 6196 municipalities, as their local development was intensive. Within the 1990s the number of municipalities was changing, and reached 6258 in 2001. The number was gradually dropping to 6249 in 2003 and 2004. Economic aspects are the crucial cause of the process of disintegration or integration of the municipalities. Small municipalities find it difficult to run their own municipal office and their legal actions. Their development, reconstruction and construction are limited by a low budget.

The development of the region authorities was a further significant interference into the system of the civil service in the Czech Republic. After the dissolution of national regional bodies a relevant reform of the local authorities began. The first stage is dissolution of the district bodies. The second stage is the dissolution of the regions and the region bodies. Authority of the former district bodies was transferred to selected municipalities and particular local authorities. These changes significantly shaped the transformation of the civil service in the Czech Republic: the shape of civil service and local government. The inter-regional government was annulled<sup>1</sup>. The regional government was restored in the newly defined regions. The new definition of the regions reflects more accurately the political geography of the Czech Republic (see Tab. 2).

Table 2. The development of the local authorities in the Czech Republic

Before the reform of the civil service	After the reform
Regional layer (NUTS-3)	
—	Region (civil service and self-government, 14 regions and a capital Prague)
Inter-regional layer (NUTS-4)	
Districts (only civil service, 77 districtes)	—
Local layer (NUTS-5)	
Municipality (civil service and self-government)	Municipality (civil service and self-government, 6249 municipalities)

Source: own work

Microregions have a new position in the local government. These microregions represent a link between municipal and earlier district government and they can

<sup>1</sup> After the reform of public administration only the district offices were dissolved, not districts themselves. Czech Statistic Office monitors them. Other institutions of civil service have operating institutions at the level of districts.

replace the district government. Microregions are specific in this respect. They are not part of legally appointed civil service as their establishment is in the jurisdiction of municipalities. They have no competency within the civil service.

Comparison to other countries' patterns could be another way of looking at the local authorities system. Despite the similar principles of democratic political systems there are relevant differences in hierarchy of the local government authorities [1]. Let's take for instance the indicator for the average number of population in a municipality and we will see big discrepancies within the EU member countries. Ireland and Sweden are the states with the highest population in a municipality – dozens thousands people in a municipality in average. Followed by Poland and Italy (7,000-15,000 people in a municipality).

The Czech Republic and France have the lowest figures (below 2,000). These states discrepancies go hand in hand with various transformation regulations enhancing the efficiency of the public sector and public administration (e.g. centralisation of the local authorities).

Table 3. Municipalities volume in some EU member countries (2002)

Country	Municipalities	People in municipality
France	36 565	1 600
Germany	13 854	5 900
Italy	8 101	7 000
Austria	2 359	3 400
Sweden	290	31 100
Ireland	85	47 200
Poland	2 478	15 411
Czech Republic	6 254	1 645

Source: Eurostat and statistical offices in individual countries.

Centralisation is achieved by merging of the municipalities by legal means and by voluntary mutual associations among municipalities. A municipality can be a member of several associations so as to secure certain public property (basic education, sewage works, waste disposal) and a strategic development of the municipalities which share some area (holiday sites, protected environment sites). These partnerships can be enhanced by establishing the municipalities' associations or microregions.

## 2. Microregions and municipality associations in the Czech Republic

The term "microregion" is used in various contexts. We understand it here as an area of no microregional layer in the geographic regional hierarchy in the Czech Republic. It is understood here as an area agreed by local authorities. The estab-

lishment of the microregion is first of all voluntary act and is not forced by law. Microregions are intended to achieve objectives shared by all founding municipalities.

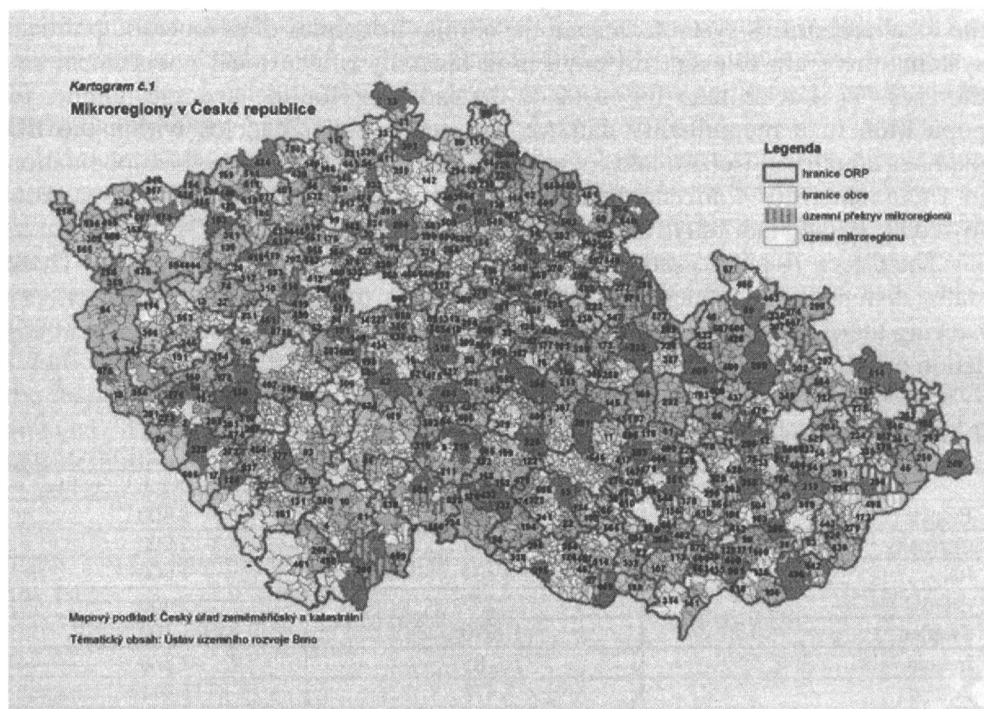


Fig. 1. Microregions in the Czech Republic

Source: Institute for Spatial Development (UUR).

Life of these microregions depends merely on the will of the associated municipalities. Some microregions are therefore dissolved after achieving the goal. Some microregions, however, strive for a long-term and complex development of the associated municipalities<sup>2</sup>. Geographic definition of these associations resembles the attraction of microregional zones.

Informal and non-institutionalised partnerships of the municipalities were common even before 1989. New Municipality Act of 1992 brought a new momentum for municipalities and allowed them to establish municipalities' associations (leave aside the law allowing the corporate bodies to associate). Even though these

<sup>2</sup> Results from the 2001-2004 research of the Institute of Spatial Development, Brno.

partnerships were not specified in the Municipalities Act, first microregions were founded to represent the associated municipalities and their aim was to enhance the partnership of the municipalities when sorting out their shared problems.

Municipalities Act only of 2000 set new rules and regulations. Section on the municipalities entitled “Partnership of the municipalities” says the municipalities can cooperate on the grounds of the agreement drawn for a specific reason or on the grounds of agreement about voluntary association or established by two or more corporate bodies. Life of these associations is not long-lasting. Municipalities are allowed to draw away, dissolve or be members of more associations. The size of these associations is unlimited – from a couple of municipalities to significant regional associations that are major partners of the regions representing the interests of towns and cities as their existence enhances these interests and strategic development of these towns and cities.

Major reasons for the existence of microregions:

- common features and links among municipalities, e.g. historic development or relevant economic, environment, geographic or natural (hilly areas, water supply areas) factors,
- pragmatic reasons, unified procedures when in contact with civil service, trade bodies, enhancing their strategic development,
- mobilization of endogenic sources, easier access to exogenic sources.

To set up microregions it is advisable to form an association of municipalities that is a corporate body and is the used form in the existing microregions. The municipalities association is set up on the grounds of an agreement approved by individual municipal authorities first. Rules of these associations are a part of this agreement. These rules reckon for instance the board body, name and seat of the associated municipalities, name, seat and activities of the association, rights and duties of its members, income sources, estate statement that is deposited to the association (see The Municipalities Act). The associated municipalities are to decide about the board body. Usually they are:

- a) general assembly (mayors, assemblies) that is the highest body and consists of all members,
- b) chair of the association that is the statutory body,
- c) deputy-chair and a secretary who administer, organize and manage the association or there is a microregion council collaborating in running the activities of the association.

A major municipalities’ association with a nationwide and worldwide impact is the Association of Towns and Municipalities in the Czech Republic. It associates roughly two and a half thousand municipalities (which represents 40% of total number of the municipalities in the country and 73% of total population of the Republic). It can hardly be considered a microregion in its original sense but is represents a specific model of the municipalities’ association with a substantial political impact. There are many objectives for a partnership. The Association promotes the

interests of municipalities, presents initiatives to a civil service and self-government bodies, supports founding of voluntary microregional, regional and international associations of towns and municipalities, analyses the municipalities' experience and advices on problems, enhances qualifications of the municipal authorities and officials. Association of Towns and Municipalities in the Czech Republic constitutes the development of the partnership with towns and municipalities abroad, supports the economic and social vitality of the towns, municipalities and microregions.

There are 474 associations of municipalities covering the area of two thirds of the Czech Republic in 2005. The borders are lapping over 32 microregions, in these microregions there are 4680 municipalities involved, which represents 70% of all municipalities in the Czech Republic. The population of these municipalities is increasing. The smallest microregion consists of two municipalities, the largest of 74 municipalities. The average number of municipalities in a microregion is 11. The average population living in a microregion is 13.3 thousand. Some microregions grow in progress, some do not. Majority of registered microregions are formally an association, minority is registered in associations of corporate bodies or they have no legal status. There are more and more municipalities involved in microregions and the number of municipalities involved in two or three microregions increases. This fact is a positive factor of the rating of the microregions as an instrument in the development of microregions.

### **3. Activities and the development of regions**

The activities of microregions are broad and are defined in the manifesto rules. Microregions have a budget that is contributed to by all members, have their own accounting books (property, income, expenses, finances related to member municipalities). The association can set up corporate bodies for specific purposes. Associations can have various objectives: social care, education, health care, culture, fire prevention, environment protection, tourism, infrastructure, communal waste, water supply, sanitation, property development (housing stock), sport, culture and other facilities run by municipalities [4]. Apart from these objectives, municipalities can focus on other activities. Within a social care they can develop structures of social care, deal with socially disadvantaged people, cope with an unemployment rate using the entrepreneurial support of the municipalities. They can also support small and mid-size traders, local crafts and trades.

Institutionalized theories of regional development effect the theoretical approaches towards the role of microregions in the regional development. These theories can be for instance [2]: theory of industrial districts and learning regions theory. Theory of industrial districts enhances endogenic approaches in the regional development and considers the quality of social, cultural and institutional structures to be fundamental for prosperity. Microregions can initiate and develop convenient

“soft” infrastructures and links between profit and non-profit sector within its network. These links can contribute to a complex development of the area. Learning regions theory enhances the competition of the regions to be based on an ability to gather and use information sources and develop regional innovation and education structures. Microregions can thus focus on the support and development of the partnership among schools, firms, regional and local self-government. The support of entrepreneurial, economic and business activities is crucial within the profit sector.

Strategic development of microregions is based on the strategic agenda that analyses current economic and social situation and proposes their development [3]. Majority of microregions have such an agenda or they are developing it. Private companies are the main authors of these studies followed by developer agencies. This agenda is the outcome of a partnership between municipalities and other local participants (clubs, civic initiatives, entrepreneurs, churches) ready to help in social development of municipalities.

Obviously, microregions will compete to get a support from European or home financial funds. This factor can induce different pace of development in various parts of a region. However, this pace depends on the quality of the projects, not on the quality of the region's development. According to the approved regional policy the public financial sources should contribute to a congruous development of all areas. On the other hand there are projects of strategic development of microregions as means of national and regional bodies. These means could provide information sources on weaknesses and strengths of a microregion and individual visions of strategic development. These information sources provide a guide for distribution of an adequate support of microregions and of strategic projects, and not support of projects that are unrealistic and against the objectives of regional development and the development in the Czech Republic.

Focusing on the strengths and sources in the microregion is a complex problem, unlike getting mere grants or subsidies. External sources should be, however, only first impuls for further public benefit. Successful “mobilization” of internal financial sources can contribute to a long-term life improvement of the citizens, enhance their citizen identity and their local patriotism and develop local democracy.

## **4. Conclusion**

Microregions bring a new drive into regional development linked to local governments and local participants. These microregions encourage positive changes for all municipalities and for the country municipalities as well. Exogenic sources stimulate the development of municipalities in a microregion, endogenic sources (finances, human resource) are less applied. However, their application with exogenic sources can generate synergic incentives encouraging a long-term strategic development of towns and municipalities. Microregions significantly reduce the

problems arising from a small size of the Czech Republic and are a possible variety of the integration of local governments.

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## ROLA MIKROREGIONÓW W ROZWOJU REGIONALNYM

### Streszczenie

W referacie zanalizowano mikroregiony w Czechach jako przykład partnerstwa w obrębie obszarów miejskich. Zdefiniowano rozwój samorządów lokalnych, reformę administracji publicznej po 1999 r., rozważono rolę makroregionu w regionie oraz rozwój lokalny. Ostatnie tendencje rozwojowe i działania mikroregionów stanowią przykłady praktycznego zastosowania aktualnych podejść teoretycznych w rozwoju regionalnym. Powyższe teorie są częścią endogenicznej strategii regionalnej, dlatego też tworzenie i funkcjonowanie mikroregionów jest postrzegane jako cecha pozytywna. Środki związane z transformacją odnoszące się do finansowania publicznego w krajach Unii Europejskiej zwiększają skuteczność sektora publicznego oraz scentralizowanych samorządów lokalnych. Makroregiony muszą odgrywać tę rolę w Czechach i są postrzegane jako wstępna integracja samorządów lokalnych, zwłaszcza w obszarach pozamiejskich Republiki Czeskiej.