

Places Nearby: Networking Borderland Regions and Rediscovering Heritage of the Iron Curtain

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Introduction

“Místa zblízka” is an interdisciplinary project, running currently under the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, formerly under the “Fund of Further Education”. The project is funded by the European Social Fund. The aim of the project is an innovative approach towards local communities via interdisciplinary cooperation and community coordination, which is a rather unique method and also includes basics of interdisciplinary approach. The multidisciplinary team of the project includes anthropologists, sociologists, historians, architects, biologists, economists, and “community coordinators”, who are the field workers living in the four main regions of the project.

Description

The project is set in four areas in structurally damaged towns and villages in Western and Northwestern Bohemia (Fig. 1). All the project areas included have direct or historical relations to the adjacent German border regions, as there was a substantial number of German inhabitants before World War

II. Two of them (Sokolovsko and Ašsko) are situated directly at the Czech-German border (Bavaria and Saxony); therefore the project was also intended to reach into the German territory in an attempt to initiate some trans-border activities. The setting of the region seemed perfect: most project areas redeveloped their relationship to the adjacent German regions after the Velvet Revolution and there are many examples of successful trans-border projects.

A brief description of how our project is necessary here is described in Fig. 2. The main message of this graphic is that our method analyses the area of interest regarding two interconnected aspects: as a pattern of phenomena identified by the interdisciplinary team, and as a set of needs indicated by local inhabitants. Together, they create a “potential” topic, which is vital enough to develop into a sub-project and to evolve after the end of the project.

As an outcome of this process, our project and our interdisciplinary team identified some of the most powerful “potentials” – important topics which resonate in the local communities and are attractive enough to activate local communities. As one of the strongest topics in the Czech-Bavarian border region, the area and topic of the former Iron Curtain was identified (Fig. 3).

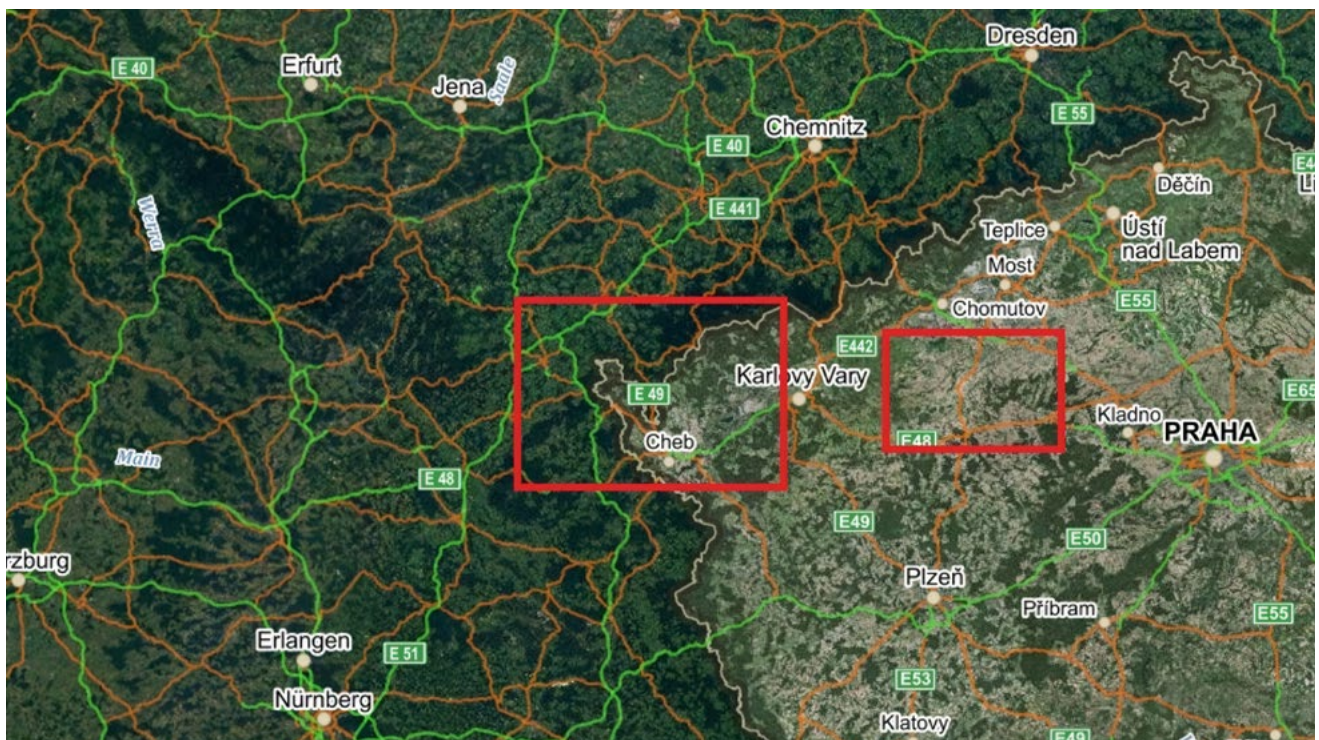


Fig. 1: Map showing the project area in the Czech-German border region



Fig. 2: Social innovation projects



Fig. 3: Current impression of the former Iron Curtain near the destroyed village of Újezd (former Mähring)

Initially, the whole area of the Aš region was mapped by the interdisciplinary team with emphasis on landscape and historical sciences. The landscape itself contains a typical pattern of the former “Sudetenland” region with abandoned cultural structures, cultural vegetation patterns (avenues, abandoned graveyards or remains of old fruit gardens) and is typically complete (Fig. 4). Large military structures are present, including straightforward deforested corridors with remains of the military border installations, abandoned military bases, etc.

In the second stage of this sub-project, the response to this topic from the local communities on both sides of the border was examined. The results were quite interesting and varied due to the nationality of the responders: there was an obvious gap between the relatively positive responses from the German side and the major lack of any interest on the Czech side of the border. However, there is a small, heterogeneous group of local inhabitants on the Czech side interested in the Iron Curtain topic, including former border guards, the current mayor of the village Krásná (formerly Schönbach bei Asch) and a group of local secondary school students.

The following and at the time final phase of his sub-project was the initiation of trans-border cooperation between the project team, the Bund Naturschutz group based in Nürnberg, and the German-German museum in Mödlareuth. However, at the moment the development of this cooperation is standing still, as the interest from both sides of the border has ceased and the project itself is struggling to survive.

Other sub-projects

There are other sub-projects running under the “Místa zblízka” project: concerning the Czech-German borderland, including the post-coal mining landscape near Sokolov (former Falkenau), and sustainable urbanism workshops for local municipalities, or brownfield conversion near Chodov (former Chodau).



Fig. 4: Remains of the village Ottengrün near Aš