



LIVING IN THE CZECH-GERMAN BORDER REGIONS

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pollytix

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1. CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION OF THE RESEARCH

This research is supported by the Czech-German Fund for the Future (hereafter referred to as the Fund). Various studies and the experience of the Fund's employees and collaborators indicate that regions near the border with Germany struggle more often with problems such as unemployment or a lack of cultural opportunities than inland regions. Therefore, the main aim of the Fund is to support people in the border regions, so they no longer view the border as a problem but instead as an opportunity.

Thus, in this research, we aim to convey an in-depth understanding of both sides of the border, in order to answer the two main questions: What are the obstacles and opportunities for strengthening the relationships between Czechs and Germans on both sides of the frontier? And - subsequently - what type of action can help to develop these relationships further?

Since the research requires a thorough understanding of the Czech and German side of the border as well as the command of the native languages, it is carried out in a Czech-German collaboration of researchers from STEM Institute, who are responsible for the research in the Czech borderlands, and colleagues from pollytix strategic research, who are in charge of the research in Germany.

Our main goal is to identify opportunities that can increase the interest in joint activities for residents in the border regions, which can in turn intensify contact and deepen existing relations between the Czech and German communities.

Our recommendations focus on three areas, which the Fund has previously identified as essential. These areas are:



Image



Intercultural encounters



Language

Our report is structured in six chapters. After this brief introduction, we introduce the context and main goals of the research, present main findings and recommendations and explain our research methods. Chapters four and five include a detailed analysis of life in German and Czech border regions. In chapter six, we offer our joint conclusions and recommendations.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research was carried out in a cooperation with STEM Institute from the Czech Republic and pollytix strategic research from Germany. Our research is based on qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with respondents living no further away than 40 km from the Czech-German border. On each side of the border, 22 interviews were conducted with respondents selected based on a set of criteria regarding their residency, gender, age and education.

The primary added value of qualitative research is that it helps to understand the social reality of the participants. However, the findings cannot be generalised for the whole population, as the degree of representation of different opinions in the general population can only be determined with quantitative research.

During the interviews, we focused on five key topics:

- Life in the border region
- Identity and belonging
- Perceptions and attitudes towards the neighbouring country and its inhabitants
- Encounters with inhabitants of the neighbouring country
- Language

2.1 Main findings

Our main findings can be summarised as follows:

→ **Firmly rooted in the border region**

- Friends, family, work, and the surrounding nature are why people enjoy living in the border region.
- The border itself is not perceptible in daily life anymore. The inhabitants in both countries see the border as an advantage. They cross it mainly for shopping and tourism and – from the Czech side – also for work.
- Infrastructure, demographics, drug problems and a lack of career opportunities on the German side, and human capital flight and higher prices on the Czech side were identified as the main challenges of life in the border regions.
- Although the pandemic has heavily influenced life in the border regions, people from both sides of the border expect to return to normality soon.

→ **A pragmatic and positive relationship, but not many personal contacts**

- We observed that Czechs have more personal contact with German inhabitants than German citizens have with their Czech neighbours.
- Inhabitants of the border region are mainly in touch while shopping, visiting tourist sites, and at sporting and recreational facilities.
- Prejudices exist but are not very strong. They are often rooted in the shared history (World War II, Beneš decrees), which is more present within older generations. Whilst prejudices within the younger generations have shifted towards current societal problems (drugs) and minorities (particularly Vietnamese and Roma and Sinti population), long-lasting perceptions

of the respective neighbour state as rich, powerful and arrogant (Germany) vs. poor, weaker and surrounded by larger nations (Czech Republic) have nevertheless persisted.

→ **Joint interests: Sports and nature have significant potential**

- Nature, sports, and especially hiking are very popular activities. On the German side, cycling was often mentioned as well. Recreational centres like visiting waterparks are popular on the Czech side.
- The younger inhabitants prefer motorbiking and paintball. Older generations are also interested in cultural events (e.g., concerts, theatre).
- Seasonal festivities (e.g., beer festivals, *Volksfeste* in Bavaria or Christmas markets in Saxony) are very popular events which people from both countries enjoy attending.

→ **Information about joint activities: Not visible**

- The knowledge of Czech-German activities is deficient on both sides of the border.
- There is no central point for information about events in the border regions. People need to actively look for it and combine various sources (information centres, internet etc.) to learn about upcoming opportunities.

→ **Language**

- Missing language skills in the neighbouring language is a primary barrier to getting into closer contact.
- Czech inhabitants of the border region have a higher level of German skills than vice versa.
- Czech respondents would appreciate it if Germans had basic Czech knowledge. This idea is shared by the German respondents as well.

For more country-specific findings as well as challenges and opportunities, please also read the respective country analysis chapters.

2.2 Recommendations

As outlined, we focus our recommendations on three areas which the Fund identified as particularly impactful. These are the following areas:



Image



Intercultural encounters



Language

The Fund is further interested in suggestions regarding shared activities which inhabitants within the border regions might wish to attend. Our analysis shows that **joint events must be linked to people's everyday activities** and/or private events to raise interest. The joint Czech-German character of these proposed events is not necessarily the key motivation for people to attend.

Based on our research findings, we structure our recommendations within the three fields of interest and differentiate two levels of implementation: The *field of actions* designates a more general level while *concrete examples* outline possible projects for the Fund or funding partners.

Image – reflecting historical and current issues

As the existing prejudices show, the shared history still impacts the region's inhabitants. Thus, thematising shared, and particularly conflictual **history is essential for future relationships**. At the same time, people in the border regions are also interested in discussions about **current issues** (e.g., impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, migration, minorities¹, mutual perception of each other).

Field of actions	Concrete examples
Guided tours and organised exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided tours at regional historical sites in both languages • Thematic guided tours within the region • Link to current issues: Organised talks about current issues (e.g.: COVID-19) and how to deal with them
Exhibitions and explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibitions along border bike routes (small or large, in existing cafés or other sites) • Information about historical events and shared history • Promoting the establishment of a documentation and exhibition centre in the border region on a political level
Theatre and film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of projects concerning a new perspective on the shared history²
Translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation of historical information (e.g., on signs and plaques near sights) • Translation of existing guided tours

Tab. 1: Image Recommendations

Intercultural Encounters – joint interest as the key motivator

Encouraging more **personal contact between Czechs and Germans** is the main challenge. Shared mutual interests are fundamental. Joint social activities must have a **low threshold to safeguard a 'natural' meeting process** and focus on activities that people already like to do.

¹ We would like to highlight that the perception of the Roma and Sinti as a 'threat' was mentioned several times by German respondents. Being aware that the subject is highly problematic in both countries and connected to different and complex policy fields, we nevertheless think that it would be worth keeping minorities in a broader sense in the border region in mind.

² See, e.g., https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/tschechien-und-die-vertriebenen-diese-tschechoslowakei-das.979.de.html?dram:article_id=488057, last accessed 23.07.2021.

Field of actions	Concrete examples
Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiking tours and hiking maps for the border region with meeting points • Bike tours along historical routes or historically essential sites • Cross-border tournaments (football, handball, hockey) • Paintball and motorbike tours for the younger generation
Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of excursion thematising geographic characteristics; in the Saxony region also in combination with mining
Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music and art are of interest to all age groups • Support of all kinds of music festivals in the region
Traditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christmas markets and local traditions and customs are of interest on both sides of the border • Support of local associations and participation of artists and/or performers (e.g., choirs) from both sides of the border
School exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School exchanges are usually appreciated on both sides • Support a program to make exchanges in the border region compulsory • Their effect could be increased by connecting them to follow-up activities (e.g., sports events, language courses, offer of further studies etc.)
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The key to promote these events and activities is information: There is no central information site at the moment • A website for all occasions and activities of the border regions is an option to increase awareness of the target groups • Another option is linking existing regional websites and ensuring that they promote information from both sides of the border • Better promotion of cross-border activities at these websites would be crucial

Tab. 2. Encounter Recommendations

Language – the basis of social interaction

Better knowledge of the language is the **primary tool to intensify the relations** and prevent prejudice. The main objective is to create sustainable **support of local groups with translation services and low-threshold intercultural courses**, which are linked thematically to activities the inhabitants use already (e.g., fire department exchanges, knitting courses, church activities).

Field of actions	Concrete examples
Courses in intercultural communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-threshold courses in touristic centres or linked to private activities
Language mediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brochures with essential words and phrases for everyday life
Language support of private initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure translators and interpreters for sectors where most people without English skills interact (importance of involving the older generation, as there are still hostilities and prejudices due to historical events)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of private initiatives with intercultural competence / intercultural translator • Support translations in border regions, especially at a place where people from both countries are likely to meet or use (e.g., restaurants, museums, tourist destinations, regional transportation)
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Tab. 3. Language Recommendations

In conclusion, we would like to stress the importance of **interconnecting the three fields of action** and linking them to the everyday activities of the inhabitants of the border region.

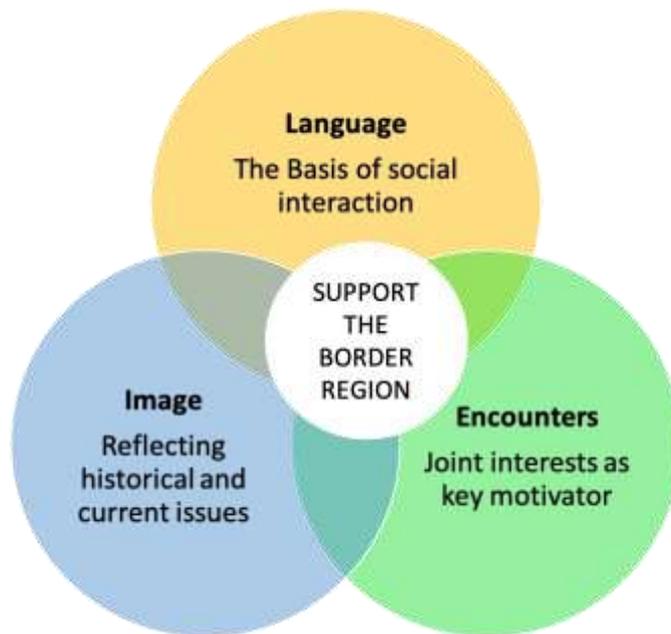


Fig. 1: Interconnection of the three fields of action

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data collection

The study is based on qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants living in the Czech-German border region. On each side of the border, 22 interviews were conducted, either online (via Zoom) or via phone when participants had no access to the internet (due to bad connection or lack of online communication skills).

The interviews were recorded, summarised in a protocol, and analysed according to a content analytical approach.³

	Germany	Czech Republic
	May 10 – June 7 2021	May 17 – June 14 2021
Number of participants	22 (11 in Bavaria, 11 in Saxony)	22 from 5 regions bordering with Saxony (Ústecký, Liberecký) and Bavaria (Plzeňský a Jihočeský), 1 neighbouring both states (Karlovarský)
Interview length	approx. 60 minutes	
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative, semi-structured in-depth-interviews with a common interview guideline • Online (via Zoom) or telephone • Online recording (via Zoom) or audio-recording (via telephone) • Simplified protocols • Qualitative content analysis 	

Tab. 4: Overview of data collection and processing in Germany and the Czech Republic

The fieldwork took place shortly after the ending of the COVID-19 lockdown in both the Czech Republic and Germany. Case numbers were falling in May, with travel restrictions loosening.⁴

3.2 Recruitment criteria and sample for both countries

We established common criteria for the recruitment of respondents within both the Czech Republic and Germany through the demographic characteristics listed below.

	Germany	Czech Republic
Main residence	German-Czech border area (maximum 30-40 km from the border)	
Number of participants	22 (11 in Bavaria, 11 in Saxony)	22 from 5 regions bordering with Saxony (Ústecký, Liberecký) and Bavaria (Plzeňský a Jihočeský), 1 neighbouring both states (Karlovarský)
Respondents	11 from Bavaria 11 from Saxony	11 from the northern border 11 from the southern border

³ See, e.g. Kuckartz, 2016, Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019.

⁴ See <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/measures-adopted-by-the-czech-government-against-coronavirus-180545/>, last accessed 26.07.2021.

		A mix of different regions, maximum 3 respondents from 1 district
Size of the place of residence	Balanced representation	Balanced representation of urban population up to and over 10,000 inhabitants
Gender	50 % male 50 % female	50 % male 50 % female
Age groups 18-29 30-44 45-60 61+	5-6 respondents in each age category	5-6 respondents in each age category
Education level⁵ Lower Intermediate Higher	Balanced representation	min. 7 – max. 10 respondents Max. 6 respondents
Underage children in the household	Min. 5 respondents with underage children in the household	
Household income and Social status	Balanced representation	Max. 4 respondents running a household or unemployed
Type of interview	In-depth interviews via Zoom; telephone if the respondent has no internet access	

Tab. 5: Overview of recruitment criteria

3.3 Recruitment

3.3.1 In Germany

The recruitment criteria could not be met entirely in the given time. The sample, therefore, contains fewer people with a lower education level than initially planned, and it is not altogether gender-balanced. The recruiter was not able to find sufficient respondents with underage children in the household. Quotas, therefore, had to be widened and ultimately also allowed for children over the age of 18 to live in the respective households.

	Bavaria	Saxony	Total
Main residence	11	11	22
Gender	5 males 6 females	7 males 4 females	12 males 10 females
Age groups			
18-29	3	2	5 aged 18-29
30-44	2	4	6 aged 30-44
45-60	4		

⁵ In the case of Germany: lower education = no degree / lower secondary education / Hauptschule), intermediate education level = secondary school / Realschulabschluss, higher education level = higher education entrance qualification. Saxony: GDR education (polytechnische Oberschule) is comparable to a Realschulabschluss. In the case of the Czech Republic: lower education = no degree / second education without a high-school diploma (základní škola nebo střední škola bez maturity), intermediate education = secondary school (gymnasium / střední škola s maturitou), higher education = university degree.

61+	2	3 2	7 aged 45-60 4 aged 61+
Education			
Lower	3	0	3 lower
Intermediate	4	5	9 intermediate
Higher	4	6	10 higher
Occupation			
Student	2	2	4 students
Working (fulltime)	4	4	8 working (fulltime)
Working (parttime)	3	2	5 working (parttime)
Applying or running household	1	1	2 applying or running household
Retired	1	1	3 retired
Children (in household)	3	1	4 with children in household
Knowledge of a foreign language			
None	6	4	10 none
At least one	5	7	12 at least one

Tab. 6: Sample in Germany

3.3.2 In the Czech Republic

The final group of respondents met the set recruitment criteria almost completely. The mix between the region is well-balanced and further corresponds to the proportion of the population in the given border regions. However, there is a slightly higher number of respondents from municipalities with 10 000 and more inhabitants. Especially along the northern region, it was difficult to find respondents from smaller towns as most of the inhabitants are located around bigger agglomerations.

	Bavarian border	Saxon border	Total
Main residence			22
Ústecký region		7	
Liberecký region		3	
Karlovarský region ⁶		3	
Plzeňský region	7		
Jihočeský region	2		
Size of the place of residence			
Less than 10 000 inhabitants	4	4	8 less than 10 000 inhabitants
More than 10 000 inhabitants	5	9	14 more than 10 000 inhabitants
Age groups			
18-29		4	5 aged 18-29
30-44		2	5 aged 30-44

⁶ The Karlovarský region shares a border with both Bavaria and Saxony. In the following statistics, we count the population from the Karlovarský region to the regions neighbouring Saxony.

45-60	1	5	8 aged 45-60
61+	3	2	4 aged 61+
	3		
	2		
Education			
Lower	4	6	10 lower
Intermediate	4	5	9 intermediate
Higher	1	2	4 higher
Occupation			
Unemployed/at home	2	2	4 unemployed/at home
Employed	7	9	16 employed
Student	0	2	2 students
Knowledge of a foreign language			
None	4	6	10 none
At least one	5	7	12 at least one

Tab. 7: Sample in the Czech Republic

3.3 Localisation of the respondents' places of residence

The following maps show the places of residence where the German respondents are currently living:

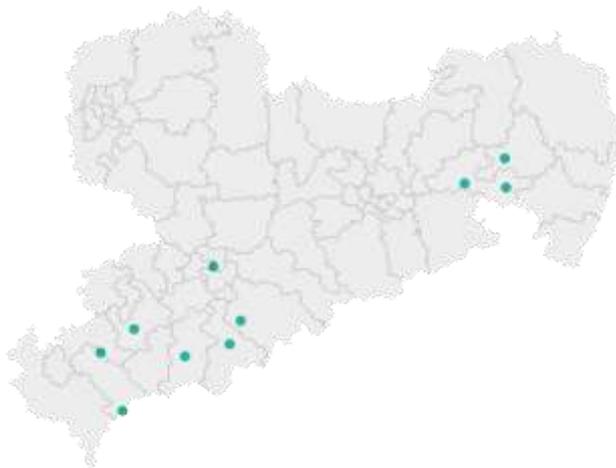


Fig. 2: Map of Saxony



Fig. 3: Map of Bavaria

The following maps show the locations where the Czech respondents are currently living⁷:

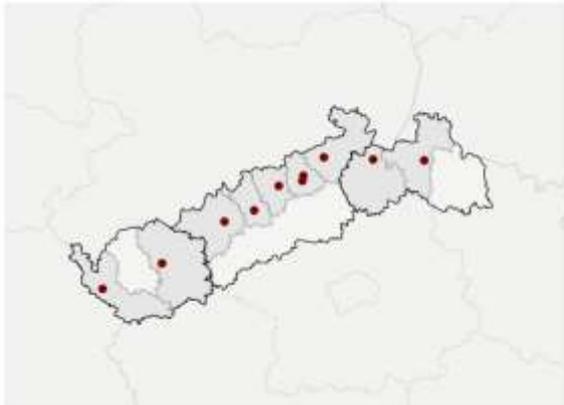


Fig. 4: Map of regions sharing borders with Saxony



Fig. 5: Map of regions sharing borders with Bavaria

⁷ In case of the Czech Republic, the size of the dot illustrated in the map does not necessarily correspond with the exact location of the respondent, as only information about the distance from the border as well as the district and size of the town were collected.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE GERMAN BORDER REGIONS

4.1 Main findings

- The respondents were **mostly born and raised in the region**, and the majority does not want to move away.
- In everyday life, the **border almost disappeared**; and respondents regularly commute to the Czech Republic, mainly for shopping or for touristic reasons.
- The **COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their lives**: Mainly because it restricted freedom of travel and strengthened possible negative prejudices. Nevertheless, most of the respondents expect the situation to normalise.
- The respondents feel **strong ties towards their home (Heimat)** due to social connections as well as **nature and landscape**, despite the challenges in the region – in Germany as well as in the Czech Republic.
- The **Czech Republic is perceived mainly positive**, although **most of the respondents do not know the country very well** (respondents from Saxony a bit better than respondents from Bavaria); the respondents appreciate the neighbouring country for shopping, for the beautiful nature and, most significantly, the friendly people.
- There are **still prejudices against the Czechs**, though. Some also shifted from animosities rooted in historical events onto negatively perceived minorities (Roma and Sinti and “Vietnamese”). Although the respondents attribute these prejudices rather to others than to themselves, it might not be helpful that most of them do not have many personal contacts with Czechs. There is a **lack of commemorative culture** of the countries shared histories.
- Most respondents are, nevertheless, **open to making new acquaintances** but would **not actively seek to form new social ties**. The main reason for these distant feelings lies in the missing knowledge of the Czech language: They would appreciate **intercultural communication courses**.
- The same applies to joint projects and activities: Respondents would appreciate these if they met their personal interests: Especially **sports, culture and Volksfeste are seen as interesting activities**.
- Respondents would welcome further information on mutual projects and activities: usually, they would check their municipality and the internet, but a central information site is missing.

4.2 Life in the border region

4.2.1 Living in the border region: Born and raised

The vast majority of respondents has lived in the border region since birth. Only two respondents moved into the border region from elsewhere: One moved from Upper Silesia (Poland) at a very young age, the other moved from Saxony to the Bavarian border region 20 years ago for work-related reasons. Occasionally, respondents indicate to have temporarily left the border region for work or study-related activities. All other moves took place within the same region. The most frequently mentioned reasons for these ‘internal’ movements are affordable housing, partnerships and a closer proximity to work or family.

Viele sind in die Region reingeboren. Die werden sich in die Region verliebt haben und nicht mehr weg wollen. (Bavaria, age: 19)

For most respondents, the primary reason for their choice of residence is that they were born and raised there. Hence, for most, living in the border region is not an active decision but rather a passive one. Simultaneously, most respondents feel at ease in the border region and do not see any reason to move elsewhere. Almost all respondents mention feeling highly connected to their region (see: chapter 2.2).

Over half of all respondents indicate they would be open to moving within their respective region but cannot imagine moving further away. Some mention they would also consider other areas within their *Bundesland*. Only a limited number of (predominantly) younger respondents say they could imagine moving away, and some are already actively looking to do so. In such cases, this is often related to a lack of career perspectives, with two out of three respondents indicating they would probably be drawn back to their home region after some time. One middle-aged respondent plans to leave the region after retirement to travel the world.

When directly asked whether respondents could see themselves living in the Czech Republic, almost half of the respondents confirmed this, stating they could imagine themselves living just across the Czech border. However, simultaneously, most of these respondents also identify essential hurdles such as the linguistic barrier (see chapter 4.6), limited employment opportunities and, consequently, financial concerns.

4.2.2 Commuting behaviour: Regular visits for shopping and touristic reasons

Nearly half of all respondents cross the border and visit the Czech Republic on a very regular basis (at least once a month). The rest visits either on a somewhat regular basis (every two to three months) or sporadically (perhaps a couple of times a year). Only one respondent stopped visiting the Czech Republic completely ten years ago after having witnessed an unpleasant atmosphere at the so-called *Vietnamesenmarkt* - markets selling cheaply priced foods and products (see chapter 4.4) and therefore no longer feeling at ease when crossing the border.

Früher hat es sich rentiert, dass man tanken oder zum Essen fährt. Man hat drei Gänge für 5€ bekommen. Mittlerweile zahlt man fast so viel wie in Deutschland. Seitdem fahre ich nicht mehr so oft. (Bavaria, age: 47)

Reasons for visiting the Czech Republic are abundant. Most prominently, respondents mention they enjoy shopping in the Czech Republic, either in stores or at markets, as the prices for certain products are remarkably lower (mainly for cigarettes and, to a lesser extent, gas). A little less than half of the respondents also mention they visit the Czech Republic for touristic reasons: Most prominently for (cultural) sightseeing, city trips or nature walks and, to a lesser extent, to go camping, to visit spas or for (winter) sports. Some respondents also mention crossing the border to enjoy the (cheaper) gastronomic offers in the Czech Republic, although some indicate that price differences are narrowing.

Some younger respondents (under 30 years of age) highlight cheaper beauty services (hairdressers, nail salons) as a reason for their trips and further mention casino visits and paintball, as the regulations

for the latter two are less strict than they are in Germany. Personal or professional reasons are barely mentioned: Only two respondents say they have visited the Czech Republic to visit Czech acquaintances (see chapter 4.5). None of the respondents mentions any current and direct work-related grounds as a reason for a cross-border journey.

Wir leben im Schengen-Raum. Wir haben keine geschlossenen Grenzen mehr. In der Pandemie hat man bemerkt, was es heißt, wenn die Grenzen geschlossen sind. Sonst bemerke ich die Grenze nicht. Es ist schön, wenn man ohne Probleme hin- und herreisen kann. (Bavaria, age: 71)

Die Grenze spielt keine Rolle mehr. Ich freue mich, wenn die Möglichkeit in unserer Gegend besteht, Pflegekräfte oder Mitarbeiter aus Tschechien zu gewinnen und den Arbeitskräftemangel ausgleichen zu können. Es tut der Region im Tourismus gut und die Arbeitskräfte sind Konsumenten, die hier Geld lassen. (Bavaria, age: 37)

4.2.3 Role of the border: Invisible in everyday life

Most respondents say the border plays either no role at all in their everyday life or only to a minimal extent. Some state they usually do not even notice they are living directly in the border region or even when crossing the border itself. A significant number of older respondents (all aged 45+) states that the border *no longer* plays a role in their everyday life – indicating the notable role it once played. Thus, especially for the older generation, a certain historical residue of the border is still perceptible (see chapter 4.4). Some respondents become aware of the border only due to the different language and/or because of the different currency. For others, closing the borders during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a re-emphasis of this ‘border feeling’.

4.2.4 COVID-19: Impacting everyday behaviour, not conducive to Czech-German coexistence

Since the beginning of 2020, commuting behaviour has been heavily influenced by measures taken on both sides of the border to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Almost unanimously, respondents say the pandemic and consequent inability to cross the border have directly impacted their everyday behaviour.

Eger, 20 km von Selb, war Hotspot. Es gab Zahlen über 700. Die Leute hatten in Bayern viel Angst vor tschechischen Kontakten. Der Kontakt nach Tschechien hat gelitten. Es gibt mehr Ablehnung von Deutschland, wenn die Tschechen zum Einkaufen kommen, dann wollen die Deutschen den Einkaufswagen nicht mehr anfassen. (Bavaria, age: 47)

Wenn die keine tschechischen Mitarbeiter in der Pflege hätten, würden die alten Menschen sterben wie die Fliegen. Wir sind auf die Tschechen angewiesen. Das ist eine Arbeit, die nicht viele machen wollen oder können. (Saxony, age: 62)

Many respondents have also noticed other impacts of the restrictions, such as less cross-border traffic in general, fewer Czech cross-border commuters and strict border controls. The fact that many Czech workers were no longer allowed to cross the border was identified as problematic by several respondents, especially for professionals in crucial industries such as (health) care. Some also mention the significant impact on other essential industries for the region, such as gastronomy and tourism.

During the midst of the pandemic measures, border control was rigorous, with exceptions only being made for particular work- or family-related cases.⁸ However, some respondents from both Saxony and Bavaria mentioned that the pandemic has had a negative impact on how German inhabitants of the border region viewed the Czech. They note that fear over an increased spreading of the virus fuelled a negative perception towards Czech commuters. One respondent, who was rather sceptical about the pandemic in general and the measures decided upon by the German government in particular, said that they noticed growing spite from Czech acquaintances towards German politicians. Another respondent stated that vaccination donations from Saxony and Bavaria to the Czech Republic⁹ caused a negative perception, as vaccination rates were still low at the time, leaving people wondering why the Czechs were given preference.

Die Grenze war zu. Es sind einige Tschechen zum Arbeiten gekommen und die haben hier auch eingekauft und das Gemüt von den Deutschen hat sich verändert. Sie haben sich ungerecht behandelt gefühlt. Sie fühlten sich bedroht und sind jetzt den Tschechen gegenüber abgeneigt.
(Bavaria, age: 19)

Als ich zum ersten Mal wieder in Tschechien war, hatte ich das Gefühl von etwas Normalität. Alles ist wieder offen. (Saxony, age: 20)

Many respondents verbalise the overall emotional effect the pandemic has had on them: They felt restricted, sometimes frightened, with many of them unsure when and if the situation would normalise again. However, with the re-opening of the borders, the dramatic drop of infection rates and the rise in vaccination rates, most respondents say they feel more at ease and notice and expect a certain normalisation. More so, mainly

the younger respondents say they have already started to visit the Czech Republic again. Many say to have genuinely missed their freedom to cross the border and enjoy what the Czech Republic has to offer.

4.3 Identity and belonging

4.3.1 *Heimat*: Strongly bound to nature and social ties

When asked about their home (*Heimat*, a German word that is perhaps best translated as ‘sense of home’), half of the respondents state they feel at home in their region: Some mention broader regions such as *Oberlausitz*, *Erzgebirge*, *Vogtland* (all in Saxony), *Oberpfalz*, *Oberfranken*, *Tirschenreith* or the *Fichtelgebirge* (all in Bavaria). One respondent indicated to also count parts of the Czech Republic that are close to the border as their *Heimat*, as they know these places very well. Approximately one third of respondents say they feel most at home in their own cities, villages or municipalities. Significantly less frequently mentioned is the respective *Bundesland* (Bavaria was mentioned once) and Europe (also mentioned once). Few respondents state to feel at home wherever they are currently residing, indicating they do not have a strong sense of *Heimat* and feel less bound to a certain place.

⁸ See <https://global-monitoring.com/gm/page/events/epidemic-0001969.QxfwUvvifKFy.html?lang=en>, last accessed 29.06.2021.

⁹ See https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/germany-and-france-will-send-vaccines-to-czechia/, last accessed 29.06.2021.

Die Menschen sind auf ihre Art sehr herzlich. Es ist ein gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt, der das Leben sehr schön macht. Dass man sich kennt und weiß, wie die Menschen miteinander umgehen, das ist angenehm. Es ist typisch für das Land. In der Stadt hat man mehr Anonymität. Auf dem Dorf grüßt man jeden, ob man ihn kennt oder nicht und das ist eine Grundeinstellung, die sorgt für ein schönes Zusammenleben.
(Saxony, age: 19)

The most apparent reasons why respondents feel connected to their home are the **beautiful nature and scenery**, boasting a feeling of spaciousness and tranquillity, as well as the **strong social ties** they have within their respective region, as listed above (hence, all within Germany). With regard to the latter, respondents frequently mention their roots, oftentimes tracing back several generations and the current proximity of friends and family. For many, this sense of home includes a certain mentality that they strongly identify with: Hospitality, informality and strong social cohesion are named in both border regions. One respondent from Saxony mentions that the typical *Erzgebirgler* is also very direct and upfront – something that may scare off newcomers at first. Some respondents also cite **cultural ties**: Certain customs and

practices such as traditional attire (one respondent mentioned cross-border costume associations), specific activities and festivities, or a shared dialect are specific markers they value within their home region.

Unsurprisingly, when asked why *other people* (neighbours) choose to live in the border region, half of the respondents stated this was because they, also, were born and raised in the region. Several respondents, predominantly from Saxony, mention that others have also maintained a strong *Heimatsverbundenheit* ever since.

Several respondents from Bavaria mention that many have left the region due to a **lack of employment opportunities**. However, other respondents from Bavaria also note that **certain industries within the region have now started to attract newcomers**. This is less frequently mentioned in Saxony, where depopulation was more often identified (see chapter 4.3.3). Other arguments closely align with the respondents' personal reasons for their choice of residence, mainly the natural surroundings and tranquillity. Some respondents also mention the relatively **cheap property prices** in comparison to other regions.

4.3.2 Cross-border identity: Ambivalent, but expanding

When asked about a shared cross-border identity between Germany and the Czech Republic, most respondents (regardless of the respective *Bundesland*) answer with a certain ambivalence: Several respondents **affirm this passively**, stating they can imagine others to feel a shared identity; however, it is not the case for them personally. Some assume it is mainly Czechs who identify with the German border region. Some respondents attribute this to the large number of cross-border workers from the Czech Republic while other respondents (all aged 45 and over) also mention a historical aspect: Formerly displaced (Czech) inhabitants of the border region may still feel very strongly connected to their former homeland. German respondents tend to believe that Czechs identify more with the German border region due to the greater number of cross-border workers, indicating a one-way identification rather than a mutual identification.

Few respondents mention **shared history, traditions and customs** as markers for a cross-border identity, instead emphasising **linguistic and cultural differences**. In particular, one 59-year-old respondent mentioned the history of the 'Sudeten', mainly German inhabitants of a region in the former Czech-Slovakia, as a reason why some elderly inhabitants maintain a certain cross-border identity. Proximity to and openness of the border is another explanation respondents give for allowing a certain cross-border identity. Occasionally, respondents mention shared activities as a unifying factor, which may incorporate promising potential for the future. Approximately one-third of all respondents (from both regions and all age groups) state they do not identify any cross-border identity whatsoever.

Die Großmutter hatte Ängste, als die Grenze geöffnet wurde. Das ist in meiner Generation nicht mehr da. Die Vorurteile werden weniger und da bleibt Platz, eine Freundschaft wachsen zu lassen. (Bavaria, age: 20)

4.3.3 Challenges of the region: Lack of career opportunities, high crime rates and drug issues

When asked about challenges within the region, a **lack of career opportunities** as well as **crime rates**, including drug-related issues, were most commonly mentioned. The latter mainly manifests itself in the illegal drug trade, whilst the former is attributed to a lack of diverse job openings (mainly for higher-skilled personnel) and an insufficient number of investors in the region, including state funding.

Most respondents acknowledge that jobs exist but they do not require skilled labour or academic backgrounds and are generally poorly paid. Due to these circumstances, skilled workers and scholars move away from the region and Czech workers, who – according to the respondents – are willing to work for less than minimum wage, fill the empty openings. It is important to note that respondents do not blame Czech workers for this but instead focus their critiques towards German politics, frequently mentioning the German government's lack of interest in their region.

Accordingly, as some respondents also identify, many issues mentioned are quite common for rural areas in Germany and therefore are not directly related to the border regions. The following overview mentions the most pressing (and often interconnected) issues:

- **Crime rates and drug-related issues:** Respondents from both Bavaria and Saxony mention criminal issues such as shoplifting, burglaries and car and copper theft. Mostly in Saxony, respondents also mention drug-related issues such as crystal meth.
- **Lack of career opportunities and perspectives (both *Bundesländer*):** In this light, some respondents also touched upon issues with poverty in the region. For example, one respondent noted how their house only has coal heating, as they cannot afford any other options.
- **Lack of local public transport and infrastructure (both *Bundesländer*):** According to several respondents, it is nearly impossible to get around the region without a car. This is seen as a particular issue for older inhabitants, who may need to drive long distances to get the special care they require.
- **Faulty internet connections (mainly in Bavaria):** The slow broadband rollout or the general lack thereof is of considerable irritation for many.
- **Passive political climate/No political interest (both *Bundesländer*):** Many respondents blame a lack of political interest (and consequent investment) in the region for the above issues.

- **Demographics (both *Bundesländer*):** Several respondents notice that more and more people are moving out of the region and fear the consequences this may have for the region's vitality. This is more dominant in Saxony than in Bavaria (see chapter 4.3.1).

Chapter summary

Challenges:

- Most respondents identify their *Heimat* to be their German region. Most view the border region on the side of the Czech Republic rather as part of a foreign country than a direct extension of their home region.
- There is a **lack of a cross-border identity**. Germans tend to believe that Czech people who commute to Germany regularly feel a shared identity but understand this as a one-way feeling.

Opportunities:

- However, if hurdles in language and career perspective are softened, **most respondents could envision a cross-border identity** and an extension of their *Heimatverbundenheit* to include the Czech Republic.
- **Shared scenery and nature intensify the emotional connections** between the two countries.

Assessment

Cultural identities are much more than simple words like “German” or “Czech” could encapsulate. Sociologist Stuart Hall wrote that identification is best understood as a reconfiguration of one's position in personal and historical narratives – it is a production that is never complete and always in process¹⁰. Through this perspective, fixed categorisations can be destabilised, and attention can be drawn to **connections**, which may actively construct a cross-border identity: Shared history, jobs, nature, culture and discourse. As most respondents either do not see any shared identity or only allude to a possible cross-border identity passively, there is room for a further focus on such connections. **If linguistic and cultural differences can be set aside, shared activities and conversations about similarities could bring residents closer together – and construct a deepened cross-border identity.**

4.4 Perceptions and attitudes

4.4.1 Attitudes toward the Czech Republic and its inhabitants: Beautiful landscape, kind people

The respondents identified a wide variety of factors they value about the Czech Republic. As mentioned previously, the offers of sport facilities in the Czech Republic are well received by most respondents. Additionally, three other positive aspects were mentioned repeatedly: **Retail and pricing, nature** and, most significantly, **the Czech population** itself:

- Especially younger women appreciate the comparatively **lower costs for beauty procedures and clothing items**. Some reported looking out for special deals and driving to their neighbouring country specifically to search for a good bargain.
- Most respondents speak in awe and admiration of **Czech nature and landscapes**. Regardless of age, gender or level of education – Germans who live close to the border value the large

¹⁰ Hall 1994, pp. 222-224.

nature reserves (such as Bohemian Switzerland) and their seemingly untouched flora and fauna. Some even stated that the Czech side is more beautiful than the German one: The mixed forests are more versatile and wilder than German pine tree plantations.

- The overwhelming majority emphasised the **kindness, friendliness and openness of their Czech neighbours**. While respondents from Bavaria commented that Czech peoples have their heart at the right place and described them as generally warm, positive and cordial, respondents from Saxony remained a bit wary of the motives behind the friendly exterior. Some suspect economic dependency from tourism to be the driving force but nevertheless appreciate and respect the effort made by the Czechs with regard to their “cultural openness”, as one respondent put it.

Die Menschen haben das Herz an der richtigen Stelle. (Bavaria, age: 47)

Alle Länder sind freundlicher als Deutschland. Es kann auch daran liegen, dass man zu Touristen freundlich ist. (Saxony, age: 34)

4.4.2 Perceived problems of the Czech border region: Drugs and poverty

Aside from the many positive aspects, many respondents also voiced complaints, mainly about either **drugs or poverty**. Interestingly, whether they are bothered by one issue or the other seems to depend on their respective gender and education level:

- Mostly female respondents pointed out the **perceived poverty** of the Czech side of the border region. They complain about the supposedly **bleak aesthetics of buildings, damaged streets and a lack of cleanliness** inside shops or restaurants – although sometimes acknowledging that these were “luxury issues”.

Es ist mir manchmal unangenehm, in Tschechien zu sein. Deutschland ist sehr sauber. (Saxony, age: 20)

- Although some German respondents mention poverty as an issue within their personal lives (see chapter 2.2), **Czech poverty and German poverty is perceived differently**: Whereas Czech poverty is visible and seen as “aesthetically displeasing”, German poverty is rather a private matter, tucked away in the otherwise well-kept and wealthy Germany. Accordingly, when asked about the perception Czech people may have of Germans, many suspect “envy” or state that most Czech citizens probably wish to work in Germany.
- According to male respondents, **drugs** are the main issue of their neighbouring country. They complain about crystal meth being sold near the border or stored and shipped to other parts of the world. Even though they are not worried about their own health or that of their friends and family, they do mention feeling uncomfortable seeing drug users around and large amounts of drugs being smuggled so close to them on a daily basis.¹¹

¹¹ E.g.; MDR reported that in 2017, 115 kilogrammes of crystal meth were seized in Germany: A 50% increase in comparison to 2016. Police efforts mainly focused on the border region with the Czech Republic, as the border region particularly struggles with drug smuggling: <https://www.mdr.de/heute-im-osten/projekte/crystal-muetter-auf-entzug-102.html>, last accessed 30.06.2021).

- Eger and Asch/Aš are identified a few times as cities with high drug use by male respondents. They attribute this to the so-called *Vietnamesenmärkte* - an accusation repeatedly mentioned in the interviews and reported in several media reports.¹² The perception of such markets will be discussed further in the following subchapter 4.4.3.
- Respondents do see a **slight improvement with drug issues in the region** over recent years due to increased state control and the police.
- Two respondents also took issue with the perceived **strictness and forcefulness of Czech police officers**. Fear of police controls is strongly connected to a lack of knowledge about the country's laws and the inability to express oneself correctly in a different language.
- Only one respondent stated that Czech people themselves bother him, as the ones he knows are *schlitzohrig* (a negative German slang for crafty or cunning) and dishonest.

Man hat ein ungutes Gefühl, wenn man in Polizeikontrollen kommt. Man weiß nicht, was einen erwartet. Wenn man über die Grenze fährt, wird man kontrolliert, die sprechen kein Deutsch. Sie wollen das vielleicht nicht. Es ist schwierig, sich zurechtzufinden, wenn man in solche Situationen kommt. (Bavaria, age: 47)

4.4.3 Prejudices

Es gibt auch sicherlich Menschen, die nicht so nah bei den Tschechen wohnen wollen. (Saxony, age: 31)

Of the 22 respondents, only three believe that there are no prejudices against Czech people in the region. The majority of respondents mentions **various stereotypes**, which either faded in time or persist until today. However, when asked about prejudices, the respondents either voiced their **disagreement** with them or used a passive tone to indicate that they are conveying other people's opinions instead of their own.

Some respondents still feel strongly about the **history of the border region**, as the Beneš decrees¹³ affected some of their family members. They argue that the deportation and consequent impact on Germans in the region are not discussed enough. Therefore, cultural prejudices, hostility and even anger still persist amongst older generations living in the region. The prejudices that remain from this era mainly revolve around Czech people being untrustworthy (or *schlitzohrig*), criminal and/or dangerous.

Es gab auf der tschechischen Seite die Märkte. Das sind Märkte von Asiaten, Thailändern, die dort Produkte verkaufen, zum Beispiel Duplikate von CDs. Viele Tschechen haben mit den Märkten nichts zu tun. Es sind Migranten oder Banden, die es etabliert haben. (Saxony, age: 37)

¹² See e.g., <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/drogenschmuggel-von-tschechien-nach-bayern-teufliches-kristall-1.1244764>, last accessed 29.06.2021.

¹³ These decrees from Edvard Beneš, the post-war president of Czechoslovak, legitimised the removal of Czechoslovak citizenship of both Hungarian and German minorities and the expropriation of their property after WWII, see <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/the-benes-decrees-implications-for-eu-enlargement/>, last accessed 28.07.2021.

Die Oma meiner Frau wurde vertrieben. Die hat vorher in Tschechien gelebt, im Sudetenland. Die hat Groll und sie fährt nicht nach Tschechien. Manche haben schlechte Erfahrungen früher gemacht, über die sie nicht hinwegkommen. (Bavaria, age: 47)

With the reunification and the opening of the borders, **prejudices and stereotypes started to change**. According to the respondents, most younger people in the region no longer think of Czech people as criminals. There may be two reasons for this: Firstly, because there is increased contact, and secondly, because historical knowledge disappeared over time. Here, the latter seems unlikely. Young respondents were quite aware of historical events and talked explicitly about the experiences of older family members. Thus, changing perceptions are due to increased contact. Because this contact remains superficial (see chapter 4.5), prejudices may soften, but a “feeling of foreignness” remains, to quote a younger respondent. People over 30, however, still speak of **stereotypes regarding criminal behaviour**. But rather than discursively constructing prejudices against Czech people, they see them **as victims of other supposedly criminal ethnic groups** – specifically the Vietnamese and Roma and Sinti.

4.4.4 “The Czechs”: Minority groups’ influence on the perception of the Czech population

It is estimated that there are currently around 100.000 Roma and Sinti and 62.000 Vietnamese people living in the Czech Republic.¹⁴ According to the respondents, both groups disproportionately engage in criminal activities. Some respondents also confused certain ethnicities, also mentioning Thai or Filipino, and sometimes resorted to calling the Vietnamese “Asians” or *Fidschi* (Fijan, a discriminatory word originally used in the GDR to designate Asian workers in the 1970s but currently also used by right-wing extremists).

Es gibt verschiedene Bevölkerungsgruppen, auch in Tschechien. Die hatten das Problem mit den Zigeunern. Die erkennt man an der Hautfarbe und am Aussehen. Man muss vorsichtig sein wegen der kriminellen Seite. Die haben viel geklaut. (Saxony, age: 60)

On the other hand, Roma and Sinti people were sometimes called by the slur “gipsy” and often viewed as inherently criminal, supposedly stealing everything - from cars to copper.

Some of the respondents noted that it is unfair to hold the criminality of other ethnicities against the Czech population, as that would be ignorant – explicitly othering these minority groups as distinct from the rest of the Czech population. Ignorance about or towards the other groups was not addressed. Respondents made no efforts to differentiate between highly heterogeneous groups such as the Vietnamese diaspora living in the Czech Republic.

Besides these perceptions, most respondents feel that there is **currently less prejudice in the region than 10 or 20 years ago**. Many were particularly outspoken against the still-persisting stereotype of Czech workers stealing German jobs. Instead of agreeing to such ideas (either passively or actively), many respondents defended and praised the Czech work ethic (which, albeit positive, may also be viewed as a prejudice). The overwhelming majority of respondents said that they themselves do not

¹⁴ See <https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/92010906/32019819.pdf/6bf03523-f75f-4335-97db-755c1c466337?version=1.6>; in Germany, there are approximately 60.000 German Sinti and 10.000 Roma, as well as 188.000 Vietnamese (<https://www.minderheitensekretariat.de/wen-vertreten-wir/deutsche-sinti-und-roma>); <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/migrationshintergrund-staatsangehoerigkeit-staaten.html>), last accessed 28.07.2021.

hold any prejudices against the Czech population and spoke of a friendly relationship with their neighbours.

Chapter summary

Challenges:

- Respondents voice **most concern about poverty and drug abuse**.
- When discussing differences, most respondents **actively distinguish between the two countries** and position themselves as people living in the supposedly “tidier” and “richer” one.
- Even though **hostile attitudes have softened over time**, certain **prejudices still exist**. These are mainly **due to the complicated history** between the Czech Republic and Germany and are therefore more present within **older generations**.
- Simultaneously, prejudices towards **certain minorities** living in the Czech Republic at best remained and, at worst, expanded.

Opportunities:

- Respondents particularly appreciate **Czech nature and low retail prices** they find in the Czech Republic.
- Nowadays, inhabitants of the German border region predominantly have a **positive and appreciative attitude towards their Czech neighbours**, who are oftentimes described as kind, open and hard-working.

Assessment:

Germans living near the border consciously separate themselves from the Czech population – even if they speak fondly of their friendliness and openness. They are never simply neighbours, but *Czech* neighbours and, thus, foreigners. Because of this, the perspectives and attitudes described in this chapter are part of a larger discourse about countries and their shared histories. According to Foucault, when social actors engage in such discourses, they are constantly (re-)shaping and (re-)structuring what is deemed to be the truth.¹⁵ Humans use such discursive truths to ascribe meaning and value and, through this process, power is negotiated, produced and solidified.

In this case, Germans use subjective differences in wealth, job opportunities and even cleanliness between the two countries to position the German population (and thereby themselves) as the cleaner, richer and more powerful one, of which the cultural other is envious. Because of a lack of deeper personal, social contact, this perspective persists, even when historical prejudices soften. **To combat this feeling of foreignness, it is essential to focus on the larger discourse: the shared history and presence of the two countries.** A comprehensive historical reappraisal in a museum or repeated events may open old wounds, but it is necessary to restructure the supposed truth about Germans and Czechs. It would be beneficial to include minority groups like the Roma and Sinti population in such a historical paradigm shift. They are also part of the shared history and have been overlooked and discriminated against for far too long.

¹⁵ Foucault, 1981, [1969], p. 74.

4.5. Encounters and joint activities

4.5.1 Knowledge of the Czech Republic: Slightly higher among Saxon respondents

*Ich kenne Tschechien bis
100 km nach der Grenze,
zum Beispiel Karlsbad,
Prag, Pilsen. Mehr kennt
man nicht. Es sind
Tagesausflüge oder
Wochenendausflüge.
(Saxony, age: 42)*

The self-assessment of knowledge concerning the Czech Republic **varies widely** among respondents. Some state to be familiar with the border region and Prague - others have made day trips or longer holidays in other parts of the Czech Republic. Saxon respondents claim to have good knowledge of the Czech Republic slightly more often than their Bavarian counterparts. This also applies to respondents with a higher level of education.

As a reason for their lacking knowledge of the Czech Republic, apart from a **general disinterest**, several respondents mention the **language barrier** – an issue further highlighted in chapter 2.5.

4.5.2 Personal interests and hobbies of Germans near the border: Mainly outdoors

- **Sports**, especially hiking, biking, and swimming, is the most popular leisure activity in both regions and among all age groups. Motorbiking is rather popular among the younger respondents. In general, being outdoors is very important for a lot of the respondents.
- **Music, arts and cultural activities** are also mentioned often: Musical concerts and festivals, cinema, theatre, and photography.
- **Meeting with friends and families** is essential and is especially important to the younger respondents from both regions.
- **Other hobbies** are as diverse as anywhere else: Ranging from handicrafts, history and beer brewing to gaming, reading and fishing.

4.5.3 Personal contacts: Mainly restricted to work contexts

The majority of respondents has **no personal contact** with Czech inhabitants of the border region. Some respondents say to have or have had a few Czech colleagues at work. Remarkably, **no personal friendships emerged from these work contacts**. Those who do indicate to have personal contacts are mostly from Saxony, and they are all 40 years of age and older: Their contacts reach back to the time before the reunification (e.g., contacts from their parents, pen friendships). One person from Bavaria has more frequent contacts, as they work for an evangelical church with close connections to a church in the Czech part of the border region.

*Durch die Arbeit,
das sind Kollegen.
Privat treffen die
sich weniger.
(Saxony, age: 51)*

4.5.4 General contact points: In everyday life

The respondents mentioned the following instances in which Czech and Germans cross paths. Notably, all of these occasions make for rather superficial contacts (they do not visit these locations or events together, but rather “side by side” - thus, these encounters happen by chance, not choice), namely:

- At work
- In supermarkets
- At folk festivals (also Sorbian¹⁶ folk festivals)
- Touristic contexts
- At sports events such as during football matches, on motorbike courses in the Czech Republic and paintball excursions (especially the young people)
- The cycling path along the border which is used by German and Czechs.

When asked about general contact points between Czech and German inhabitants of the border region, there is a slight difference in perception between Bavaria and in Saxony and between older and younger respondents:

- The **older respondents** in Saxony think that there are **some or even frequent contacts** between Czechs and Germans. The **younger respondents** from both Saxony and Bavaria believe there are **no frequent contacts**.
- The Saxon respondents talk more about contact through **tourism and gastronomy** than the respondents from Bavaria, whether all the other activities are mentioned independently from the region.

4.5.5 Cross-border contacts: General interest in joint activities, but no active engagement

- Most respondents from all age groups would **appreciate (more) contact and new acquaintances** if they naturally happen but are not directly looking to get actively engaged in obtaining these contacts. **Only a few actively deny an initial interest: Mostly younger respondents between 18 and 29.** Some of them say the Czech Republic is too far away, they and their friends are generally not interested, or they do not feel at ease when meeting foreigners.
- When asked what would be helpful to facilitate contact, **language and communication** (see chapter 2.5), as well as **personal contacts and activities grounded in joint interests**, are mentioned most. Another aspect to keep in mind when moving cross-border contact forward is that some inhabitants do not own a car and are therefore restricted in terms of travelling.
- The majority of respondents say that they would be **interested in joint activities** – if they find time and if the events or projects meet their personal interests. Fewer respondents say they would be willing to get actively engaged in organising events or projects due to a lack of time.
- A little less than half of the respondents (from all age groups and both genders, however slightly more from Bavaria) have never visited or participated in binational or cross-border events or projects.

4.5.6 Shared interests in the border region: Sports and nature, culture, *Volksfeste* and regional activities

The respondents locate **four areas to be particularly attractive or interesting for planned activities in the region**: Sports and outdoor activities (green); fine arts, music, and concerts (orange), regional

¹⁶ The Sorbs are a small Slavic minority mainly residing in the bordering regions of Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic.

history, tradition, and customs (blue); (folk) festivals and gastronomy (yellow) and a diverse category (others).

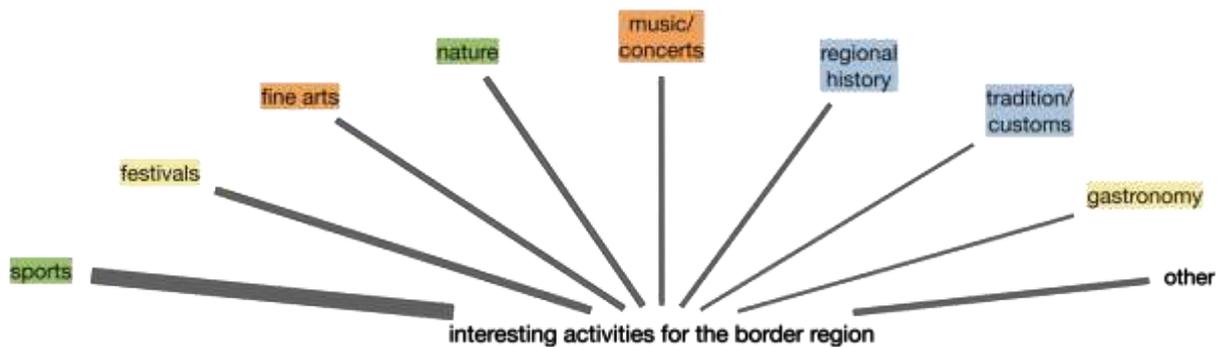


Fig. 6: Interesting activities: The thickness of the lines indicates the frequency in which these activities are mentioned.

Sport and outdoor activities

- **Sports** and outdoor activities are highly popular and rated as attractive for the whole border region. Sports as an important social sector in general are highlighted, and several disciplines are mentioned specifically: by far the most are hiking and cross-border cycling routes as well as mountain bike routes; skiing (according to the respondents, there is less bureaucracy, making the area a better skiing area), canoe and paintball (mentioned by younger participants). Football and handball clubs play a special role: On the one hand, respondents are involved voluntarily and thus have contact persons; on the other hand, German clubs engage professional Czech footballers who play in the local leagues.
- **Nature:** Besides sports activities, the area is also attractive for other nature-related undertakings: Nature conservation projects or general activities concerning flora and fauna are mentioned. A planned recreational area with a lake for camping and a national garden show are two highlighted activities.

Über Sport läuft vieles. Weil es der sozialer Zweig der Gesellschaft ist. (Saxony, age: 70)

Fine arts and music

- **Fine arts:** Culture in general, art exhibitions, film festivals, and theatre (although the language barrier is mentioned as a problem).
- **Music and concerts:** Music festivals or concerts for different age groups; a German-Czech music festival in Goldberg is mentioned as a positive example.

In Goldberg, dort gab es ein deutsch-tschechisches Musikfestival. Das war schön. (Bavaria, age: 47)

Folk festivals and gastronomy

- **Volksfeste:** Particularly within Bavaria, popular festivals with beer, food and partying are held in high regard. Partnering towns could organise them alternately.
- **Gastronomy:** The importance of the cuisine on both sides of the border is mentioned several times as an area that is always highly estimated.

Regional history and tradition

- **Regional history:** Older respondents (45 and over) in Bavaria wish for informative or educational offers like museums thematising the history of the border region and guided cultural tours in the border region and the Czech Republic; those from Saxony focus on regional tourist or cultural activities like a “Bohemian evening”, or tours through the existing castles.
- **Traditions and customs:** Several traditions which could be interesting for the whole region were mentioned, such as woodcarving art, mining traditions, Christmas markets (Saxony), solstice celebrations or the tradition of the *Maibaum* (in Bavaria).

Dass man Führungen macht, die Leute an der Grenze abholt und dann in Tschechien Führungen macht. (Bavaria, age: 51)

Other

- Some local initiatives and best practice examples are mentioned, such as playgrounds or a joint flea market, handicraft projects or a Dinosaur Museum. One respondent from Selb mentions a lot of projects with the partnering town Asch/Aš and stresses the importance of the involvement of the local community.

4.5.7 Information sources and accessibility of information: Municipality, Facebook, and Google

The respondents have **no central information point or address** when they want to get information about activities in the region. **Around a quarter of the respondents do not know at all where to obtain any information.** Very few specific organisations were named, but when asked where they would get information about German-Czech projects, most of the respondents indicate the municipalities or Facebook and Google:

- **Organisations:** An association that funds Czech-German friendship, EUREGIO ERGRENSIS,¹⁷ partnering cities, house of the Czech-German friendship.
- **Municipality;** the *Gemeinde* (in Saxony) or the *Landratsamt*¹⁸ (Bavaria, refers to the administration of a *Gemeinde*), the regional tourist office.
- **Internet:** Facebook and Google.

Darauf wird seit Jahren hingearbeitet. Die Bevölkerung ist ins Boot geholt worden, man kann Vorschläge machen, wie man das Geld einsetzen soll. (Bavaria, age: 29)

Chapter summary

Challenges

- In general, there are **only very few contacts between Germans and Czechs** that go beyond every day contacts: **it is a co-existence with the neighbours.** Work contacts usually do not extend to the private realm. As shown in chapter 2.5, the language barrier is still a major problem for deeper contacts.

¹⁷ The EUREGIO ERGRENSIS consists of working groups focussing on cross-border exchange within the German-Czech border regions.

¹⁸ Also synonymous with *Kreisverwaltung*.

- Most of the respondents are **passively interested contacts**; those who actively state not being interested are mainly younger respondents. Besides a lack of time and interest, negative feelings are mentioned by only one respondent.

Opportunities

- **Knowledge on the Czech Republic varies widely but is a bit higher with the Saxon respondents**, independent of their age, but dependent on their education level with the higher education resulting in a more profound knowledge. These respondents also have slightly more personal contacts, especially the older ones.
- In **Bavaria, there is a higher demand for information about the border region**: cultural tours or museums are mentioned several times.
- **Favourite spare time activities are sports, nature, arts and culture and meeting friends and family**. These are also the fields where common cross-border activities would be welcomed: Especially sports and outdoor activities have a high potential.
- Respondents are mainly **interested in joint activities whenever these meet their personal interests**; next to sports activities, socialising (*Geselligkeit*) is particularly important in Bavaria, where *Volksfeste* are held in high regard. In Saxony, individual tourist activities and gastronomy are rated higher.
- There is little knowledge on binational projects. **A central information site or point is missing**: When information is needed, respondents would ask their municipality or just search on the Internet.

Assessment

The neighbourhood between Germans and Czechs can be described as **a good co-existence**. In everyday life, there are few contacts points but mostly no deeper connections. An eye should be held on the younger inhabitants – there is evidence that some of them develop fears of contacts. **But the majority states to be interested in contacts and joint activities generally, as long as they meet their interests**. Sports and nature have a high potential in the region, in Bavaria more social activities, too. There are many possible connection points to be integrated into every life activity. To make them more accessible, an **information access point** (digital and maybe also printed to be distributed in the municipalities) would be helpful on the one hand. On the other hand, especially **in Bavaria, more historical information about the region is needed**.

4.6 Language

In their everyday life, **respondents rarely come across the Czech language**: They usually encounter the Czech language while shopping in Czech supermarkets or on street signs. Only two respondents say that they hear Czech in personal contacts; especially in professional contexts, the Czech counterparts speak German or a translation is provided. No significant difference between any groups of respondents can be observed.

*Schilder auf
Tschechisch, die
beachte ich nicht
mehr so im
Straßenverkehr.
(Bavaria, age: 70)*

4.6.1 Knowledge of Czech: Restricted to some words

None of the respondents had a level of linguistic competence in Czech that allows for in-depth conversations. When asked whether they speak Czech, roughly a third of the respondents say they have absolutely no knowledge. The majority says they know **a few words or phrases**. At most, some

respondents are able to order food in Czech but these competencies would probably not be enough for the language level A1.¹⁹

The majority of the people who say that they know a few words are Saxon (as well as the person who moved from Saxony to Bavaria after reunification) and middle- to older-aged; some refer to the **compulsory Russian lessons** in the former GDR. One young person, a student living in Bavaria, says he knows some words, as he currently works at a COVID-19 test-centre at the border.

When asked if they know other people speaking Czech, about half of the respondents confirm this. They mention mainly three groups of inhabitants of the border region that speak Czech:

- People who live in binational families or relationships.
- People who needed Czech skills for professional reasons or learned them during their studies.
- People with a Sorbian background in Germany or older family members who had to leave Czechoslovakia after World War II because of the Beneš decrees. Amongst them, a certain reluctance to speak Czech has remained.

Die Oma wird sicherlich ein bisschen Tschechisch können. Sie lehnt es ab, mit uns rüberzufahren, zum Beispiel zum Essen. Es ist ein schlechtes Thema, wenn man es anspricht.
(Bavaria, age: 47)

4.6.2 Interest in learning Czech: Low

Man verlässt sich darauf, dass sich die Tschechen bemühen und Deutsch sprechen.
(Saxony, age: 42)

Around two-thirds of the respondents say they have **no interest in learning Czech**. The main reason is that Czech citizens speak German well. There is just no need, although some mention that it would be good to speak Czech, at least out of respect. But **without economic pressure, the Germans rely on the German skills of their Czech neighbours**. Combined with the perception of Czech being a **complicated language** and the frequently mentioned **lack of time** in everyday life, there is no reason to learn the language, and it is sufficient to know English.

A closer look at the ones who say they would be interested in learning Czech shows: Except for the generation of 60 years and older, the interested ones are respondents of all ages, education, and origin (Saxony/Bavaria). It seems that **those interested in learning the language are generally outgoing** people who like traveling and are open to new cultures; some also mention moving to the Czech Republic would be an option for them. One respondent from Saxony is strongly connected to the region and refers to the historical background of the "Sudetenland" and their shared values. They had many contacts with the Czech Republic during the GDR, relying strongly on their origins and would also appreciate children learning Czech at school.

¹⁹ According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language.

4.6.3 Language is perceived as a barrier for contact: Few opportunities for translation

- Although most respondents do not want to learn Czech, the **lack of language skills is perceived by almost all of them as an obstacle to establishing contacts**. However, if connections - in a personal or professional context - are to be deepened, **language skills are indispensable**. One needs a common ground, and it is unpleasant if one has to rely on the other. Some respondents mention being afraid of such contacts, because they cannot communicate in the way they wish to.
- **People who speak English have fewer problems:** However, in the border region, there are still many people who do not speak English - for them, the situation is challenging, especially for the elderly. Up to a certain point, **translations are helpful in everyday situations**, but interpreters are needed for in-depth contacts. Cases from the church care sector or the agricultural sector are mentioned as examples for useful translations. **Language is more than just communication**, language also means identity and commonality, as one respondent points out.

Wenn es in Tschechien ein Projekt gibt, an dem ich mich beteiligen möchte, dann wäre es wichtig, dass ich Grundkenntnisse in der Sprache habe. Man würde sich sonst unwohl fühlen und sich mit keinem unterhalten können. Es ist wie eine Barriere. (Saxony, age: 31)

Wenn ich Tschechisch sprechen könnte, wäre die Einstellung anders. Man hat was, das verbindet und man ist stolz, dass man die Sprache kann und will sie ab und zu nutzen. Das würde mehr Gemeinsamkeiten bringen. (Bavaria, age: 20)

4.6.4 Schools: Voluntary courses appreciated – but not effective

Mainly due to their own experience with lacking language skills and the difficulty of learning Czech, **the majority advocates that children should learn Czech**.

But most of the respondents think that the courses offered in schools should be voluntary. The negative voices point to this very problem: Those who do not encourage their children to learn Czech do so because they think the children already have too many other tasks or are already overburdened with the compulsory school material. Consequently, the same problems that prevent adults from learning Czech are emerging in schools.

Es braucht Macher. Es braucht Menschen, die dahinterstehen. Wenn man eine Kindergartenleiterin hat, der das am Herzen liegt, dann funktioniert das. (Bavaria, age: 47)

Some suggest it would be necessary for the **state to provide more support**, which some participants describe as inadequate. Others consider **student exchanges and joint projects** to be more beneficial than Czech courses at school. For example, one parent mentions her children's Montessori school promoting these exchanges intensely; another participant speaks of a German-Czech project at the kindergarten and common language holidays their church had organised for children. However, these projects depend very strongly on individual engagement and are abandoned when this person is no longer there.

4.6.5 Intercultural communication: More important than grammar courses

Similar to the demands in the school context and derived from everyday experiences, some participants point out that “pure” language courses are not very useful. **General courses in (intercultural) communication would be much better and more sustainable.** Low-threshold offers and courses in an everyday context would be necessary.

Es müsste Sprachkurse geben, die gratis sind und die nicht auf der Grammatik aufbauen, sondern auf dem Leben. Dass man sich kennenlernt: Wie ticken die anderen? Was verdienen die in Tschechien? Dass man mehr voneinander lernt, ohne gleich anzuecken, indem man was falsch macht. (Bavaria, age: 47)

Es würde reichen, dass einmal die Woche jemand aus Tschechien ins Feuerwehrhaus kommt, dass man sich dort trifft und berichtet, wie die Feuerwehr in Tschechien arbeitet und daraus macht man dann einen kleinen Sprachkurs. (Bavaria, age: 59)

However, these low-threshold courses must be thought out well, as intercultural frictions can arise: EUREGIO ERGRENSIS-projects are mentioned, where a lot of money was “wasted” because the projects did not come “from the hearts” of the people. Thus, simply investing money is not enough.

According to Bourdieu²⁰, language skills are cultural capital: they are incorporated and cannot be transferred from one person to another. The value of a language depends on the "market": social, cultural, and economic power is associated with it.

From the German perspective, knowledge of the Czech language as cultural capital is not associated with economic power, as the Czech labour market is not attractive enough (yet). Moreover, as the respondents do not mention any social group with high prestige in the Czech part of the border region, the Czech language is not a social capital either. It is instead the other way round: The German language has a higher value in the border region; therefore, most Czech inhabitants speak German, especially those with an economic interest (gastronomy, retail).

But as memories and hostilities from World War II are fading and Europe is growing closer, the importance of a common language is rising in the inhabitants' perception. When personal contacts emerge, the Czech language becomes social capital people would want to invest in (e.g., as in relationships).

Chapter summary

Challenges

- **None of the respondents speak Czech well enough to hold a conversation:** Their competencies are restricted to single words or phrases.
- **The majority does not want to learn Czech:** Czech as a language does not have a value high enough for respondents to commit to learning the “complicated” language. The older respondents from Saxony would instead refresh their Russian knowledge; others rely on their English skills.

²⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre, 1982.

- However, **most respondents advocate for voluntary Czech courses at school** – but in places with existing offers, no respondent had taken such a course or encouraged their children to go. The situation for children is the same as for adults: lack of time and the difficulty of the Czech language are deterrents. **Later in life, the pressure to learn Czech is not strong enough**, and – most importantly – the Czech population in the border region speaks German well enough for basic conversations.
- Translations are helpful, but real **in-depth conversations would require interpreters** who are hard to find.

Opportunities

- Skills in the neighbour's language are perceived as **crucial for in-depth contacts** nevertheless, and as a means of respect towards the Czech – the lack of Czech knowledge is perceived as a hurdle in the border region.
- **More knowledge on intercultural communication is desired** and assessed as more sustainable than courses purely focused on grammar.
- Positively mentioned are also school exchanges.

Assessment

At the moment, **Czech is not valued enough by the German inhabitants** of the border region for them to invest time and effort into learning the language. **But the hurdle of the language barriers is mentioned in all parts of the interviews** – also by those who speak English. English is sufficient to get along in short interactions, but not enough to establish personal, in-depth contacts. The **German respondents are interested in more intercultural, low-threshold courses**. Since a lot of Czechs speak German, intercultural events within everyday activities have potential to increase more personal contacts, which in turn may increase the willingness to learn Czech.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE CZECH BORDER REGIONS

5.1 Main findings

- People in border regions **do not see their lives as different from the rest of the country**. The only exception is the Ústecký region. In this region the relationship of inhabitants with the place is weaker. They also deal with various internal problems (e.g., difficult cohabitation with minorities, safety in bigger cities, smaller cultural opportunities, etc.).
- The **proximity of the border is mostly perceived as an opportunity** for work or shopping. To a smaller extent also for other free-time activities (e.g., sports, tourism).
- **Coronavirus disrupted daily routines**; however, most Czechs believe that life will get back on track quickly. Although they mention that people on both sides of the border became warier, the prevailing view is that the pandemic will not negatively affect relations in the long run.
- The pandemic also showed a partial **economic dependence** (e.g., labor, tourism) of the border regions on Germany. It also pointed out that there were some positive changes resulting from lowered tourism rates (people from tourist venues appreciated that the pandemic brought peace, the opportunity to meet locals, etc.).
- Czechs, specifically women, believe that **relations between people in Germany are better**, as people are more considerate and have more solidarity.
- **Many Czechs can imagine living in Germany**. They especially appreciate cleanliness, tidiness, a better social system, preferences for quality over quantity, and better relations between people.
- On the other hand, the positive image is disrupted by **prejudices** which, although not very strong, describe Germans as more arrogant and superior.
- This negative image is nourished by what is perceived by many Czechs as a **smaller will of Germans to communicate at least in basic Czech**.
- **The complicated history is not very influential**, however, some symbols (e.g., Beneš decrees) still play a role especially among the older generation. Nevertheless, Czech respondents prefer to focus more on current issues.
- **The division into East and West Germans** still partially exists in minds of Czechs (especially those at the northern border).
- Many **Czechs in the border region have personal contacts with Germans** either through work or family (e.g., thanks to mixed marriages).
- Although shopping is the main reason why Czechs visit Germany, they like to connect their travels with other activities such as **visiting sports or recreational centers, towns or historical sights**.
- Czechs from the border region often do not feel that they need to (or can) intensify contacts with their German neighbors. However, if the joint activity is **something they like to do or are interested in, they would consider attending**.

- Information about events in the border region are accessible (mostly via the internet) but people need to actively search for them. **No central website or main source of information regarding activities in the border region was mentioned.**
- **Language is a practical but also a symbolic barrier for more intensive contacts.** Most Czechs in the border region declare knowledge of at least some German but it is not enough for an in-depth conversation. Some mention that using German puts them in an inferior position.
- Those **who do not speak German (or any other language) more often avoid travels to Germany.**
- **German language is considered to be especially important in the border region,** but knowledge of English is seen as more crucial.
- Most parents recommend their **children to take German language classes.**

5.2 LIFE IN THE BORDER REGION

5.2.1 Living in the border region: advantages and challenges

The majority of the respondents have spent their entire lives in the border region. If they moved then it was only within the borders of the region where they were born.²¹

The reasons why Czechs stay in the border regions are usually family, friends, work or property (for instance, they have a mortgage). Some also mention the surrounding nature as a reason why they like where they live. This is true even for the Ústecký region which is more industrial than regions in the South.

Respondents from bigger cities, especially in the Ústecký region, more often indicated that they would like to change the place where they live. However, usually, they intended to move from the city to the countryside while staying in the region.

“Kdyby byla možnost, klidně bych se přestěhoval. Není to tak, že bych měl tohle místo zakořeněný. Důvodem pro odchod by bylo zaměstnání, klidnější místo, za lepším bydlením a prací. V kraji bych klidně zůstal, ale na nějakou vesnici bych se odstěhoval.” Ústecký region, age: 18-29)

“Jak jsem se zmínil o nějaký tý vesnici a lesu, tak tam kdyby se naskytla nějaká příležitost, to bych odešel.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

Respondents in the Ústí region also often did not feel any specific regional identity or deeper ties to the area.

²¹ Only two respondents were born further from the Czech-German borders. The first one moved from Prague, the capital city, a long time ago. The second moved from Valašské Meziříčí, a town in Moravia, thus quite far from borders with Germany. The reasons for moving to the border region were family and/or work. Both respondents were happy with their choice and would not move back to their previous home towns.

“Nemám vůbec představu na co by tenhle kraj mohl být pyšný. Po dlouhý době jsme navštívil Moravu a vinný sklípky, a tam mám pocit, že lidi můžou být na něco pyšný...” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

Respondents from the Ústecký region described the region as mostly industrial. On one hand, this is considered as an advantage, as thanks to the industry it is not difficult to find work. On the other hand, it creates an image of an unattractive, “dirty” region.

Compared to other regions, respondents in the Ústecký region more often mentioned various problems that make their life harder. Especially in bigger towns these issues concerned ethnic minorities (mostly with Roma communities but also with Arab minorities in Teplice, a town close to Ústí nad Labem). Ethnic minorities were often associated with feelings of less security and higher drug use.

“Co se centra (Ústí nad Labem) týče, tak se to zhoršuje. Je tu víc nepřizpůsobivých občanů, drogově závislí. Ve večerních hodinách by mělo být centru víc hlídáno.”(Ústecký region, age: 45-59)

“Co se týká celkově města, tak možná Most není tak jako oslavované a bezpečné... mám tady zahradu a cítím se dobře, ale co se týká plošně, tak to se jako dobře, bezpečně necítím, kor ve večerních hodinách.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

Respondents from smaller towns in the Ústecký as well as in the Liberecký region indicated that life along the border was also complicated due to insufficient civic amenities. For instance, after-school activities such as sports, music lessons, etc. were very limited. This situation persisted for quite a long time even after 1989 and started to improve only about 15 years ago.

“Předtím jsem si jako mladá říkala, že odsud uteču a nebudu tady, tady se nic neděje. Ted’ se to hodně srovnává.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

Although some respondents from the Ústecký region mentioned issues concerning air pollution, at the same time they referred to the nature which is surrounding the industrial cities as the primary source of their pride. They also stated that pollution has gotten much better since the fall of communism.

“Na obnovu okolní přírody. Začínají se zasypávat jámy po povrchových dolech. Vznikají tam jezera.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

In the Karlovy Vary region, respondents mentioned the issue of higher unemployment and smaller availability of services. In case of unemployment, the proximity of Germany was mentioned as a solution to the issue, as many Czechs find work on the other side of the border.

“V Karlovarském kraji je málo práce. Znáám plno lidí, kteří cestují do Německa právě z tohoto důvodu.” (Karlovarský region, age: 18-19)

In other regions (Plzeňský, Jihočeský či Liberecký) respondents did not state any specific issues that would make their lives more difficult or easier. They more often felt that each region has its *pros and cons* and that there is no big difference between their region and the rest of the country.

“Já bych se nikdy nikam neodstěhovala. Já jsem tu maximálně spokojená. Mě nechybí nic.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

“Situace v Česku je hodně vyrovnaná. Nedá se moc říct, v čem je region lepší nebo horší.”
(Plzeňský region, age: 18-29)

5.2.2 Proximity of the border: the benefits outweigh the disadvantages

Respondents often considered the proximity of the border with Germany to be an advantage. One reason in particular is the opportunity for shopping; respondents especially appreciated the higher quality of food and other products (e.g., washing powder), which are sometimes cheaper than in the Czech supermarkets.

Another reason respondents consider living close to the border useful is that many Czechs find work in Germany. Thus, they benefit from higher wages even though they often work in less qualified positions.

„Tak podle mě je to výhoda určitě, co se týče práce, protože v Karlovarském kraji je té práce méně. A plno lidí cestuje do zahraničí, na německou stranu.” (Karlovarský region, age: 18-19)

Some respondents also appreciate the fact that Germans come as tourists, which is beneficial for local restaurants, shops and service providers (for instance hairdressers).

Although most respondents perceive the proximity of the border as an advantage, we were able to identify several factors which are seen as problematic.

The first one is that the proximity of the border increases local prices. This was mentioned in the case of Domažlice, a town close to the border with Bavaria. The increase was connected to Czech commuters who rent apartments in Domažlice. Since these residents have “German wages” they can pay higher rent, which also increases rental prices for the rest of the local inhabitants.

“V Domažlicích je draho, hlavně byty. Pendleři z Prahy nebo Plzně si pronajmou byt, a protože mají německé platy, tak lidé ví, že si můžou dovolit zaplatit víc. Tudiž ceny šly nahoru.” (Plzeňský region, 60+)

Some respondents complained also about higher prices in Czech restaurants at the border because of German guests.

Another factor that was perceived negatively is connected to the labor market. Typically, doctors and nurses are attracted by higher wages in Germany. According to respondents, this is one of the reasons there is a lack of these professionals in Czech hospitals.

From the perspective of some respondents, the open border also changed relationships in the community. When the border opened, people left local businesses and went to work in Germany. While before people were perceived more as equal, now their relationships are more influenced by money.

“Když byli lidi v zemědělství, tak bylo víc pokory. Teď se všichni předhání, už nedrží tak pospolu. Trochu se to zkazilo. Spíš se předhání, aby se měli líp a měli víc. Předtím si byli tak nějak víc rovni.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

However, these changes cannot be attributed exclusively to the openness of the border but rather to the overall transformation of society.

The border was perceived explicitly as a threat in only one case. In this case, the fear was connected to

migration and to the fact that the border is not controlled and people can cross freely.

“Takže ty otevřený hranice, to mi trochu drásá nervy. Jsme první na ráně.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

5.2.3 Coronavirus: disruption in everyday life but hopefully without long-term consequences

The coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on life in the border regions. Partial closure of the border mostly affected travel. Above all, people lacked the opportunity to shop in Germany. Some also missed traveling to Germany for activities they were used to before the pandemic, including sports activities, sightseeing trips and hikes. Even when the border was open, some respondents were discouraged by the administration and/or the need for testing associated with travel.

“Hodně se mi to [cestování] zkomplikovalo a je mi to nepříjemné. Plánovali jsme, že bychom jeli o víkendu do Budyšína do ZOO a městem se projít a možná, že přes tyhle překážky to ani nabudeme absolovovat”. (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

Respondents also often perceived the difficulties that the closed border posed for commuters, although the absolute majority of them (with one exception) were not personally affected as they did not work in Germany during the pandemic. They mentioned that commuters could not get to Germany or that they could not cross the border daily and instead had to pay for accommodation in Germany.

“Tak ten, kdo tam pracuje, tak to pro něj určitě bylo ztížený, že si musel vyřizovat ty výjimky, nebo tam museli, když jim ty výjimky nevyřídili, nějakou dobu zůstat spát, to pro ně asi nebylo úplně dobrý.” (Plzeňský region, 30-44)

Respondents also noticed a significant decrease in tourism. Most of them considered it problematic, especially for local entrepreneurs who are, according to respondents, largely dependent on German visitors.

“Určitě v tom pohraničí to mělo vliv na obchodníky, tam byli i živí z těch turistů z Německa, tak to teď nebylo.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

“Celé ty Jižní Čechy jsou závislé na německých turistech, ale jak byly hranice zavřeny, tak se nejezdilo.” (Jihočeský region, age: 45-59)

Nonetheless, some respondents (specifically from those places with high tourism rates) appreciated that the place where they live was calmer.

“Zlepšil se ten klasický život, zrovna v Rozvadově to bylo příjemný, když tam člověk chodil a potkával ty místní, a nejen ty cizince. A celkově ten provoz byl klidnější, žádné davy nepřijížděly.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

“No jéje, my jsme tu měli svatej klid...Tady to byla oáza klidu. Ted' nepřejdete silnici, kor když je svátek, to je strašný.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

Respondents in the border region also remarked that the pandemic negatively influenced the relationships between Czech and Germans. In their view, Germans, as well as Czech, became more

vigilant and more suspicious. Germans suspected the Czechs of spreading the disease and vice versa. However, some also pointed out that Germans were more disciplined in wearing masks than Czechs.

“Když jsme tam ještě mohli, tak se od nás odtahovali. Bylo to víc než Češi s Čechama. Na české straně to bylo podobné. Lidi si dávali pozor na Němce.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

The closed border also had an emotional effect. It provoked memories from the communist past or from the times when it was more difficult to cross the border. Some respondents also mentioned that they felt uncomfortable and depressed when they saw that the border was controlled again by soldiers.

“...když jsme jeli do Hrádku, tak ta policie, tím, že je tam polská a za ní německá hranice, tak to všechno bylo hlídáný. Chodili tam psovodi, vojáci z Liberce z jednotky. To město působilo stísněně. To mi bylo nepříjemný.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

“...ale samozřejmě mi to vadilo všeobecně, celkově jako člověku. Ta stísněnost a celkově pocit, že někam nemůžete.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

Respondents also often stated that it was only during the pandemic that they realized the extent to which they considered the open border to be automatic and something they previously undervalued.

Although some respondents were more skeptical and expected that the pandemic would have a long-term—if not permanent—effect on life at the border (for example that people will remain more vigilant and distant), most of them expected that everything would get back on track soon as the pandemic faded.

“Vrátí se to do starých kolejí, ale bude to trvat delší dobu. Nejvíc tomu pomůže čas. Myslím, že na Vánoce už to bude dobrý.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

Chapter summary

Challenges

- The relationship with the neighboring country is rather pragmatic. The proximity of Germany is perceived primarily as an opportunity for well-paid work and bargain shopping. The interest in the lives of the people who live there is weaker.
- Respondents in the Ústecký region are less rooted than in other border regions. On one hand, they feel that their region is not appreciated enough even though they have lots of things to offer (for instance beautiful nature despite the industrial character of the place). Unlike inhabitants in other border regions with Germany, they are also more consumed by the regional problems (relationships with the Roma community, safety issues, etc.). These issues are, however, mostly of an internal nature and are not connected to the proximity of the border.
- Although the proximity of the border is mainly considered as an advantage, certain negative images exist (such as brain drain, higher prices due to proximity to Germany, etc.).

Opportunities

- Our respondents mostly enjoy living close to the Czech-German border. Most of them take it as an advantage. If the current interest in the neighboring region could be extended also to the lives of its inhabitants, it could not only further strengthen relations but also shift relations from a pragmatic to a more personal level.
- The closed border due to the coronavirus pandemic underlined the interconnectedness (mainly economic) between the German and Czech regions. It showed the advantages of an open border but also some disadvantages (money from tourism vs. life of the local community) and economic dependency (e.g., work, tourism).

Assessment

Although our respondents also notice also some negative factors connected to the proximity of the border (brain drain, higher prices, economic dependency, possible infiltration of dangerous individuals across the border), advantages of living in the border region in proximity to Germany prevail. They consider the open border as something natural which gives them an advantage mainly through additional work opportunities and/or access to better products (mainly food) for a reasonable price. They also like to travel to Germany for sports and recreational activities.

5.3 IDENTITY AND BELONGING

5.3.1 Feeling at home: family, work and nature

Respondents most often referred to the place where they live and the immediate surroundings as the place where they feel at home.

Concerning their home, people most appreciate nature, more specifically the mountains²². The reasons why people stay in the place where they live are family (parents are often specifically mentioned), friends, the fact that they were born there, and ownership of a house or other property. They also often signaled that they would be afraid to move elsewhere mostly because they cannot be sure to find work.

“Mají třeba dvougenerační dům, nechtějí tu nechat tu starší generaci samotnou. Nebo prakticky řeknou, dům je to jediné, co mám a nechtějí se ho zbavit. Bojí se novinek, jak by fungovali jinde.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

Some respondents also mentioned that they like the size of their town, which offers them all they need—enough opportunities for work and leisure time and at the same time it is calm, safe and less expensive (they often used Prague, the capital, for reference).

People most often cited a combination of historical and natural monuments as a source of pride. Inhabitants from smaller villages mentioned that they perceived a certain tension between keeping the place as it is and creating better opportunities for tourism that would help the local economy but which would disturb the existing peaceful character of the place and surrounding nature.

²² All Czech border regions with Germany are close to mountains where people often ski and hike.

“Ve vztahu k těm horám taková snaha a udržení kontinuity té přírody, není to protkaný turistickým atrakcemi. Zás je to možná na úkor, že ne každý tam chce přijet, spousta lidí chce tu pohodu a zábavu.” (Liberecký region, age: 45-59)

5.3.2 Cross-border identity: very weak ties that only recently started to appear

As indicated in the previous chapter, in the Ústecký region the feeling of regional identity seems to be weaker than in other regions (young people are leaving, not many families who would have lived there for generations). Even those who say that some identity exists usually cannot connect it with concrete examples. Usually, they do not include German parts of the region in their idea of cross-border identity.

“[Myslíte si, že ve Vašem regionu existuje specifická “přeshraniční” identita?] Nemyslím si. Vůbec nic, bohužel.”(Ústecký region, age: 60+)

“Na jihu Čech jsou kořeny silnější. Jsou tam starousedlíci. Postavili si tam domy, byty. Drží si tam mladé. Tady se nic neděje.” (Ústecký region, age: 45-59)

Respondents from other regions (Liberecký and especially from Karlovarský and Plzeňský) agreed more often that a cross-border identity that includes also parts of Germany exists. However, at the same time, they added that the appearance of a joint cross-border identity is rather slow and quite recent.

“Lidé cítí sepjetí s pohraničím, ale dříve to tak nebylo.” (Karlovarský region, age: 18-29)

“Přeshraniční identita je cítit hlavně v Chebu nebo Domažlicích, které jsou blízko hranic.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

Chapter summary

Challenges

- Cross-border identity has only recently started to appear and only in some regions.

Opportunities

- People are proud of natural and historical monuments in their region. This can be a motivation to introduce them to visitors from other countries, especially from Germany.

Assessment

Not surprisingly, people are tied to the place where they live primarily through their family and personal ties. Sources of their regional pride are usually linked to nature and history (mostly historical sights). Although the cross-border identity was interrupted by the Second World War (WWII) and later the West/East division, people in most border regions say that the cross-border identity has recently started to appear.

5.4 PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES

5.4.1 Perception of Germans and Germany: not only higher standard of living but also more caring state and better relations between people

The Czechs often associated their German neighbors with properties such as high self-confidence, punctuality, better organization, respect for rules and orders, and honest approaches to work. The image of Germany is entirely connected with the idea of cleanliness. As for people, our respondents consider Germans to be friendly and even more helpful and considerate (i.e., in shops they hold the doors, help with the stroller, etc.).

“Oni jsou takový nápomocní. Když jsem měla malé děti, nákup, kočárek, tak vždycky někdo přišel a podržel to. Takže co se týká Gorlitz, Žitava, co je tu nejbliž, tak ti lidi jsou otevření, příjemní, všímavější k sobě.” (Liberecký region, 30-44)

There is also an image of Germans as those who prefer quality and are more demanding in comparison to Czechs, who prioritize the quantity and profit. According to respondents who worked in Germany, this also translates into their attitudes towards employees as well as customers.

“Nekoukají tolik na to, jestli prodejna vydělává a uživí zaměstnance, ale spíše na to, aby byl zákazník spokojený a dlouho nečekal.” (Ústecký region, 45-59)

Respondents who have work experience from Germany also pointed out that German companies offer more part-time jobs, which are especially advantageous for women. They also mentioned that the German government is more supportive of families with kids than the Czech state (e.g., they receive higher child benefits) and that there is a lower wage-gap between men and women.

“Je tam jiný pracovní trend. Je tam hodně pracovních příležitostí na zkrácený pracovní úvazek, právě pro ženy, což je úžasný.” (Plzeňský region, age: 60+)

“Jsou tam lepší finanční podmínky a stát víc stojí za svými obyvateli... Stát více podporuje rodiny s dětmi. Tady s jedním platem je to obtížnější. U nás jsou ženy platově diskriminované. Tady při čtyřčlenné rodině moc vyjít nedá.” (Ústecký region, age 45-59)

Quite a few respondents considered Germans to have more solidarity. Interestingly, this opinion was linked with the way Germans treat migrants and foreigners in general. Although Czechs in general oppose migration and the fact that Germany accepted so many migrants is not always seen positively in the Czech Republic, it seems that to a certain extent Czechs respect the way how Germans coped with this issue.

“Přijde mi, že vůči migrantům, cizincům jsou solidárnější, podporují to, ale v mém okolí se to nepřijímá dobře.” (Ústecký region, 30-44)

Those respondents with personal or work relationships in Germany often stated that relations between people in Germany are better. They explained this by pointing out that the Germans are wealthier.

“Ten vztah člověka k člověku bych možná řekla je lepší. Je to opravdu velkej rozdíl, co se týká všeho.” (Ústecký region, age: 66)

Respondents also often stated that they could imagine living in Germany. This was more common among younger respondents. But also, quite a few older respondents would have considered it if they were younger. The main barrier is language and children who would need to change schools. In the case of those who did not want to live in Germany, the main reason was language. They were afraid that they would not be able to learn German. On the other hand, of the motivations for living in Germany, economic factors were most often mentioned. However, issues related to the better social system, feeling that there is less pressure for profits, and more on quality or better relations between people were also discussed by our respondents.

“[proč byste se do Německa přestěhovala? Co by vás tam táhlo?] Táhla by mě tam kultura lidí. Lepší vztahy. Lip se k sobě chovaj. Pořád jsou vstřícný. Mají migranty, my usilujeme o to, aby tady nebyli. Nesetkala jsem se, že by tam někdo dělal problémy. To, že jsou tam vztahy lepší je v lidech. Češi jsou závistivý, neumíme se spojit jako oni. Mají jiný peníze. Možná proto jsou méně závistiví... Jsou ve všem dopředu. Jsou ekonomicky napřed. Možná i to napomáhá lepším vztahům.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

5.4.2 Prejudices exist, but with more personal experience they fade away

When we asked about what prejudices people have about Germans, most of our respondents responded that they do not have any, that *“good and bad people can be found everywhere,”* and one cannot generalize. Yet, across the interview we were able to identify different kinds of negative images that Czechs have about their German neighbors.

The prejudices are linked mainly to economic advancement (*“they are more well-off,” “they can enjoy life”*) as well as to the perception of Germany as a big, powerful country (*“they act as they are superior, as they own the place”*).

According to respondents, the feeling of superiority results in behavior that could be viewed as arrogant. However, a few respondents mentioned that they feel that the situation has changed and that this kind of behavior was more common soon after the fall of communism in 1989. Some also thought that Germans behave differently at home and when they are abroad.

“Přijde mi, že u sebe jsou disciplinovaní, ale když přijdou k nám, tak jsou dost neukáznění. Já leta dělala po převratu v gastronomii, němečtí hosté byli nejhorší. Byla tam arogance, nechali děti všechno dělat, všude kečup, hranolky, to bylo na úklidovou četu.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

Respondents also occasionally mentioned that they felt they were treated differently than local customers when visiting restaurants in Germany.

Concerning work, there is an impression among Czechs that they are viewed as cheap labor. Some of those who worked in Germany mentioned that better, more qualified positions are kept for Germans

(although they admitted that this is usually due to insufficient knowledge of German) and that foreign workers do not always have the same advantages as local workers (i.e., there are differences in shifts, breaks, and sometimes even in wages).

“Němci od nás chtějí jen to, co jim hraje do karet. Abychom tam jezdili makat. Využívají jen to, co potřebují.” (Ústecký region, age: 18-29)

At the same time, according to their experiences, Czech hardly ever protest because, in the end, they are happy to earn a better salary. The image of self-confident and superior Germans (which is not exclusive only to Germans but basically to all “powerful” nations) is thus often accompanied by an image of intimidated and submissive Czechs (see also Chapter 5.6: Language).

Nonetheless, it is important to say that with more personal relationships with Germans these negative images fade away. Better communication and more personal experience are therefore suggested as the main tools for overcoming prejudices.

“Ten, kdo tam cestuje pravidelně, tak ty Němce vidí z jiného úhlu, a ty předsudky padají. Ten, kdo se s nima nevidá, tak ty předsudky může mít.” (Plzeňský region, age: 18-29)

Quite a few respondents also mentioned their positive experience with student exchanges (see also Chapter 5.5: Encounters and joint activities). According to their experiences, these events help teach Czech children German, emphasize the usefulness of German language, and help increase interest in people in the neighboring country.

“Možná, že by se víc přiblížili, i ve volnočasových aktivitách, tyhle ty zájmové kroužky, že by se děti učily německy, měli by zájem poznat tu zemi. A nejen, že tam půjdu dělat.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

“Jako děti jsme měli rádi výměnné pobyty. Bylo to pro nás něco nového. Každý chtěl mluvit jako ti Němci, plynně... Někteří si tam styky udělali, ale spíš as na VOŠ, spíš z té pozdější doby.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

5.4.3 Role of the past: history should not be the main issue of the current relations

In our research we asked respondents, in their opinion, how much are the relations between the Czechs and Germans affected by the events of WWII (including the expulsion of German inhabitants) and by the communist era.

Respondents often responded that WWII does not influence the current relations with exception of the old generation (which can still remember the events).

“Ti lidi, co zažili válku, ti jim nikdy nepřijdou na chuť, protože ti si teda opravdu něco zažili, jak to bylo, protože to samozřejmě nebylo nic hezkého, samozřejmě. Takže ti staří lidé o nich mluví pořád ošklivě.” (Plzeňský region, age: 60+)

“To v nich ještě je, v těch starších lidech prostě. V té mladší generaci už ne. Ale u těch starých jo, že nám ublížili.” (Liberecký region, age: 45-59)

Most often people agree that, although history should not be forgotten, it should not be the main focus of the current relations.

“Určitě ne tlustá čára za minulostí. Taková ta vstřícnost v těch lidech, nepřilévat do ohně, máte politiky, kteří jsou rozumní a pak máte takové, kteří přilévají do ohně, a to je špatně. Stalo se, stalo, každý uznáme svou vinu, stalo se to, minulost nejde smazat. Ale nedělat z toho vědu, nějakou politiku.” (Jihočeský region, 45-59)

A portion of the respondents showed concerns about political parties in the Czech Republic and in Germany that use nationalistic arguments.

“Ale pak když člověk slyší ve zprávách o těch jejich extremistických stranách, tak to je smutný... Z Čechů tomu spousta lidí nevěří, a jen se k tomu davu přidá.” (Jihočeský region, 18-29)

The only topic from the past that remains alive (more in the regions along the border with Bavaria) is the possible cancellation of Beneš decrees²³.

However, we noticed two stories of people who lived in houses formerly belonging to Germans. In one case the visit by the German owners after 1989 led to a long-term friendship between the Czech and German families.

Although the expulsion of German inhabitants after the war was seen by a considerable number of respondents as an injustice, it is considered a past event that should not be reopened. Several respondents stated that the consequences of the expulsion are still noticeable. They are manifested mainly in the interrupted continuity of community life (as the new inhabitants have not always taken root) and some remaining sparsely populated areas.

“Po odsunu vzniklo obrovské prázdno. To máte doted'ka, ty osady, to jsou vesničky, to je pár lidí. To je skoro neobyvatelná oblast.” (Jihočeský region, age: 45-59)

“Všechno je to o tom, že sem přišli lidi, kteří neměli práci, který sem byli doporučený, přivezený, jsou to náplavy tady ty lidi. Nemají k tomu místu žádný vztah historicky. A teď se tady sjelo spousta lidí, který... no... který jsou různý názorově, myšlenkově, a nechce mi říkat... barevně. A tady se to nepotkává, a to bude dlouho. Teď je to úplně čerstvé, první druhá generace.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

The communist past had a greater impact on relations at the southern border with Bavaria which belonged, unlike the Saxony, to the former West. The memories of older inhabitants are connected mostly with the heavily guarded border and few people being allowed to live close to the border.

“Tady, jak to bylo pohraničí, tady jste nikam nemohla, tady bylo pásmo, všude na vás čekali, už 50 km od hranic byly kontroly.” (Jihočeský region, age: 45-59)

²³ Beneš decrees are decrees with the force of constitutional or regular laws. They were issued by President Edvard Beneš during WWII. After the war, they were additionally approved by the National Assembly. Based on these decrees, ethnic Germans (and Hungarians) who lived in Czechoslovakia before WWII were deprived of Czechoslovak citizenship and their estates were confiscated. Validity of the Beneš decrees at the time of their issuance was confirmed by the Czech Constitutional Court, although they are considered not legally binding (for more see the Constitutional Court ruling from March 8th 1995, available here: <http://nalus.usoud.cz/Search/GetText.aspx?sz=PI-14-94>)

“Tady se nesmělo nikam. Já pracovala ve škole, nedalo se nikam jít, všude byly dráty, to byla možnost je na jednu strany. Všude byly věže strážný, vojáci. Ale když tu byli vojáci, tak měli areál upravený, krásný. Teď jsou tam ruiny.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

In the southern regions respondents recognized the change after 1989 more intensively. They also mentioned the help of the Germans after 1989, which sharply contrasts with the pre-1989 description of Germans as the main enemies. Respondents from the southern regions described their surprise when they visited Bavaria for the first time after the fall of the Iron Curtain; everything was so clean and in good repair. Their view of Germans has changed dramatically since then.

“Dřív jsem se o Němcích ve škole učili jen ošklivé věci. Neřekli nám nic kladného. A potom jsem zjistila, že jsou to normální lidi. Když jsem poprvé, ještě za komunismu, přijela do Německa, nestačila jsem se divit. Všechno bylo čisté a uklizené, s pohraničím se to vůbec nedalo srovnat.” (Plzeňský region, age: 60+)

“Během komunismu to bylo hodně zvláštní, že Němci jsou 12km, ale hranice jsou zavřené a nedostaneme se tam... Teď už to všichni berou jako samozřejmost. Myslím, že bychom si toho měli vážit a nezapomínat na to, co bylo.” (Plzeňský region, age: 60+)

In the regions bordering with Saxony, formerly East Germany, respondents were still inclined to make the distinction between East and West Germans. In their view, East Germans were lucky because the Western part of Germany financed the transformation. Thanks to that the eastern German regions developed more quickly than the Czech regions.

“V západním Německu tam už to splývá, ty statky jsou modernější, nejsou to ty jednodušší stroje, tak ekonomika tam je.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

“Vždy jsem rozdělával Německo na východ a západ. Bavoři mi přišli lepší, Sasové horší. A mám to tak dodnes. Myslím, že to má podobně většina lidí, hlavně těch starších.” (Liberecký region, age: 45-59)

„Východní Němci mi přijdou po pádu komunismu kultivovanější. Nechali se ovlivnit těma lidma ze západního Německa k lepšímu.“ (Ústecký region, age: 45-59)

Chapter summary

Challenges:

- Although at first glance it may seem that prejudices against German neighbors have almost disappeared, they do still exist. The most common prejudice is that Germans are more arrogant, which stems from their better economic situation and also from the fact that they come from a much larger and more influential country. For some people, this may give the impression that the two groups cannot be equal and therefore no real partnership can emerge.
- History plays a smaller role in mutual relations but some relics of the past persist in the minds of the older generations. In the regions along the border with Bavaria part of the population is still afraid of the cancellation of the Beneš decrees. In the northern regions, distinct images of former East and West Germans remain.

Opportunities:

- Most people do not want to focus on the past. This does not mean that it should be forgotten, but rather respondents would like to concentrate on current issues and future cooperation.
- Part of the population does not fully identify with the perception of Germany only as a source of employment or cheap purchases. These people could be interested in participating in activities that would try to change this notion.

Assessment:

Prejudices and stereotypes are not very strong, but they do exist. Negative images are usually associated with the idea of a German who is a little bit arrogant and behaves differently abroad than at home. On the other hand, many Czechs believe that relations between people in Germany are better, people are more considerate and have more solidarity. The more personal connections Czechs have with Germans, the weaker the prejudices about them. History still plays a role but, except for the oldest generation, it does not harm current relations. People would like to focus mostly on current issues and are open to future cooperation.

5.5 ENCOUNTERS AND JOINT ACTIVITIES

5.5.1 When Czechs meet German neighbors: random as well as more personal contacts

The vast majority of residents of border regions met their German neighbors quite often, usually at least twice a month. They usually met in shops, at restaurants, at sports and recreational facilities, or tourist sights.

However, a significant portion of the population (almost half the respondents in our research) also had closer contacts either through family or work. The type of work was often a decisive factor in whether work contacts over time led to personal, more friendly ties. That is, respondents working in Germany in manual labor professions often stated that they did not meet many Germans, as their colleagues were Czechs or other foreigners (for instance from Bulgaria, Slovakia, etc.).

„Známí, co mám kolem sebe a jezdí pracovat do Německa ti také neumí [německy]. Jsou tam mezi Slovákama, Čechama, Bulharama. Němec je tam jedinej, kterej nás chodí buzerovat.“
(Ústecký region, age: 18-29)

Those working in services (shops, hotels, etc.) more often said they had German friends from work.

It is not unusual that a Czech family has a relative who married a German citizen. Few respondents also mentioned that they have Czech friends who emigrated to Germany before 1989.

“Spousta Čechů tam emigrovala a ti lidé tam zůstali, takže tam mám kamarády, spolužáky a známé.” (Plzeňský region, age: 60+)

Unsurprisingly, in terms of neighborly/community relations (i.e., organization of joint festivities or visits), respondents from smaller towns and villages²⁴ had closer relationships with the German community than respondents from the bigger cities.

Some respondents mentioned that they try to connect shopping in Germany with the visit of a sports facility or walk around the town or a historical sight²⁵. Aquaparks and other recreational centers are especially popular among the people at the border region.

“Člověk to bere i jako výlet. Někdy to spojíme s německým akvaparkem.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

“Jezdili jsme se tam koupat, už roky předtím [před Covidem] k těm Lužickým jezerům, co tady jsou. Do Gerlitz, do Bautznu, do Žitavy do ZOO, do různých dětských zábavních parků a tak, výlety jsou tam fajn. Možná raději než do Čech, tak šáhneme spíš tam.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

Visits to traditional festivities are also very popular among Czechs in the border region. People from the northern border like especially the Christmas markets in Dresden. Along the southern border, people like to visit beer festivals.

“Vánoce si tam nenechám ujít... Mají krásné vánoční trhy, to se nedá u nás srovnat.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

A special category of contacts represents school exchanges or joint sports tournaments. As we already mentioned in the previous chapter, this type of activity is usually perceived as an excellent opportunity to increase interest in the German border region. However, respondents stated that the exchanges were often just a one-time activity without clear follow-up; this did not foster stronger contacts.

“Dříve jsme mívali i partnerství s tou školou z Waidhausu, Vohenstrausu. To jsme se navštěvovali. My jezdili s dětmi tam a oni zase sem... My se o ty výměny snažíme pořád, navázat na to, nějak se nám to nedaří. Z naší strany zájem je, já ani nevím, jestli paní ředitelka někoho oslovila. Ted' byl ten lockdown, tak to nešlo.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

“Oni nás pak zvali na turnaje, my je... Myslím, že si ty lidi, ať už je to napříč kulturou nebo sportem, si hledají cestu mezi sebou.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

One respondent recommended that similar exchanges could work also on the level of companies (she has experience with a similar program in Italy), as there are factories from the same company on both sides of the border. According to her, it would be good if Czech, as well as German employees, see how it is to work in the other country. It could help transfer good practice (for instance part-time positions) to the Czech Republic.

5.5.2 More encounters: natural joint interest is key

The general feeling is that Czechs and Germans meet quite often, although in smaller towns the contacts are more frequent than in the bigger cities (such as Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, Liberec

²⁴ Places mentioned in our interviews: Hrádek nad Nisou, Uhliště, Rozvadov.

²⁵ Cities in Germany mentioned in our interviews: Weiden, Furth im Wald, Zhořelec, Budyšín, Žitava, Drážďany, Pirna)

etc.). Respondents often do not have strong motivations to intensify the contacts further. Lack of time is often the main obstacle preventing stronger mutual contacts. Some respondents also mentioned that their level of German is not sufficient to have more in-depth conversations.

“Tak jako určitě nedovoluje to ani čas, jo, na druhou stranu, ta němčina není taková, abych jim úplně všechno rozuměl.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

[proč není víc přátelství?] *“Určitě jazyková bariéra, myslím, no a ten čas. Každý žije na tom svém. To vidím i tady v Rozvadově. Dříve se lidé setkávali, žili spolu, a dneska... To se ani nedá mluvit. Každý běží do práce, z práce domů. Dříve to bylo tak, že se lidi setkávali, dovedli se pobavit. A dneska málokdo. Každý si hrabe na svém písečku. Když se jim to nepřipraví to setkání, já jsem ve spolku, kde děláme třeba masopust. Musí se jim připravit všechno, zadarmo, tak pak přijdou. Přijeli k nám i lidi z Německa.” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)*

Yet, the language question has not only practical but also symbolic importance for the strengthening of mutual relations. The limited effort of Germans to speak at least a few words in Czech is perceived by a part of the society as proof of their superior behavior.

“Všchno bylo německy. To oni vůbec neřešej. Je zvláštní, že my, když tady něco děláme, tak se můžeme zbláznit, aby to bylo anglicky, německy. A my, když jedeme tam, tak je málokdy něco v češtině, a přitom tam mají mraky Čechů... To mně na nich trochu vadí, že by pro nás mohli udělat trochu víc.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

A spousta lidí třeba, vadí jim, že Němci se nesnaží tu bariéru řeči prolomit. Když chcete mluvit s Němcem, musíte mluvit Německy, i u nás. A to ty lidi odrazuje od styku.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

The experience of some respondents with the efforts of Germans to communicate in Czech shows that it is very appreciated and could have a very positive effect on Czech perception of German visitors.

„Ještě mě napadlo, že já mám Němce, rád, protože když přijedou do Čech, tak mají naučený aspoň pár slovíček, že se strašně snaží říct aspoň něco česky, protože prostě jsou v tom místě, to se mi na nich vždy strašně líbilo, zvláště starší lidi, to mají v nátuře, že si umí říct, vždy aspoň o to pivo česky.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

“Kdyby byly skupinky, kdy se Němci budou učit česky, kdyby se učili vzájemně, tak by to ty vztahy možná zlepšovalo. Dokud je to jednostranné, tak si nemyslím, že se něco změní.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

When we asked our respondents if they would consider attending a joint event with German neighbors they often reacted positively. However, the event must relate to something they already like to do or are interested in. Most important is that the activity does not feel artificial, but that it stems out from the natural interest of both sides. One respondent also mentioned that he would be motivated if his friends were involved in the activity and if the event was in a language he knows (for instance, in English).

“Kdyby to bylo intenzivnější, tak by to bylo takový možná umělý, strojený. Teď je to taková volnost a chuť. Kdyby tam bylo moc organizovaného, tak by se to každému přejedlo. Takhle je to dobrý.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

Thus, sports-related events, historical sightseeing, and cultural events (especially music concerts) could raise the natural interest of Czech participants.

Regarding the question what could attract German neighbors to their town, Czechs often mentioned sports events, historical sights and nature, food markets (*"Germans like good food"*), and different festivals and festivities.

We also asked our respondents what they would like to know about their German counterparts. Quite often they were interested in learning what Germans think about Czechs. Also, they prefer to discuss current issues (e.g., what they think about migration, how they survived the coronavirus crisis, where to go for a trip, what is interesting to see). A few respondents also mentioned that they would be interested in finding out whether they have relatives in Germany.

"Mě by zajímal jejich názor na nás, na Čechy, hlavně těch z příhraničí. Jestli to vnímají podobně jako my, jako my vnímáme je." (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

"Jak to vidí oni, jestli to soužití je pro ně teď příjemný. Jestli mají pocit, že se to pořád vylepšuje, že máme hezky našlápnuto k tomu, abychom byli jedna oblast. Nebo jestli oni tam vidí nějaký nedostatek. Jak vidí oni nás." (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

"Co si myslí oni o nás. Jestli my jim nevadíme, když tam přijedeme. Nedávají to najevo, ale třeba nás mají plné zuby." (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

5.5.3 Information about Czech-German activities is not very visible

In general, people do not often search for information about what is happening on the other side of the border. Also, they do not encounter much of this kind of information. If they are interested in finding out what is going on they have to actively search for themselves.

Most of the respondents know where to look. Most often they use the internet or they get information from the leaflets in information centers (more common among the older generation). Some respondents also mentioned local newspapers, radio or TV (it was not clear if these were Czech or German sources). However, no one mentioned a single concrete website or news channel where this information would be concentrated. Only in Cvikov the respondent noted that they receive local newspapers where they can find a calendar with different events.

Most residents are aware of the existence of organizations or associations focused on Czech-German cooperation, but they are unable to list any specific names. Usually, they heard about partnerships between Czech and German towns or joint activities focused on the repair of historic buildings (typically churches). Only a few respondents participated in school exchanges or sports tournaments. People from smaller towns were more often able to recall an event where Czechs and Germans met than people from bigger cities.

Chapter summary

Challenges:

- Not surprisingly, people from smaller towns and villages have more personal contacts with German neighbors. People from bigger cities have less incentives to get involved in new activities and attracting their attention can be much more difficult.
- The will to communicate in the language of the neighboring country is considered to be significantly lower in the case of Germans, which has the potential to worsen their image in the eyes of the Czech population.
- Although respondents did not complain that it is difficult to look for information about events on the other side of the border, at the same time, they do not often come into contact with this information.
- Most people do not have concrete motivations as to why they would like to strengthen relations with Germans.

Opportunities:

- Many Czechs have personal relations in Germany, either from work or family. As we can see from this research more personal experience works well as prevention of prejudice.
- Those Czechs who go to Germany to shop relatively often combine shopping with other activities (visit of recreational/sports centers, towns or historical monuments).
- Although most people lack concrete motivation to deepen relationships with their German neighbors, most of them would consider attending a joint activity or event if there is a common interest.
- School exchange and other activities (i.e., tournaments or internships) have strong potential to attract attention, as they create a clear purpose and joint interest for participants.

Assessment:

A considerable number of Czechs have some personal relationships with German citizens either through work or family. Although work contacts do not always result in friendship, they usually help to lower the barriers between both groups. It is also not unusual that Czechs have relatives in Germany due to mixed marriages. Although most people consider the current level of encounters sufficient, they would consider strengthening the mutual relationship if there is a strong common interest. Identifying these interests or creating opportunities for both groups to share these interests appears to be the main challenge. Although language represents mostly a practical barrier in deepening the relations, it plays also an important symbolic role. Even basic knowledge of Czech by Germans could considerably increase the desire to meet with Germans. Despite the fact that people have access to information about events in their neighborhood, more active and visible promotion could increase their awareness and participation at shared events and activities.

5.6 LANGUAGE

5.6.1 German language: frequent use but only basic knowledge

Czechs from the border regions encounter German at least a few times a month. The encounters are rather superficial and include situations in restaurants or shops on both sides of the border. It is also important to say that respondents very often declared to have at least a basic knowledge of German.

The absence of knowledge of German is not perceived as an important barrier in everyday encounters. However, respondents often see a lack of knowledge of the German language as an obstacle for an in-depth conversation and more intensive relationships. Respondents without knowledge of German (and other foreign languages) even avoid traveling to Germany.

“Znalost němčiny by pomohla, aby setkání byla intenzivnější.” (Liberecký region, age: 45-59)

“Ten jazyk je bariéra. Když ten jazyk neumím, tak se tam snažím nejezdit. Abych nevypadala za blbce.” (Plzeňský region, age: 30-44)

5.6.2 German is important but English is crucial

People in the border regions often consider knowledge of German as beneficial mainly because of the proximity to Germany. Among the main motivators we can find the possibility of working in Germany, but for some the language is also an important tool to improve mutual relationships.

Nonetheless, younger respondents in particular saw German as a regional language. In their view, English is more important because one can use it everywhere in the world.

“Angličtinou se dorozumíte všude, německy ne. Takže za mě ta angličtina je na prvním místě celosvětově. Ta němčina záleží právě, v jaký části Čech se ten člověk nachází, jak je mu to Německo blízko.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

“Angličtina je důležitější. Je i víc ve světě. Všude se s ní domluvíte.” (Ústecký region, age: 60+)

“Z globálního hlediska není [němčina] důležitá, angličtina je důležitější. Ale v rámci regionu důležitá je, naši sousedi se tu vyskytují, takže by bylo dobré vědět, o čem si povídají.” (Ústecký region, age: 30-44)

Alternatively, older citizens consider the knowledge of German to be more instinctive, mainly because Czechia and Germany are two neighboring countries.

“Jsme sousedi. Proč se učíme anglicky?” (Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

The view that English is a global language influences people's views on the extent to which it should be taught at school²⁶. The agreement that German should be offered as an optional language is strong,

²⁶ Elementary schools in the Czech Republic are obliged to start teaching the first foreign language in the third grade (usually around 8 years of age). It is recommended that the first foreign language is English. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon that children already start with English in kindergarten (Zormanová 2015, <https://clanky.rvp.cz/clanek/k/z/19693/VYUKA-CIZICH-JAZYKU-V-CESKE-REPUBLICE-A-V-EU.html/>). Since the academic year 2013/2014 the second foreign language is compulsory for all students no later than in 8th grade

however, preference is given to English. Only one respondent recommended that students in the border region should first start with German and only start taking English later. One respondent pointed out that in smaller towns in the border region it is often difficult to find a teacher of German.

Younger respondents pointed out that English should be also considered a common language since Germans also learn it at school.

5.6.3 Lack of motivation to improve the current level of German

Respondents regularly stated that they have at least basic knowledge of German; it is common for older respondents to speak German. People usually say that the current level of German is sufficient. Although some would be interested in language courses, the main obstacle for taking them is lack of time or feeling that they are too old.

One respondent mentioned that in their town the municipality organized free courses in German language for its citizens. At first, the demand was quite high but after a while most of the students gave up (*“they thought they have already learnt enough”*).

From some of the statements it was clear that the motivation to learn German could be encouraged through specific opportunities for its use (e.g., an offer of future studies at German universities). Although some possibilities in this regard exist, they are considered to be rather scarce.

“Už to malinko funguje. Je tu možnost pro studenty střední školy, většinou tedy gymnázií, semestru studia v Německu. Pak můžou požádat třeba na Univerzitě v Birně... V mém okolí asi čtyři nebo pět studentů to využilo.” (Liberecký region, age: 30-44)

Most Czechs do not expect that Germans would learn Czech. The main reasons they gave are that Czech is too difficult and it is not a very useful language.

“Takhle to je, že ta němčina je světový jazyk. Ta čeština je těžší. Nevidím tam smysl.”
(Plzeňský region, age: 45-59)

“Nemyslím si, že by to mělo platit naopak. Němci češtinu tak moc nevyužijí.” (Karlovarský region, age: 18-29)

Despite the fact that Czechs generally do not expect Germans to speak their language, they appreciate if Germans try to use at least a few words or basic expressions while they are in the Czech Republic.

Regarding opportunities for German translation, people would mostly appreciate translations in restaurants (already a common practice), shops, historical sights (a partial practice). People would also appreciate basic information on where to buy tickets or how to pay for services at hospitals, bus and train stops, and parking lots.

(around 14-15 years of age) (MŠMT 2013, <http://www.nuv.cz/vse-o-nuv/zavedenim-druheho-povinneho-cizihojazyka-na-zs-se-zlepsj>). According to statistics of the Czech Statistical Office from 2019, German is the second most popular foreign language (after English) in Czech schools and its popularity is growing. In 2018, 176,000 (approx. 22 %) students in Czech elementary schools studied German; this was 48,000 more than in 2008 (ČSÚ 2019, <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/skoly-a-skolska-zarizeni-skolni-rok-20182019>)

Chapter summary

Challenges:

- Although Czechs in the border regions generally have sufficient knowledge of German for more superficial encounters (e.g., at shops or in restaurants), this does not allow them to have a more in-depth conversation.
- Although knowledge of the German language is considered a practical skill (mostly regarding possible future employment in Germany), there are not enough concrete motivations or opportunities which would encourage people to increase their current levels of German.
- English is not considered a common language although both countries teach English in school (especially to the younger generations).

Opportunities:

- Czechs in the border region can very often communicate in German and they are used to it.
- Although English is considered a global language, German is still seen as an important language in the region. Most respondents with kids are/or would be happy if their children took German at school.

Assessment:

The German language is still considered an important language, especially in the border region. More concrete opportunities or perspective on when and how to use the language could encourage (especially younger) people to improve their current understanding. The use of English should be also promoted as an option at Czech-German events, especially for younger audiences. This could also support the feeling of equality and avoid only one group adapting to the other.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

→ **Firmly rooted in the border region**

The respondents from both sides of the border are **firmly rooted in the region and have a long residential history there**. Friends, family, work and surrounding nature are why respondents opt to live there. However, the **border region faces challenges** related to the existing infrastructure, demographics, drug problems and missing career opportunities on the German side as well as brain drain and prices on the Czech side.

Nevertheless, the respondents see **many advantages of living in the region for their everyday life**. The border itself is not perceptible in daily life anymore; the inhabitants cross it frequently for shopping and tourism and – from the Czech side – for work. **The pandemic has heavily influenced** these behaviours. Although the respondents from both sides expect to return to normality soon, COVID-19 has not been beneficial to cross-border relations.

→ **A pragmatic and positive relationship, not many personal contacts**

Most **German respondents have no personal contacts with Czech inhabitants** of the border region; some have Czech colleagues at work. There are slightly more cross-border contacts in Saxony, as the border was never fully closed during the East-West division. **On the Czech side, more personal connections could be observed**. Nevertheless, inhabitants of the border region mainly cross each other's paths while shopping, visiting tourist sites, and at sporting- and recreational facilities.

The border has disappeared in everyday life, but the people are still separated despite generally appreciating the other. **Prejudices exist but are not very strong**: They are rooted in the shared history (World War II, Beneš decrees), which is more present within older generations. **The prejudices within the younger generations have shifted towards current societal problems** (drugs, negative images of minorities) as well as in long-lasting perceptions of the respective neighbour state as rich, powerful and arrogant (Germany) vs. poor, weaker and surrounded by bigger nations (Czech Republic).

→ **Joint interests: Sports and nature have significant potential**

The region has significant potential for recreational activities: **Nature, sports, and especially hiking are very popular**. On the German side, the bike routes are often mentioned as well. The younger inhabitants prefer motorbiking and paintball. Recreational centres like visiting waterparks are popular on the Czech side. The **older generation is also interested in cultural events** (e.g., concerts, theatre). Very often, Czech visitors combine shopping trips with visiting a historical site or sports facilities. In the region bordering Bavaria, *Volksfeste* or beer festivals are popular on both sides. Among Czech inhabitants on the border with Saxony, visits to Christmas markets are also very popular.

→ **Information about joint activities: not visible**

On both sides of the border, **knowledge of Czech-German activities is deficient** - although some of the respondents are aware of the existence of organisations facilitating such joint activities. If people living near the border require information, **they need to actively look for it**: They would usually go to the

municipality (Germany), information centres (Czech Republic) or search the internet in a very general way (Google, Facebook).

→ Language

Missing language skills in the neighbouring language are a **primary barrier to getting into closer contact**. If it concerns everyday activities, respondents either use their German (Czech respondents) or English skills (both). But **their competencies are still not high enough for in-depth conversations and more intensive relationships**. However, the Czech inhabitants of the border region have a higher level of German skills than vice versa. Both sides agree that it is not worth it for the German inhabitants of the border region to learn Czech. Nevertheless, the Czech respondents would appreciate it if Germans had basic Czech knowledge. Also, the German respondents share this view: It is embarrassing to rely on the other's language skills and it is limiting opportunities for closer contact.

6.2 Recommendations

The main objective of the joint Czech-German research project was to help the Fund better understand the **barriers** and **opportunities** for strengthening the relationships between Czechs and Germans on both sides of the frontier and recommend activities to develop these further.

The Czech-German Fund for the Future identified three areas in which the Fund's activities can have the most significant impact:



Image



Intercultural encounters



Language

Interconnecting these three fields of action and linking them to the everyday activities of the inhabitants of the border region is of high importance. Furthermore, the Fund is interested in suggestions for those people already involved in shared activities and those who might be interested. As we have shown, no respondent in the sample is currently engaged in Czech-German activities: The analysis also shows that the inhabitants from both sides of the border are principally interested in shared activities, as long as they do not have to make an extra effort (find time, decide to try something new, additional travel, etc). Thus, successful efforts concerning activities and actions must be linked to everyday activities and/or private interests.

In the communication and promotion of these events, it is essential to note that the Czech-German character is not necessarily the key motivation for people to attend. As the border has disappeared, people from both sides are regularly commuting and have, in general, a positive attitude toward their neighbours; we see a lot of potential in the region.

We would like to recommend activities and actions within the three fields of interest and on two different levels of implementation: **Field of actions** as a more general level and **concrete examples** as possible projects for the Fund or funding partners, respectively. We are aware that the Fund is not in the position to fund all those projects – but the concrete examples should give an idea of where to find partners and funding cooperation.

Image – reflecting historical and current issues

As the existing prejudices show, the region's inhabitants still rely on their shared history – consciously or unconsciously. Addressing shared, and particularly conflictual, history is essential for future relationships. Especially German respondents mentioned the wish for guided tours and historical exhibitions. We will summarise recommendations concerning **image** under the historical perspective – while being aware that the future is rooted in history and that activities must be linked to everyday life activities to be integrated successfully. At the same time, discussion about the relations between regions on both sides of the border should not be limited to history. Many Czech inhabitants are interested in discussing the current issues of the border region (e.g., impacts of COVID-19, migration etc.) or how their German neighbours perceive them.

Field of actions	Concrete examples
Guided tours and organised exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided tours at regional historical sites in both languages • Thematic guided tours within the region • Link to current issues: Organised talks about current issues (e.g., COVID-19) and how to deal with them
Exhibitions and explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibitions along border bike routes (small or large, in existing cafés or sites) • Information about historical events and shared history • Promoting the establishment of a documentation and exhibition centre in the border region on a political level
Theatre and film	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of projects concerning a new perspective on the shared history²⁷
Translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation of historical information • Translation of existing guided tours

Tab. 8: Image Recommendations

Encounters – joint interest as the key motivator

As we have shown, the more personal contacts exist, the weaker the prejudices are. Thus, the main objective is to create more **personal contact between Czechs and Germans**. Shared interests are fundamental, joint social activities must have a **low threshold to safeguard a 'natural' meeting process** and be based on activities that people already enjoy doing.

As we have shown, there are many interests on a personal level. Therefore, we suggest the following broad fields:

²⁷ See e.g., https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/tschechien-und-die-vertriebenen-diese-tschechoslowakei-das.979.de.html?dram:article_id=488057, last accessed 23.7.2021.

Field of actions	Concrete examples
Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiking tours and hiking maps for the border region with meeting points • Bike tours along historical routes or historically essential sites • Cross-border tournaments (football, handball, hockey) • Paintball and motorbike tours for the younger generation
Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of excursions thematising geographic characteristics; in the Saxon region also in combination with mining craft and tradition
Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music and art are of interest to all age groups. Support of music festivals of all kinds in the region
Traditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christmas markets and local traditions and customs are of interest on both sides of the border. Support of local associations and participations of artisans and/or performers (e.g., choirs) from both sides of the border
School exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School exchanges are usually mutually appreciated: Supporting a program to make schools in the border region compulsory, already on primary or even kindergarten level, could prove beneficial. Their effect could be increased if they are connected to some follow-up activities (e.g., sports events, language courses, offer of further studies etc.)
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The key to promote these events and activities is information: Currently, no central information site exists. A website for all events and activities of the border regions is an option for increasing the target group's awareness. Another option is linking existing regional websites and ensuring that they promote information from both sides of the border. Better promotion of cross-border activities at these websites would be crucial

Tab. 9: Encounter Recommendations

Language – the basis of social interaction

The respondents on both sides of the border identified better knowledge of the language as the primary tool to intensify the relations and prevent prejudice. At the moment, the pressure on German inhabitants in the border region is not high enough for them to commit to complex grammar courses. But language competence strengthens personal contact, which in turn raises the value of the Czech language. As Houžvička states: "There is a demonstrable correlation between social interaction and the formation of political trust, which gradually contributes to overcoming economic asymmetry, cultural difference, and historical resentment".²⁸

As mentioned, many Czechs can communicate in German on a relatively superficial level. However, they lack the motivation to increase their current level of knowledge (what they know seems enough). Also, English is not always used as a common language of communication. However, there is awareness of the importance of language competencies to establish further contact. The main objective would be to ensure sustainable support of local groups with translation services and low-threshold intercultural courses, which are linked thematically to activities the inhabitants use (e.g., fire department exchanges, knitting courses, church activities).

²⁸ Houžvička 2013, p. 476.

Field of actions	Concrete examples
Courses in intercultural communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-threshold courses in touristic centres or linked to private activities
Language mediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brochures with essential words and phrases for everyday life
Language support of private initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure translators and interpreters for sectors where most people with no English knowledge interact (importance of involving the older generation, as there are still hostilities and prejudices due to historical events) • Support of private initiatives with intercultural competence or an intercultural translator • Support translations in border regions, especially at a place where people from both countries are likely to meet or use (e.g., restaurants, museums, tourist destinations, regional transportation, etc.)

Tab. 10: Language Recommendations

As a concluding remark, we would like to suggest that a good starting point may be to discuss the findings of this research with both Czech and German inhabitants of the border region. This way, the inhabitants could jointly embark on a path leading to new cultural opportunities – and, simultaneously, be active agents in creating new relationships across country borders. We will be happy to further illustrate our recommendations with the Fund’s representatives and their collaborators.

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