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Cross-border cooperation of Polish and Czech area-based partnerships supported by Rural Development Programmes: Genuinely international or solely national projects?

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Abstract

The literature on cross-border cooperation in Europe is predominated by the analysis of the European Union (EU) INTERREG Programmes' results, while other support funds are often neglected. To fill this research gap, the authors undertook the research on cross-border cooperation of the area-based partnerships (Local Action Groups – LAGs) from Poland and the Czech Republic, financed by the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) 2014–2020. The main purpose of our paper is to identify the rationales for cooperation, strategies to find partners, the scope of activities and obstacles in implementing the joint projects. The qualitative research involved a content analysis of LAG documents and interviews with LAG managers. The actions in twelve identified cooperation projects were mainly related to local traditions, inventory and the promotion of local products and services, the development of tourism and environmental issues. The respondents have emphasised that these actions required separate financing by national RDPs following different administrative rules, even though when constituting the components of a single project. The bureaucratic restrictions resulted in a clear asymmetry of LAGs activities, manifested in a lower involvement of the Czech LAGs. As a result, many projects can be considered as highly unilateral, solely national rather than genuinely international, which has not been the intention of the LAG managers, however.

Key words: Area-based partnerships, Local Action Groups, Rural Development Programme, cross-border cooperation projects, evaluation, Poland, Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

Cross-sectoral area-based partnerships, so called Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the European Union (EU), are most commonly the associations of people and organisations, representing social, economic and public sector, operating in the territorially compact areas (Thuesen, 2011; Gašior-Niemiec & Pawłowska, 2014; Konečný, 2019). LAGs prepare territorial development strategies and receive public funds to support projects of local voluntary organisations, entrepreneurs and public entities to enhance local social and economic participative development (Chmieliński et al., 2018; Lacquement et al., 2020; Shishkova, 2020; Opria et al., 2023). LAGs are supposed to stimulate local stakeholders' mutual good relations and bottom-up cooperation in the management of local resources (Esparcia et al., 2015; Navarro et al., 2016). The collaboration is intended to ensure greater effectiveness in creating local social and human capital, meeting the needs of residents and contributing to sustainable development (Duguet, 2007; Macken-Walsh, 2009; Marquardt et al., 2011). Although they focus on local actions, the exchange

of information between LAGs within European, national, regional and cross-border networks and the implementation of joint cooperation projects are also important in supporting their activities (Ray, 2001; Marquardt et al., 2009; De Luca et al., 2018; Marhoff, 2019). The main purpose of this type of interregional relations is to transfer information, good practices, innovative ideas, and to strengthen the mutual respect of local communities despite cultural differences – similarly as in the municipal international cooperation (Lucke & Bellocchi, 1997; Baldersheim et al., 2002; Furmankiewicz, 2005).

Currently, an abundant literature is available dealing with the internal cooperation of stakeholders within LAGs territory, specific power structures, the creation of social capital, the effects of implemented local projects and other results of their operation (Moseley, 2003; Kull, 2014; Zajda, 2014b). However, much less attention is devoted to the issues of their international cooperation, diffusion of information, good practices and innovations (Ray, 2001; Duguet, 2007; Marquardt et al., 2009; Pisani & Burighel, 2014; Pylkkänen et al., 2020). In turn, the

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literature on cross-border cooperation is dominated by studies analysing projects implemented under the EU INTERREG cross-border cooperation programmes (e.g. Dołzbłasz, 2013; Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2015; Martín-Uceda & Jańczak, 2018; Nadalutti, 2015; Böhm et al., 2021, 2023) while other sources of financing are relatively rarely analysed and discussed (McCall & Williamson, 2000; Ray, 2001). There is a particularly striking scarcity of studies analysing the extent to which LAGs are involved in international and border cooperation in the frame of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), which has been also subject to significant support in the integration policy of the EU (Ray, 2001; Zajda, 2013; Pylkkänen et al., 2020). Thus, in this paper, the authors attempt to develop the discussion on the significance of formal, cross-border LAGs cooperation supported by RDPs, independently of the programmes such as INTERREG. As an example of this type of cooperation, Polish-Czech projects initiated and implemented by LAGs located in border regions, in 2014–2020 financial perspective (in practice contracting till 2023) were analysed. The main research objectives (RO) of this article are as follows:

- RO1: to identify the cross-border cooperation networks co-financed under RDPs within the so-called Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) framework and differences in the involvement of Polish and Czech partners;
- RO2: to evaluate the rationales and scope of LAGs cooperation, strategies in finding partners, identifying the main obstacles and assessing the prospects for further development of cooperation;
- RO3: to assess the conditions of the RDPs in supporting cross-border cooperation based on the opinions of LAG representatives.

The main added value of this article is presenting the relatively poorly discussed topic of LAGs cross-border cooperation within the RDPs framework, its limitations and challenges. Our analyses can prove useful for the developers of future support programmes (i.e. officials and politicians) offering an additional evaluation of cooperation projects implemented as part of the CLLD approach. The paper is also intended as a contribution to the research carried out on the basis of political geography, presenting the widely discussed problem of asymmetry issues of cross-border cooperation.

2. Networks and cooperation of LAGs in the EU rural development policy

2.1 The role of inter-regional cooperation of LAGs in boosting local development

In contemporary socio-economic development, the authors emphasise the high role of group work, cooperation and voluntary non-hierarchical relations, which are an important component of territorial governance systems in democratic countries (Murdoch, 2000; Simard & Chiasson, 2008; Furmankiewicz et al., 2014; Pappalardo et al., 2018). This approach to local development also involves the establishing of cross-sectoral territorial partnerships, such as LAGs, in the EU. LAGs have been supported in rural areas in the countries of the European Economic Community since 1991 (Barke & Newton, 1997; Ray, 2000); and in Poland and the Czech Republic after the accession of these countries to the EU in 2004 (Furmankiewicz et al., 2015; Šaradin & Zapletalová, 2021). Since 2014, LAGs can operate in both rural and urban areas, under the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD, formerly LEADER) approach (Miller, 2014; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018; Kola-Bezka, 2020). The assumptions of CLLD approach have already been widely described and analysed in the literature (creation of area-based local development strategies, bottom-up elaboration and implementation of strategies, local

public-private partnerships, integrated and multisectoral actions, innovation, cooperation, networking) (European Commission, 2006; Bosworth et al., 2016). In this subsection, however, the authors have focused on two promoted activities: the 'networking', and primarily the 'cooperation'.

The idea of networking is focused on creating transnational, national and regional information exchange networks (Duguet, 2006; Marquardt et al., 2011; Marhoff, 2019) while cooperation is focused on undertaking joint ventures in smaller groups (Lepik & Bremse, 2013; Zajda, 2013; Esparcia & Abbasi, 2020). Networking includes both the exchange of information between LAGs, and between LAGs and state administration entities that participate in rural development (Silina et al., 2012; NSMAS, 2015). The cases are the National Network of LAGs of the Czech Republic (NSMAS, 2021) and the National Rural Network in Poland (Chmieliński, 2011).

Cooperation under the CLLD approach is meant to take place on two main formal and legal levels – within a cluster of organisations working for the development of a specific territory (i.e. territorial cooperation) (Da Re et al., 2017) and between LAGs and other public or private organisations from different areas (i.e. inter-regional cooperation) (Ray, 2001; Duguet, 2006; Pylkkänen et al., 2020). In both cases, LAGs are to ensure the broad participation of local communities in cooperative activities.

In the source literature, it is believed that both the horizontal networks of coordination (exchange of information) and cooperation (joint activities involving own resources) can bring a number of benefits to its participants (individuals and organisations) (Nunn & Rosentraub, 1997; Furmankiewicz et al., 2014; Da Re et al., 2017). Networking can have a positive impact on the relations and exchange conditions between the local stakeholders and the outside world (Saraceno, 1999). External networks are designed to help overcome the isolation that often involves actors and individuals living in rural areas, especially the peripheral ones (NSMAS, 2015). The authors emphasise that the voluntary nature of creating cooperation networks increases their flexibility in solving local problems and generating stimuli for development (Esparcia & Abbasi, 2020).

Information exchange networks serve to expand the knowledge of the participants involved and stimulate the diffusion of innovation (Srsen et al., 2017). They can facilitate the modernisation or introduction of new organisational solutions and ideas that – even if already known in other regions – provide innovations on the local scale that positively affect the efficiency of enterprises, local governments and social organisations (Doitchinova et al., 2019). The acquisition of new knowledge and skills allows for competence building, meeting the needs of local communities and solving their problems more effectively. Networks and clusters also facilitate obtaining financial support, providing regulatory frameworks and measures, stimulating needs, creating markets and reducing uncertainty in economic activity (Conway & Waage, 2010). They can be particularly important in rural areas, which are more hesitant in accepting innovations, due to social attachment to tradition and often relatively low level of education among the population (Floriańczyk et al., 2012).

In the case of both cross-border and far-distance international contacts between organisations and local communities, the authors also point to their significant role in overcoming national prejudices as well as building mutual trust and respect for cultural differences, which may help to mitigate conflicts and stimulate social inclusion of the excluded social or national minorities (Furmankiewicz, 2005; Böhm & Drápela, 2017). The European cooperation between local stakeholders is considered to be particularly important for the integration of a culturally and ethnically diverse Europe and is often interpreted as the process of the 'Europeanization' (Scott, 2018; Heidenreich, 2019).

The participation of both local leaders and managers of LAGs (people who are moderators of local social activity) in international contacts is of great importance for local development (Koschatzky, 2000; Bábíková, 2019). The qualifications of these people can be increased through their participation in conferences and trainings organised with the representatives and LAGs office staff (direct learning), but also through study visits, during which the representatives of local communities learn about the effects of successful projects in other areas (Zajda et al., 2017). Owing to international cooperation, LAGs can add value to their human resources and be more creative in terms of activating rural communities (Ray, 2001; Lepik & Bremse, 2013).

As a result of the positive perception of the possible effects of inter-regional relations in the EU policy, significant attention was also paid to the international cooperation of LAGs (Ray, 2001; European Commission, 2006; 2018). The EU programmes supporting the activities of LAGs usually involved separate allocation of funds for the implementation of national and international cooperation projects between these organisations (Ray, 2001; European Commission, 2008; Sykała et al., 2015).

2.2 The development of international cooperation of LAGs

International cooperation of LAGs has a longer tradition in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe. LAGs from the EU Member States could participate in transnational cooperation in two subsequent LEADER Community Initiatives: LEADER II (1994–1999) and LEADER+ (2000–2006) (Ray, 2001), when Poland and the Czech Republic were not yet members of the EU (accession to the EU in 2004). Despite the emphasis in the EU documents on the high role of supporting the international cooperation of LAGs (European Commission, 2006; De Luca et al., 2018), some studies indicate that their real involvement in international cooperation was not intensive. For instance, Schiller (2008) found that LAG international relations in LEADER+ were not considered important by the Eurosceptic rural communities in British LAGs.

In the EU 2007–2013 programming period, the budget which the Member States programmed for inter-territorial LAGs cooperation projects was € 265 million from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (European Commission, 2008). It is estimated that approximately 360 international cooperation projects were supported (Lepik & Bremse, 2013), which seems a relatively low number for the entire EU. Authors conclude that the European LAGs expressed only a relatively small interest in international relations (Bedrac & Cunder, 2010; Zajda, 2013; Pylkkänen et al., 2020). For instance, 189 national cooperation projects were implemented in Poland under the RDP 2007–2013, and only 34 projects with a foreign partner (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2017). Kalisiak-Mędelaska (2013) assessed that in the Łódź region in Poland, international cooperation projects were implemented to an ‘insufficient degree’, as out of twenty existing LAGs, only three participated in international projects. The research of 22 LAGs from the Lublin region in Poland revealed that only one LAG expressed the will to implement an international project (Guzal-Dec, 2018). International LAG cooperation has also proved less popular than the local issues in the Czech Republic. An analysis of the content of press articles about LEADER approach showed that only 5% contained information on international LAG activities (Lošťák & Hudečková, 2010). According to the ex post evaluation of the RDP 2007–2013 in the Czech Republic, LAGs were involved in 162 national and 40 transnational projects of this type. The most common foreign partners were LAGs from Slovakia, and only in four cases from Poland (EKOTOXA and IREAS, 2016; SZIF, 2015).

The literature offers relatively few analyses of the scope of activities and barriers for international LAG cooperation. In Poland, cooperation projects involving foreign partners most

often concerned the development of tourism, the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and enhancing pro-ecological attitudes of local communities (Kalisiak-Mędelaska, 2013; Hoffmann & Hoffmann, 2018; Zajda, 2014a). The main identified barriers to international cooperation include relatively high financial costs and difficulties in coordinating activities due to geographical distance, language barriers and differences in legal conditions and formal requirements for LAGs in different countries (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2017). In other countries, De Luca et al. (2018) analysed the example of an international cooperation project led by the Italian LAG, whose main themes were rural tourism and the sustainable development of forestry. In this project, the main difficulties of cooperation identified were differences in financial abilities, regulations and procedures in different EU countries and the Managing Authorities’ bureaucracy and timing. In other cases the scope of activities concerned information exchange, tourist small infrastructure or training and educational activities (Srsen et al., 2017; Krasniqi, 2020; Voth, 2024).

2.3 The issue of influence of top-down policy on LAGs scope of cooperation

In the literature, the authors point out numerous limitations of LAG support programmes, which emphasise the need for ‘bottom-up’ and ‘innovation’, and at the same time introduce numerous restrictions on the scope of financed activities, limiting their innovative character and effective operations (Kis & Szekeresne, 2011; Konečný et al., 2020). According to the original assumptions, LEADER and CLLD approaches were to promote grassroots innovation through a high level of freedom in the types of implemented projects. Similarly to the idea of New Public Management, the main element of the final evaluation regarding local activities was to be their effects, including positive impact on achieving the goals of social development (participation, activation of residents) and economic development (a bottom-up development based on small and medium-sized enterprises and multifunctionality of agricultural farms), rather than focusing on compliance with administrative procedures (Moseley, 2003; Pawłowska, 2016; Konečný et al., 2020). Hence, initially, this programme was associated with the concept of endogenous development (fully bottom-up), based mainly on local needs, ideas, resources and grassroots activities (Barke & Newton, 1997; Ray, 2000).

The analyses of subsequent LEADER type programmes indicated that their aims and rules had a strong impact on the scope of local activities (e.g. Furmankiewicz et al., 2015; Konečný et al., 2020). A fear of non-settlement of funds and the loss of refinancing limited project innovation and increased the efforts of public authorities to the standardisation of local projects and to expand control over LAGs, project selection and their implementation (Zajda et al., 2017). Pisani and Burighel (2014) suggested that in Italy bureaucratic constraints may have reduced interest in transnational projects in subsequent LEADER programmes. The autonomy of LAGs, as a local actor, was therefore limited (Kovacs et al., 2023).

As a result of these observations, the concept of neo-endogenous development was popularised, indicating a deliberately strong influence of top-down rules on bottom-up actions (Ray, 2006). However, the analyses of this issue concerned mainly local activities within the LAG territory. The impact of procedures and restrictions included in the programmes on inter-regional (including international) cooperation undertaken by LAGs was relatively rarely discussed. The literature provides almost no information if LAGs are involved in regional cross-border cooperation, what is its scope and what problems arise in the implementation of joint projects. It is the reason why the authors focused on analysing the projects implemented by Polish and Czech LAGs in border regions in the frame of RDPs.

3. Materials and methods

The conducted research covered Polish-Czech cross-border cooperation projects implemented with the funds obtained from national Polish and Czech RDPs 2014–2020 by LAGs operating under the CLLD approach. The research covered projects whose leader (main contractor) was LAG located in the regions adjacent to the state border (Lower-Silesian, Opole and Silesian voivodships in Poland, and Liberec, Hradec Králové, Pardubice, Olomouc and Moravian-Silesian regions in the Czech Republic), and at least one foreign partner was no further than 150 km from the border. The cooperation projects financed by RDP may include partners from different EU countries and do not have to be cross-border in nature, but the presented research is focused on cooperation in border regions.

The list of projects financed by Polish RDP was provided by the Marshal Offices (regional self-government supervising LAGs), and on the Czech side by the State Agricultural Intervention Fund (SAIF) in Prague (SZIF, 2023). In total, twelve Polish-Czech projects that received funding from the Polish or Czech RDP and one project that was prepared but ultimately not implemented were identified and used for further analysis.

In each project the authors interviewed their main manager in 'lead LAG' (project leader – a contractor responsible for submitting and accounting full project in their national RDP on behalf of all partners from a given country) – one in Poland and one in the Czech Republic. Interviews were also conducted with the representatives of the so-called 'non-financial partners' (Czech LAGs that did not receive financial support from the Czech RDP and were only partners of the Polish project without the possibility of financing their own activities). The authors conducted additional interviews with the representatives of three LAGs who were originally supposed to participate in two projects, but withdrew from the cooperation. This allowed better understanding of the difficulties in the preparation and implementation of projects. In total, the authors conducted twelve interviews with project managers in Polish LAGs and nine in the Czech LAGs (see Appendix 1). The unequal number of interviews on the Polish and Czech sides is due to the fact that some LAGs participated in two projects, and in two other projects the partners of Polish LAGs were other types of organisations (explained in the results).

As no previous analyses of cross-border cooperation of LAGs were available, the method of qualitative interviews using questionnaires with open questions was applied, which facilitates the exploration of issues that have so far been poorly described in the literature (Babbie, 2011). The first interviews were conducted between November 2021 and October 2022. The results of pilot studies were presented in Furmankiewicz and Trnková (2022). In January and February 2024, the research was supplemented by asking additional questions to the same respondents (at the request of the reviewers) and to five new respondents. The final list of questions asked concerned:

- The motives (rationales) of LAGs for cross-border Polish-Czech cooperation;
- The ways to find a partner from a neighbouring country;
- Project objectives;
- Planned activities (the scope of works);
- Information regarding the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the planned goals and activities;
- The effects and benefits of the project;
- The main difficulties encountered in the preparation (planning) and implementation of the project;
- Respondents' opinions on the reasons for the relatively low involvement of LAGs in international cooperation projects;
- The possibilities and scope of future cooperation (further projects in the future).

The interviews were mostly conducted by telephone and transcribed directly to the text during the interview. In a few cases, the respondents checked and authorised the answers or preferred to complete the research questionnaires themselves, using the questionnaire (text) electronic file. We have also used the information provided in the documents publicly available on the websites of the surveyed LAGs.

Telephone interviews have disadvantages known from the literature: e.g. the problem of 'satisficing', i.e. the respondents' tendency to agree with the statements read by the interviewer regardless of their content or to repeat similar content in relation to different questions (Krosnick & Presser, 2010). In addition, methodological analyses show that in a telephone interview, the respondents' answers to open questions are less comprehensive and honest than in face-to-face ones (Sykes & Collins, 1988), which was especially possible in case of LAGs managers feeling discouraged due to numerous surveys. International studies are also burdened with semantic differences in translated questions and cultural differences, which may negatively affect the comparability of national results (Scheuch, 1993).

The collected data were subjected to a qualitative analysis, structured according to the research questions. The answers to open-ended questions on the rationales, scope of activities and obstacles to cooperation were assigned (coded) to the authors' own predefined research categories. It is the classical sociological method (Babbie, 2011; Züll, 2016). This kind of method brings a certain degree of the researcher's subjective influence into the results, but it is acceptable in exploratory research (Sandelowski, 1995; Neuendorf, 2002). Surveys with project managers (therefore not all cooperation partners) are also often used in research on the cross-border activities of local organisations (Nadalutti, 2015; Martín-Uceda & Jańczak, 2018).

In this paper, the authors focused on transnational cooperation financed by RDP. The other sources of possible border cooperation support, like INTERREG Microprojects Funds (Dołbłasz, 2013; Böhm et al., 2021) accessible for LAGs located in Euroregions were not included. However, the review of documents and websites showed that only three Polish LAGs used other source of financing cooperation with Czech partners (not LAGs). Focusing on the analysis of RDP projects limits conclusions about the general willingness of LAGs to cooperate across borders, but it is justified in relation to the evaluation of the international cooperation sub-programme under the RDP.

4. Results

4.1 LAG cooperation projects financed by the RDPs on the Polish-Czech border

In the EU programming period 2014–2020, international LAG cooperation was financed under the sub-measure '19.3. Preparation and implementation of cooperation activities of the local action group' of the national RDPs. Partners of cooperation projects must, in each case, apply for funds from their own national RDP (i.e. the national RDP finances only the LAGs from its country) (European Commission, 2018). Each application was submitted by one 'lead LAG' as the 'project leader' to national supervising institution, with the documents confirmed by the project partners.

According to our research, a total of twelve cooperation projects have been implemented by the 'lead LAGs' located in Polish and Czech regions adjacent to the state border (Tab. 1, Fig. 1). The contracts were signed in the years 2018–2023 (the duration of the programme was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic). In an additional (thirteenth) analysed case, the LAGs resigned from the project's implementation (not included in the Figure). A total

of 27 LAGs from Poland and nine LAGs from the Czech Republic participated in the analysed projects. Four LAGs from Poland and three LAGs from the Czech Republic participated in two projects.

All twelve cooperation projects were co-financed through the Polish RDP (support for Polish LAG activity), however, only three of them were financially supported also through the Czech RDP (support for Czech LAG activity) – namely the ‘A year in the Country’ project, implemented by the Hlučínsko and the Płaskowyz Dobrej Ziemi LAGs, the ‘Visit the borderland’ project, implemented by the Hrubý Jeseník and Nyskie Księstwo Jezior i Gór LAGs, and ‘Love Food – Polish Czech cooperation to promote local culinary traditions’, implemented by three Polish and two Czech LAGs. There were seven projects, in which Czech LAGs were ‘non-financial partners’ of Polish LAGs and did not received any RDP funds, however, in three Czech LAGs some very limited

actions were financed from their own funds. One project, financed by Polish RDP, was implemented with the help of the Czech Euroregion Glacensis association (non-financial partner), after the Czech LAG did not receive funding and withdrew from the project, and one more with the local public service company Geopark Český ráj (it is not a LAG, also a non-financial partner), because the Czech LAG refused to cooperate due to the lack of any funding.

For a better understanding of the LAGs’ administrative staff potential in the implementation of international projects, it should be added that the analysed Polish LAG associations had between 27 and 135 members (average 83) and employed between two to six employees in the LAG office, while the Czech LAG associations had between 34 and 108 members (average 65) and had between three and 12 members of staff employed in the LAG office.

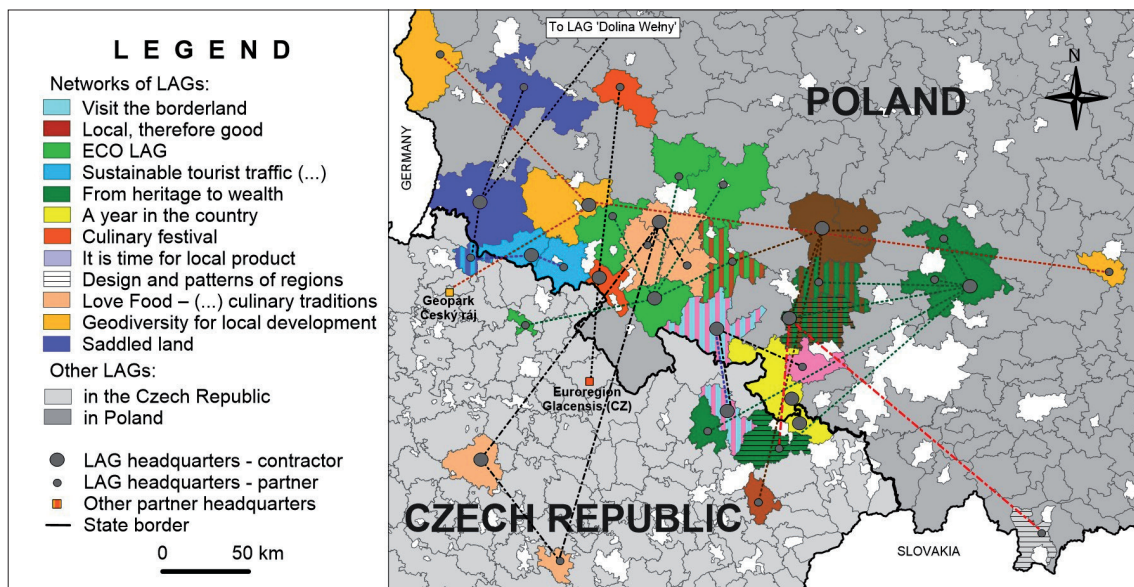


Fig. 1: The networks of Polish and Czech LAGs implemented cooperation projects supported by the RDPs. Two Polish LAGs (financial partners) are located outside the map area. Full project names are provided in Appendix 1

Source: authors’ research. The map layers with LAG boundaries were obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (‘Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi’) in Warsaw (Poland), and the National Network of Local Action Groups of the Czech Republic in Prague, Czech Republic (‘Národní síť Místních akčních Skupin České republiky, z.s.’)

No.	Project	RDP contract date	Partners from Poland (PL)		Partners from the Czech Republic (CZ)			
			Financed by RDP	With-drawn	Financed by RDP	Non-financial partner – own funds	Non-financial partner – lack of funds	With-drawn
1.	Visit the borderland	28.08.2018 (PL) 22.10.2018 (CZ)	1 LAG		1 LAG			
2.	Local, therefore good	24.10.2018 (PL)	4 LAGs				1 LAG	
3.	ECO LAG	16.11.2018 (PL)	5 LAGs			1 LAG		
4.	Sustainable tourist traffic (...)	31.12.2018 (PL)	2 LAGs			1 LAG		
5.	From heritage to wealth	15.03.2019 (PL)	5 LAGs				2 LAGs	
6.	A year in the country	25.07.2019 (PL) 02.08.2019 (CZ)	1 LAG		1 LAG			
7.	Culinary festival	10.05.2021 (PL)	2 LAGs				Euroregion Glacensis*	1 LAG
8.	It is time for local product	11.05.2021 (PL)	2 LAGs			1 LAG		
9.	Design and patterns of regions	13.10.2022 (PL)	2 LAGs				1 LAG	
10.	Love Food – (...) culinary traditions	13.01.2023 (PL) 08.11.2022 (CZ)	3 LAGs		2 LAGs			
11.	Geodiversity for local development	28.07.2023 (PL)	3 LAGs				Geopark Český ráj**	
12.	Saddled land	04.12.2023 (PL)	3 LAGs				1 LAG	
13.	Folk-Demotic-Cultural	resignation of the applicants		1 LAG				1 LAG

Tab. 1: The complexity of funding sources of Polish and Czech LAGs cross-border cooperation projects planned with support from the RDP 2014–2020 (contracted till 31.12.2023). Full project names are provided in Appendix 1

Notes: * Association of legal entities [‘Zájmové sdružení právnických osob’ in Czech] ‘Euroregion Pomezí Čech, Moravy a Kladska – Euroregion Glacensis’ (Rychnov nad Kněžnou, Czech Republic); **Public service company [‘Obecně prospěšná společnost’ in Czech] ‘Geopark Český ráj’ (Turnov, Czech Republic)

Source: authors’ research

4.2 Rationales to cooperation and methods of acquiring partners

The main reason for establishing cross-border cooperation under the RDP platform was the desire to learn about different activities and ideas in foreign LAGs (this type of reason was mentioned by five Polish and five Czech LAGs). However, in other five cases, managers in Polish LAGs admitted that they would gladly choose a distant partner from other European countries, but due to limited financial resources, they were forced to look for a partner as close as possible in terms of geography to reduce transport costs for direct visits. Hence, they chose relatively close partners from the Czech Republic. One manager replied that she wanted to stimulate cross-border contacts of local communities (including local organisations), and these are the easiest to maintain at a relatively close distance. In three cases of projects involving Polish and Czech LAGs adjacent to each other across the border, project managers from Poland and the Czech Republic indicated that the common history or similarities of the regions separated by a state border were of great importance to them (especially in Opole/Czech Silesia region and in Izerskie/Jizerské (Jizera mountain) – Karkonosze/Krkonoše (Giant mountain) region).

Searching for cooperation partners were usually based on long-standing cross-border relations, which were most commonly created on the basis of direct contact and projects previously supported by the EU cross-border cooperation programmes such as PHARE (before Poland and Czech Republic joined the EU) and INTERREG (after accession in 2004). In the cases of LAGs located within a short-distance or adjacent across the border these relationships were established at various local events, meetings, conferences or even tourist excursions. In four cases of cooperation between LAGs adjacent to the border, the most important were the personal contacts of LAG managers who participated in the events organised by other entities in a neighbouring country (e.g. local governments), where they met people associated with other border

LAGs. In three projects, Polish and Czech respondents indicated assistance from member municipalities that had previously cooperated with the municipalities on the other side of the border. They also used the help (intermediation) of the other LAGs, other local associations, the Euroregion associations, the National Network of Local Action Groups of the Czech Republic and the Centre for Regional Development in Olomouc.

4.3 The aims, scope of works and effects

The main aim of the cooperation projects (both the implemented and those only planned) was the support of tourism development (the promotion of tourist attractions and activities in the given regions), the mutual exchange of experience regarding the identification, certification and promotion of local products (including handicraft, food and services), the exchange of experience regarding waste management, and activating local communities in the Czech and Polish countryside. Both in Poland and the Czech Republic, the topics of cooperation were usually similar to the scope of activities carried out within the LAG territory (see Tab. 2). This resulted from the RDPs principle that the goals and activities in cooperation projects must be consistent with the goals of the local development strategy, the provisions of which were valid for both internal and inter-regional projects. The main difference was the limited possibility for implementing investment in cooperation projects, stronger on the Czech side.

The most common scope of implemented activities in cooperation projects included workshops on the production of local dishes or handicraft products, as well as promotional materials for local products and tourist services. These activities were most frequently financed on the Polish side, however, promotional materials were usually issued simultaneously in Polish and Czech languages. Promotional or educational films (usually available on the Internet) were produced as part of five projects. Similarly,

Country	LAGs in Poland	LAGs in Czech Republic	
Main internal subject of actions (defined in the RDP rules) – through grant competitions for local entities and LAG's own operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening social capital (local events, meetings, trainings etc.); • Supporting local entrepreneurship; • Supporting cooperation between local entities conducting business activities; • Development of sales markets for local products and services; • Development of non-commercial tourist, recreational or cultural infrastructure; • Construction or reconstruction of local public roads; • Promoting the area covered by the LAG strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions supporting education, community planning of social services, cultural and social activities; • Caring for people; • Educating children and youth; • Supporting small businesses in the countryside (including the introduction/management of a regional brand) and tourism; • Improving the environment; • Landscape care in the countryside; • Development of rural infrastructure; • Development of smart innovative solutions to rural problems and challenges. 	
Type of partner	Leader and Financial Partner* (possibility to finance own actions from Polish RDP)	Leader and Financial Partner (possibility to finance own actions from Czech RDP)	Non-financial partner in Polish projects (no possibility to finance own actions from the RDP)
Main international subject of action – through LAGs cooperation projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conferences/ seminars/ workshops; • Study visits to partner areas; • Very small infrastructure (e.g. redecoration) or equipment; • Promotional materials (folders, films) related to local service providers, craftsmen and local producers, tourist attractions, traditional events etc.; • Educational materials related to environmental issues, local heritage; • Educational competitions for youth; • Internet application related to local products. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotional materials (folders, films) related to local service providers, craftsmen and local producers, tourist attractions, traditional events etc.; • Local conferences/ seminars/ workshops; • Local events or meetings for social integration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free participation in events organised by financial partners; • Free assistance in organising the reception of partners' visits; • Possibility to provide information for publications and promotional materials financed and published by the project leader.

Tab. 2: The scope of internal LAGs activities and activities conducted under cross-border cooperation projects in Polish and Czech LAGs

Notes: * In Poland there were no non-financial partners

Source: authors' questionnaire research and content analysis of LAGs documents and websites; Binek et al., 2020; NSMAS, 2021; SZIF, 2023

five cases involved study tours to partner LAGs. One especially interesting initiative was the organisation of the Local Product Centre in Nysa (Nyskie Księstwo Jezior i Gór LAG, Poland). This Centre deals with the promotion and organisation of sales of local products from the area of the Polish LAG, and promotes the tourist offer of the partner LAG from the Czech Republic.

On the Czech side, the scope of financed activities was clearly more limited. Czech LAGs organised mutual meetings, often combined with an excursion and presentation of experiences in a specific area, such as regional product labelling, waste management, etc. One-day cultural events, where local crafts and food were presented, were mentioned for two projects. Common conferences or workshops were indicated as an output in only two projects. Regarding four projects Czech LAG representatives stated that they were originally intended to implement a much wider range of activities, but due to difficult rules of the Czech RDP it was not possible.

Most LAGs implemented all contracted activities and two Polish LAGs even increased the scope of activities owing to savings. Only the projects implemented during the maximum restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 encountered problems in conducting face-to-face meetings and study visits.

For comparison, according to the collected data, the national cooperation projects of LAGs in the Czech Republic were aimed at increasing the quality of tourism and cultural heritage, supporting the local economy through the labelling of local producers and their products, educating the general public about natural resources and ecological problems. The supported activities took the form of soft actions – mainly workshops, conferences, creation of informational and promotional materials and info-points or web applications. Similar goals and actions were in Polish national projects, however, Polish LAGs could invest in small infrastructure and the promotion of historical and cultural heritage was frequent. Generally, it can be said that national and international projects had similar goals and scope of activities, both in the Czech Republic and in Poland.

The exchange of experience and deepening of cooperation were perceived as positive results by the representatives of Czech LAGs in five implemented projects. However, in the case of two projects, this contribution was perceived as completely insufficient, which was related to the failure to obtain financing for the activities

planned on the Czech side. The representatives of all ‘lead LAGs’ from Poland which implemented the projects expressed opinions about obtaining benefits from the implemented projects. However, two were not satisfied with the cooperation with Czech partners, who withdrew or limited their activities due to failure to obtain funding from the Czech RDP. The representatives of Polish LAGs pointed to the benefits of promoting the LAG area, including the inventory of local products in their region. The projects facilitated the cooperation of local food producers, creators and artisans in joint promotion. According to one LAG representative:

Folk artists and handicraftsmen became more active, [...], these local producers were better promoted. There were many benefits for our local handicraftsmen, they acquired knowledge in marketing and business. Despite the completion of the formal project, we are still introducing new craftsmen [in promotional materials and an online store] (manager of Polish LAG – project leader, interview 02.12.2021)

The representatives of Polish LAGs also pointed to the lasting benefits of the projects that included the implementation of small infrastructure and purchasing office equipment, which, among others, enabled the establishment of marked educational routes, setting up information boards or equipping facilities promoting local products. Two respondents from Poland also pointed to the benefits of transferring ideas for new local products, which were not previously known in the given LAG. For example, the representatives of Polish LAGs paid special attention to the ideas of a Czech local producer for food products with garlic, or to learning traditional crafts in Czech schools (which is rarely practised in Poland).

4.4 The obstacles to cooperation

Most of the respondents indicated that the main difficulty in implementing cooperation projects with the support of RDP were the unfavourable rules for implementing these programmes (Tab. 3). First of all, it was pointed out that joint cooperation projects require separate applications to national institutions with different procedures and different scopes of eligibility costs. As commented by LAG managers in Poland:

The main problems were the differences in procedures and in the scope of possible activities to be implemented under cooperation projects, because the tasks are financed completely separately

Obstacles	Poland											Czech Republic										
	Nyskie Księstwo	Dolina Stobrawy	Qwsi	Ducha Gór	Północnej Jury	Plaskowyz Dobrej	Sowigórskie	Kraina św. Anny	Lider A4	Kaczawskie	Izerskie	Cieszynska Kraina	Hrubý Jeseník	Hraničko	Královédvorskó	Rozvoj Tanvaldska	Opavsko	Hlučínsko	Královská Stezka	Sárúzení Slav	Jablónkovsko	
Unfavourable rules of the RDPs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Difficulties in coordinating activities and documentation between partners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Language barriers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Cultural differences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
The distance makes face-to-face contacts difficult and costly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Need to pre-finance activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Too few local NGOs to develop bottom-up border relations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Lack of trust	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Tab. 3: The obstacles to international cooperation within the RDP framework in the years 2018–2023 in the opinion of Czech (N = 9) and Polish (N = 12) LAGs managers engaged in preparation or/and implementation of cooperation projects

Legend: LAG had this obstacle in planned or completed cross-border cooperation project; LAG had no such obstacle in Polish-Czech project, but it is possible in other international cooperation projects (data from coding responses to open-ended questions to predefined categories).

Note: *The full names of LAGs are given in Appendix 1. Source: authors' research results

in each country, although it is considered a single project. In terms of content, the scope of permissible activities in the Czech Republic differs from those on the Polish side. [...] The Czechs did not receive funds from their programme for the planned scope of activities. They did not abandon us, but they had to carry out tasks from their own resources. If they had not done so, we would have had a problem with the settlement of the project. [...] It was not possible to correct the provisions of the project, because they were already approved in Poland. Each LAG in their home country has submitted a part of the cooperation project to its own institution. It is like two independent applications submitted separately, but each depends on the implementation of the other. (manager of Polish LAG – project leader, interview 16.12.2021)

Czech LAGs particularly emphasised that the national rules and the scope of financing cooperation projects were very narrowly defined. They indicated that the conditions for the implementation of such projects have deteriorated comparing to the previous EU programming period of 2007–2013. According to one Czech LAG representative, the Czech rules enabled mainly soft (non-investment) projects, like mutual meetings, educational events and the creation of promotional materials, while in Poland, it was possible to purchase equipment and invest in the so-called small infrastructure. Several Czech LAGs indicated the difficult bureaucratic relations with the State Agricultural Intervention Fund of the Czech Republic. As one Czech respondent claimed, the main obstacle to cooperation under the RDPs was:

[...] the inconsistency of the funding rules on the Czech and Polish sides, the significantly limited range of activities that can be financed from the RDP. [Additionally], the conditions of the RDP would change significantly within the programme periods, which also limited cooperation [...] (manager of Czech LAG which participated in a project, interview 17.10.2022).

Three representatives of 'lead LAGs' from Poland mentioned difficulties in coordinating activities and financial settlements between partners. Several respondents listed language barriers, distance limiting direct contacts and generating transport costs, difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic and cultural differences. Another problem involved the need to pre-finance activities (EU funds only refinance the costs incurred after the project is completed). On the Polish side, this issue was solved, among others, through bank loans, which generated additional costs. Only one Polish respondent noted the lack of trust towards the previously unknown partners as problems that make it difficult to establish a formal cooperation with foreign LAGs, so it was not a significant factor.

A representative of one Czech LAG mentioned that the very low number of formal local NGOs in their area was a real obstacle to trans-border cooperation, because there were no local entities which could activate local people to participate in events and workshops funded by the cooperation project.

4.5 The prospects for future cooperation

Among the 11 Polish LAGs – project leaders (who implemented a total of twelve projects) – the majority were interested in further cooperation, however, if funds were available for such cooperation. Particular emphasis was placed on the willingness to exchange experiences in the field of development and promotion of local products (both food and crafts), development of catering services and promotion of local traditions. Representatives of Polish LAGs emphasised that, in their opinion, the Czechs have more experience in promoting and certifying local products (especially catering services). One Polish LAG which had difficulty implementing a project, and one that had to withdraw their project, considered that they saw no prospects for the future implementation of cross-border cooperation projects from the RDP funds. Two Polish LAGs pointed out that in the new Polish Strategic Plan for the

Common Agricultural Policy for 2023–2027 there is no possibility of financing cooperation projects of LAGs as entities. Only local social organisations can submit cooperation projects if the LAG includes such actions in its strategy (status as in March 2024, procedures may be adjusted). Managers of the two Polish LAGs located in the Euroregion areas planned to submit applications under the INTERREG Microprojects Fund programme. However, INTERREG type programmes were not popular between LAGs. As commented by the manager of one LAG:

Theoretically, there are funds in the Nysa Euroregion, but the financing conditions are terrible. We cannot afford to pre-finance activities because we are too small an association. The waiting period for a refund after implementing the activities can range from one to two years. This is terrible, only local governments can afford to implement the projects. There are no prospects for this to change. (manager of Polish LAG, interview 16.12.2021)

Polish LAGs were a source of inspiration for the Czech LAGs due to deeper connection of the population with the countryside and agriculture, in contrast to the more industrially oriented communities in the Czech Republic. One Czech LAG representative stated that Polish LAGs have a lot of ideas in terms of promoting traditions and customs, culinary arts and appreciation for the environment, or involving pensioners in experiencing an active life in the countryside. Czech representatives often perceived Polish LAGs as quality partners with whom they would like to cooperate in the future. However, four representatives of Czech LAGs (including two LAGs whose sub-project was not financed) stated that they are not interested in another cooperation project under the current conditions of the Czech RDP. However, they did not exclude the possibility of developing such cooperation in the future when the procedures of the support programme are simplified, and include a greater scope of eligible costs. In any case, the interviews with Czech managers revealed a great deal of scepticism towards the newly established RDP conditions.

5. Discussion

5.1 The asymmetry of LAGs cooperation

In this study, the authors identified twelve contracted, cross-border cooperation projects of Polish and Czech LAGs financed by the RDPs, however, financing projects on both sides of the border was highly asymmetric. All projects were financed by Polish RDP, only three – also by Czech RDP. Most commonly Czech partners were only 'non-financial partner', which meant that the projects were often more national than truly international in nature. The Czech LAGs often expressed their dissatisfaction with the established rules for providing support from the Czech RDP. Obtaining project funding was very difficult and led to the withdrawal from cooperation projects (or refusal to cooperate) of several Czech LAGs. As this threatened the loss of funds on the Polish side, the partners simply signed the documents to make the project 'international' and, at most, helped organise study visits for the Polish partner who received funding or provided materials to be used as promotional materials prepared in Poland, free of charge. In this case, the benefits of cooperation could be highly one-sided, which discouraged further cooperation.

In the analysed period, the requirements and difficulties were higher on the Czech side. To compare national differences, it is worth knowing that the contract for operation under the RDP in the years 2018–2023 was signed by 292 LAGs in Poland (Zajda et al., 2017), and a total of 317 cooperation projects were implemented (no data available on how many of them with a foreign partner). There were 180 LAGs operating in the Czech Republic (NSMAS, 2021), but only 15 cooperation projects were implemented, including 9 domestic ones and 6 with the participation of a foreign partner (including three analysed

ones with a partner from Poland) (SZIF, 2023). Therefore, there was much less interest in projects of this type in the Czech Republic, not only in the field of Polish-Czech cooperation. The Czech LAGs suggested that conditions for implementing the cooperation projects in the Czech Republic had deteriorated, because 40 international projects were supported from the RDP in the programming period of 2007–2013 in the Czech Republic (SZIF, 2015).

The problems of asymmetry in the conditions for the development of border regions have been often discussed in the literature (Dołzbłasz, 2015; Martín-Uceda & Jańczak, 2018; Jędruch et al., 2020). In our study, we emphasise that the asymmetry of LAGs engagement and actions is not a result of the existence of the border as a barrier (because it is not physically important due to the freedom to cross the border without a control), but a consequence of the legal, economic and administrative differences in the neighbouring regions, as investigated by Böhm and Opiola (2019). These differences are much more difficult to overcome than simply opening the border for the movement of goods and people. This problem has already been noticed in the evaluation of the LEADER 2007–2013 programme in the Visegrad Group countries (Dvořáková Líšková et al., 2019) and clearly in the 2014–2020 edition, bureaucratic constraints have not been significantly reduced yet.

5.2 The regional conditions and scope of LAGs cooperation

In Polish border regions, the cooperation with the Czech Republic was most often established by LAGs from the Lower Silesia and Opole (historical Opole Silesia) regions, but not from the Silesia (historical Upper Silesia) region (only one 'lead LAG' with two partner LAGs). In the Czech Republic the LAGs located in the middle area of historic Czech Silesia were most willing to cooperate with Polish partners. The LAGs with the most intensive short-distance cooperation were located in the Pradziad/Praděd and Silesia Euroregions, which generally have a wide scope of local cooperation under INTERREG programmes (Böhm et al., 2023). However, the Śląsk Cieszyński/Těšínské Slezsko and Glacensis Euroregions also have a wide scope of cooperation, but the LAGs from these areas ultimately did not cooperate within the RDP. This may indicate the high role of historical, cultural and local economic ties, like in the Hlučín Region (Šťastná & Vaishar, 2023) and that the main rationale to short-distance border cooperation was 'to take advantage of similarity', using the typology given by Ray (2001). About two-thirds of the Polish-Czech border area is a part of the tourist region of the Sudety (Krkonoško-jesenická soustava) Mountains (Potocki et al., 2014; Przybyła & Kulczyk-Dynowska, 2017; Böhm & Šmída, 2019) and a smaller part in the East of the Beskidy/Beskydy Mountains. Relatively small part covers the lowland and upland areas of the old mining and industrial basin of Upper Silesia (Kolejka et al., 2015; Šťastná & Vaishar, 2023). These border areas used to be subject to numerous restrictions related to the protection of the state border in the 20th century, which had a negative impact on their development (Jędruch et al., 2020; Sikorski et al., 2020; Vaishar et al., 2013). Currently, due to the far-reaching integration of Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany and Slovakia into the EU, the borders in these regions are no longer a strong barrier. This ensures a relative ease of tourism development, establishing economic links and cooperation of local communities in border regions, with an additional benefit in the support from the EU funds (Dołzbłasz, 2013; Kachniarz et al., 2019). As a result, obtaining income from tourism (and agritourism) is perceived by local communities as a particularly attractive direction of development (Dołzbłasz & Raczyk, 2015; Dołzbłasz, 2017; Przybyła & Kulczyk-Dynowska, 2017), which is also visible in the analysed LAGs' cooperation projects. Such activities are conducive to the diversification of rural development towards the projects other than those typically involving

agriculture, and they are considered an important direction of development in the RDPs (Trnková, 2021; Průša et al., 2022; Biczkowski et al., 2021).

Several identified cooperation projects did not have a typical border character, but we cannot perceive them as far-distant. This is confirmed by the responses regarding how LAGs found partners for cooperation – in most cases, the local cross-border personal contacts of LAGs managers were used and intermediation of member municipalities or other local organisations that had already been conducting cross-border cooperation with the Czech partner many years earlier. We did not obtain data from all of Poland, but the data from other studies suggest that most projects financed by the RDP in Poland, which engage the Czech LAGs into cooperation, were implemented by LAGs from these two border regions (SZIF, 2015, 2023). The relatively short-distance Polish-Czech cooperation of various entities is very popular in the regions adjacent to the border (Furmankiewicz, 2005; 2007; Dołzbłasz, 2013; Kafarski and Kazak, 2022).

It is difficult to assess whether a longer distance cooperation could be a longstanding one. In some cases, the choice of partners was quite random – after the LAG with whom other LAG tried to establish contacts refused, Polish LAGs looked for any LAG that would agree to cooperation or even for a completely different organisation. These were kind of 'rescue' actions aimed at using the grant funds, being not aimed at a longstanding cooperation. There was no real choice due to a relatively small number of LAGs willing to pursue foreign contacts. However, in previous studies of the intermunicipal partnership cooperation, cases of establishing contacts 'by chance' did not exclude subsequent long-term cooperation (Furmankiewicz, 2005). While the individual cooperation between Polish and Czech municipalities has been intensively developing for a long time, LAGs (having a legal form of the association) are less involved in cross-border contacts (only 12 projects). Similarly, the implementation of cross-border micro-projects funded through the INTERREG programme were first and foremost dominated by local governments and public institutions of culture and recreation, rather than non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Dołzbłasz, 2013; Böhm et al., 2021). What could be the reasons for this? Our respondents mainly pointed out the difficulties related to obtaining funds for such activities and project settlement. It can be assumed that the LAG's weak human resources (a small number of staff being able to prepare projects) and financial resources (the lack of permanent income to independently finance such activities) influenced the effectiveness of dealing with these problems. Compared to regional and national environmental NGOs, LAGs associations are relatively small (the average number of analysed LAG members – 83 in Poland and 65 in the Czech Republic), while the average for Environmental NGOs in Central and Eastern European countries was 309 members (Carmin, 2010). However, LAGs have higher potential than a typical local social association in Poland, which has on average only 25 members (Charycka et al., 2022). The limited cooperation may also be affected by the weak tradition in the self-organisation of society (independent of political authorities) within local NGOs, due to the undemocratic, communist systems being in force in the Czech Republic and Poland from 1945 to the end of the 1980s (Chloupkova et al., 2003). According to Zajda (2023), almost 96% of rural local organisations were characterised by a low level of cooperation with external NGOs. The low openness of rural communities to inter-regional and international contacts may also be important (Schiller, 2008). Some studies from Poland also noted that urban municipalities were more often involved in international cooperation than rural communes (Furmankiewicz, 2007).

The analysed cooperation projects concerned mainly the exchange of knowledge and information, educational events and the development of market for local products and services, especially for

the purposes of developing revenues from tourism (which is largely due to the existence of tourist mountain regions on the Polish-Czech border). It can be considered that these are very traditional areas of cooperation, typical for NGOs and local governments in many border areas. Both the international LAG cooperation projects in Europe (Ray, 2001) and the projects implemented under the Microprojects Fund within INTERREG Poland-Czech Republic Programme had a similar thematic scope (Dołzblasz, 2013; Guzal-Dec, 2018; Marhoff, 2019; Böhm et al., 2021).

5.3 The conditions of national RDPs support

Considering the scope of cooperation, it should be remembered that the European Commission designed the main themes of cooperation projects as the enhancement of local products, natural and cultural resources, utilising know-how and new technologies, and improving the quality of life in rural areas (De Luca et al., 2018). Additional restrictions have been introduced by national programmes. Thus, the scope of cooperation in the RDP was not fully bottom-up, but strongly determined by the support programmes. It means that the presented research on cooperation projects has revealed a problem that has been already described in the analyses of local activities implemented by LAGs – a strong limitation of the bottom-up activities and their innovation due to top-down restrictions and rules incorporated in the supporting programmes (Kis & Szekeresne, 2011; Furmankiewicz et al., 2014; Konečný et al., 2020).

In some cases, LAGs' managers complained about the need to pre-finance projects, for which they often lacked their own resources (because they do not have, for example, a fixed budget, as local governments have). Other analyses of LAGs also identified difficulties with pre-financing activities (Lengerer et al., 2023). Similarly, the costs of international cooperation and language barriers were also problem for local governments participating in international bilateral cooperation (Lucke & Bellocchi, 1997; Furmankiewicz, 2005). It is worth noting, that both this research as well as studies by other authors (Zajda, 2013; EKOTOXA and IREAS, 2016) indicate that the domestic LAG cooperation is much more popular than international and cross-border cooperation. This may indicate even a much greater importance of language and cultural barriers than suggested by the LAGs involved in the international cooperation.

Our research shows that, contrary to the rhetoric about the importance of networking and cooperation in the EU documents, RDPs are not always adapted to contribute effectively to the international cooperation of rural communities. This is not conducive to European integration which is understood and promoted as an increase in social ties (networking) and an increase in positive attitudes between local communities from different countries. The results of many studies suggest that the communication of LAG stakeholders across different territories is typically weak (Schiller, 2008; Da Re et al., 2017; Pylkkänen et al., 2020). The unilaterally led cooperation usually leads to a discouragement and 'closing' of local communities off from the external contacts. This limits the reduction of unfavourable prejudices against the foreign nations and the EU and hinders the diffusion of innovations that would help to develop peripheral rural areas.

It is definitely possible to argue that the main focus of CLLD and LAGs is local, rather than international, outreach. However, the same can be said about the local self-governments, which are very active in international networks of information exchange and cooperation worldwide (Furmankiewicz, 2007; Dołzblasz, 2013; Dołzblasz & Raczyk, 2015; Böhm et al., 2021). That said, they have much greater human (qualified officials) and financial (fixed income) resources, required to organise and maintain social and official international contacts. LAGs are relatively small

associations with a small number of office staff and negligible own income, which probably limits their possibilities with regard to implementing and financing relatively costly face-to-face international contacts.

6. Conclusions

The literature on LAGs indicates that they have become very important actors in the EU, activating local communities and helping to implement their relatively low-cost activities and local investments (Moseley, 2003; Cañete et al., 2018; Konečný, 2019). However, our research indicates that their involvement in international projects under the RDP was not so common and was highly depended on the ease of obtaining funds for such activities. In the 2014–2020 programming period, the procedures for obtaining funds for cooperation projects were clearly more attractive and transparent in the Polish RDP than in the Czech one. This resulted into a clear asymmetry in the activities of project participants on the Polish and Czech sides of the border. Only three bilaterally financed projects can be considered as really international. The others were more one-sided in nature, with the Czech LAG unable to finance any of its activities. In extreme cases, the Czech partner has just signed documents, but could hardly do anything. It should be emphasised that this was not the intention of LAGs, but the result of difficulties in obtaining funding. This study confirms how much influence the benefits from cooperation have on entering into common projects, which can be referred to the second-generation rational choice theory (Won Lee & Jun Park, 2007).

The authors propose that international cooperation programmes financed from the EU funds should either be able to finance, to a certain extent, partners from different countries (not only LAGs from their own country), or the principles of financing cooperation should be unified across the nation states (i.e. one agreement for all partners, the same scope of activities and investments that can be co-financed, one institution settling the subsidy for all cooperation partners). It is necessary to harmonise the national rules in the field of cooperation projects between the Member States, which has already been pointed out by Dvořáková Líšková et al. (2019).

It is particularly important to free up the scope of funding: if LAG projects are supposed to be bottom-up, why do the programme rules so strongly limit the scope of supported activities? The idealistic rhetoric of innovative bottom-up LEADER approach is becoming clearly different from its actual administrative rules, which are highly imposed by governments in national programmes. In the authors' opinion, the cooperation projects should include not only soft activities (e.g. meetings, cultural events and study tours), but also small investment activities (i.e. hard projects), e.g. investments implemented according to a proven pattern (good practice) from the territory of a friendly, foreign LAG with the advice of its representatives.

The presented difficulties in international LAG cooperation do not differ significantly from the problems encountered in the implementation of other cross-border cooperation programmes, like INTERREG, where administrative, legal and financial problems are usually identified (Zabielska, 2020; Böhm & Opiola, 2019). If we consider that LAGs are associations created by stakeholders from rural areas, then the support for their international cooperation should be based on particularly simple rules.

In the authors' opinion, the good examples of international cooperation (regional border and long-distance trans-border) of LAGs do not change the fact that the main entities initiating cooperation and international contacts of local communities remain local governments, which have adequate human and financial resources to implement such activities (Lucke & Bellocchi, 1997). However, it is worth improving the procedures for supporting

international LAG cooperation, so that these organisations can also involve local communities in international contacts, similarly to other local NGOs (Carmin et al., 2003). Supporting international contacts of rural territorial partnerships is particularly important since the rural communities are slower to adopt innovations and are often more sceptical about the European integration, which often arises from their isolation. In the future, it would be worth conducting a research on the central administration actors to explain why they introduce certain restrictions in support programmes and what their justifications for such actions are.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – The list of surveyed LAGs (full names in national language) and their projects (full names in English)

Poland: 1) Stowarzyszenie LGD – Partnerstwo Izerskie ('Saddled land' – contract under the Polish RDP); 2) LGD 'Partnerstwo Sowiogórskie' ('Culinary festival: traditions of Polish and Czech villages Kul-Fest' – contract under the Polish RDP); 3) Stowarzyszenie LGD 'Qwsi' (EKO LAG – contract under the Polish RDP); 4) LGD na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju gmin Kąty Wrocławskie, Kobierzyce, Siechnice, Żórawina, Domaniów – Lider A4 ('Love Food – Polish Czech cooperation to promote local culinary traditions' – contract under the Polish RDP); 5) LGD Duchy Gór ('Sustainable tourist traffic in the Western Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border' – contract under the Polish RDP); 6) LGD Nyskie Księstwo Jezior i Gór ('It is time time for local product!' and 'Visit the borderland!' – both contracts under the Polish RDP); 7) Stowarzyszenie Kraina św. Anny ('Design and patterns of regions' – contract under the Polish RDP); 8) Stowarzyszenie LGD Płaskowyż Dobrej Ziemi ('A year in the country' – contract under the Polish RDP); 9) Stowarzyszenie LGD 'Dolina Stobrawy' ('Local, therefore good' – contract under the Polish RDP); 10) Stowarzyszenie 'Partnerstwo Północnej Jury' ('From heritage to wealth' – contract under the Polish RDP); 11) LGD Partnerstwo Kaczawskie ('Geodiversity for local development' – contract under the Polish RDP); 12) Stowarzyszenie LGD 'Cieszyńska Kraina' ('Folk-Demotic-Cultural' – resignation).

Czech Republic: 1) MAS Rozvoj Tanvaldska ('Sustainable tourist traffic in the Western Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border' and 'Saddled land' – both non-financial partner); 2) MAS Sdružení Splav ('Culinary Festival' – resignation); 3) MAS Královédvorsk (EKO LAG – non-financial partner); 4) MAS Hrubý Jeseník ('Visit the borderland' – contract under the Czech RDP; and 'It's time for local product' – non-financial partner); 5) MAS Hlučínsko ('A year in the country' – contract under the Czech RDP); 6) MAS Hranicko ('Local, therefore good' – non-financial partner); 7) MAS Opavsko ('From heritage to wealth' and 'Design and patterns of regions' – both non-financial partner); 8) MAS Jablůnkovsko ('Folk-Demotic-Cultural' – resignation); 9) MAS Královská Stezka ('Love Food – Polish Czech cooperation to promote local culinary traditions' – contract under the Czech RDP).