

Cross-border identity and engagement of civil society in twin cities

Issues of Cross-border identity, involving civil society in the functioning and development of twin cities - good practices on European borders, cross-border civil societies - current and future opportunities and threats from the perspective of European border regions, recommendations connected with enhancing the involvement of civil society in twin cities activities:

These questions were discussed by representatives of the public and non-governmental sectors as well as local and regional communities at an international forum held in Cieszyn and Český Těšín on 5 March 2020. The participants from the Polish-Czech border and other European border regions shared their ideas, fears and proposals for the future of Europe.

1. Cross-border identity in a future Europe

Forum participants agreed that **identity is a sense of self-esteem, the way we perceive ourselves**. It is, above all, these components, which determine who we are. Identity is heavily dependent on **our roots such as history, family, religion, the place where we grow up and live, but also certain images**. These images really matter in the cross-border context, because they are a kind of our own reflections in the mirror. When we talk about **local identity** as well as cross-border identity, we do not only need to take into account our own convictions. **We must view this issue from a wider - global - perspective. Moreover, we should try to understand why other people may think in a different way than we do.**

"Getting used to the otherness is very important as well as tolerance"

Forum participants recognized **fear as a very strong identity factor**, especially in a cross-border context. In a twin city, fear manifests itself in the fact that **we do not fully open up to others, foreigners**. This does not necessarily lead to aggression. However, it can cause a **lack of trust and reluctance to get to know each other**. Therefore, **it is very important to get used to otherness**, as the otherness turns out to be, in fact, the same as here. Inextricably linked to otherness, **tolerance** towards other cultures, ethnicity and beliefs plays a key role in social relations. It is defined as our own approval for having someone (foreigner) around us.

Moreover, **story-telling** also has a very significant impact on cross-border identity. It is thus worthwhile to make efforts in this area, such as creating common history textbooks. Although this may be perceived by some as a utopian idea, it has its justification, because even recent historical events often have completely different narratives on both sides of the border. Indeed, **the clash of national-based narratives** occurs not only in border regions, but also within particular countries, which can be an additional factor deepening divisions between communities.

Forum participants also agreed that **heroism and national martyrdom** are crucial historical aspects connected with identity. Many cases of **Messianism and suffering** can be found in the history of particular nations. These links are mostly seen between what is individual or interpersonal and what is national or international (if we bear in mind the cross-border context). **So, building interpersonal**

relations with a local (cross-border) and international (European) dimension should also be based on common roots.

2. Identified barriers and threats

The discussion focused on the barriers and threats to cross-border initiatives of citizens of twin towns. The participants pointed to the existing administrative and legal obstacles, which are faced by schools from Poland. In order to cross the border, they have to possess written permission of the school “curatorium” (a body responsible for the supervision of schools).

"Central governments often marginalize the meaning of cross-border cooperation"

The border crossing - even in the format of a divided twin city - is considered a regular foreign trip requiring a special permit. Another threat that could negatively affect cross-border citizens' initiatives are the opinions and concerns expressed by some politicians (especially those without any relation to cross-border cooperation), regarding the **loss of national identity,**

undermining the national integrity of border regions and towns. This could lead to governmental decisions, having serious consequences for infrastructure activities and citizens' initiatives at the Polish-Czech border. Cross-border initiatives are often of a secondary interest for public servants representing the central government and they therefore tend to marginalize cross-border cooperation.

When discussing barriers and threats to cross-border initiatives of citizens in twin towns at the European level, discussants pointed at the **increasing demand for the tightening of border controls (re-bordering).** It was also underlined that, for many people living in border regions, borders mean the end of something. Moreover, the **border exists also in the mind-sets of the communities living on both sides of a border. People are afraid to cross borders, because of the language barrier or existing stereotypes, animosities and resentments, for example.**

It is often the case that **citizens are just the passive recipients of international or bilateral projects. They are not involved in designing and implementing those initiatives. Hence, they do not identify themselves with some activities.** Another potential negative impact of public participation is linked to the sheer nature of cross-border projects: not all identified needs of citizens living in border regions can be implemented - due to the different administrative systems and contexts of partner countries - which can lead to their frustration.

Another obstacle, which concerns citizens' initiatives of twin towns and is of European significance, is the low level of public awareness of the co-financing of various cross-border cooperation projects by the EU. The **general public still receives too little information on the use of EU funds** and their tangible outputs. **Moreover, funds supporting people-to-people initiatives, mainly in the framework of the INTERREG programme, are burdened with a high-level of administrative complexity and made even more complicated by the need to pre-finance these projects from own sources.** Civil society organisations often do not apply for the available funds, as they lack the financial and human capacities to pre-finance and administer such projects. This leads to **little synergy and a lack of links between individual initiatives.**

3. Ideas and proposals for future Europe

Discussants underlined that **border regions**, where the twin cities are located – regardless of whether we consider them from a local or European perspective - should be understood as **places where people and cultures meet**. These are places, where innovations are often born, where there is a huge development potential **thanks to the border** and where multiple good examples can be identified. However, to exploit these opportunities it is important to have **special soft-skills linked with the exploitation of intercultural differences for the sake of cross-border cooperation** in twin towns. **Co-operation leaders and specialised trainers/facilitators have an important role to play here.**

The EU institutions, as well as local and regional authorities should take measures to ensure **transparency and civic participation**. This transparency should be linked with the distribution of funds for co-operation, whereas the participation should reflect the involvement of citizens in planning and implementing projects, from which they will benefit in the future. The participation of citizens should be secured at multiple levels: local, regional, national and European. Involving citizens in their advisory and co-decision capacity will lead to further **democratization and cross-border integration**. This will improve the delivery of policies implemented by local and regional authorities, increase citizens' involvement in activities of the Union and enhance cross-border education etc. The processes of **creating cross-border participatory budgets**, where the citizens can vote on concrete projects, **serve as a good example here**. These forms of citizens' involvement are operating in some border regions already; hence, they should be supported and promoted. Engaging civic society at local or European level can be based on their involvement in **cross-border management** (for example by the means of active consultations or elaborating cross-border action plans) or **in working groups** (for instance those operating under the auspices of Euroregions etc.).

"The EU institutions as well as local and regional authorities should take measures promoting transparency and civic participation."

Local and European institutions should also place greater emphasis on **information and communication activities**, for example with regard to concrete implemented projects and the funds used. This would contribute to a higher level of awareness among the broader public.

It is also important to create and use various IT devices, such as mobile apps serving the broad cross-border community in the divided towns. Already existing **innovative solutions**, such as cross-border chipcards authorizing their holders to get discounts on particular products on both sides of the border, show that this is feasible.

In order to support the processes of involving civic society in twin cities in the future, it is crucial to improve the **INTERREG programme**, as it contributes not only to creating joint tangible outputs in terms of infrastructure, but it strengthens the level of mutual trust, which is especially important in the border regions. **Cross-border cooperation involving citizens should also be supported more by national governments** in the future.

More information:

<http://www.transfrontier.eu/tein4citizens/>

Appendix: Agenda of 3rd international forum within 'TEIN4citizens' project, 5 March 2020, Cieszyn/Český Těšín

<p>FORUM ORGANIZERS: The 'Olza' Association for Cooperation and Regional Development, Institut EuroSchola PARTNER INSTITUTION: WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza</p>	
9:50	<p>Welcome and introduction</p> <p>Janusz Pierzyna, The Mayor of Jasienica Municipality/The President of the Board - The 'Olza' Association for Cooperation and Regional Development Dr Hynek Böhm, Vice-president, Institut EuroSchola</p>
10:00	<p>Forum opening</p> <p>Stanisław Kawecki, Secretary, City Hall in Cieszyn Dr Joanna Kurowska Pysz, Head, Research Institute on Territorial and Inter-Organizational Cooperation, WSB University in Dąbrowa Górnicza</p>
<p>1st PART at Liburnia Hotel, Cieszyn Organised and moderated by 'Olza' Association for Cooperation and Regional Development</p>	
10:15	<p>TEIN (Transfrontier Euro-Institut Network) and 'TEIN4citizens' project - international initiatives targeted at civil societies living on European border regions</p> <p>Anne Hofmann, TEIN Coordinator, Euro-Institut</p>
10:45	<p>Cross-border identity from twin cities perspective - Cieszyn and Český Těšín example</p> <p>Dr hab. Bogusław Dziadzia, Deputy Dean for Students and Education, Faculty of Ethnology and Educational Sciences, University of Silesia Dr Magdalena Szalbot, Faculty of Ethnology and Educational Sciences, University of Silesia</p>
11:15	<p>Coffee break</p>
11:30	<p>Involving civic society in twin cities functioning and development - Cieszyn and Český Těšín example</p> <p>Petra Slováček Rypienová, Executive Director, Člověk na hranici</p>
12:00	<p>Cross-border civic initiatives between Cieszyn and Český Těšín - current and future opportunities and threats</p> <p>Stanisław Kawecki, Secretary, City Hall in Cieszyn</p>
12:30	<p>Joined debate dedicated to Cieszyn and Český Těšín based on presented issues</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>PŘEKRAČUJEME HRANICE PRZEKRAČAMY GRANICE 2014—2020</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>EVROPSKÁ UNIE / UNIA EUROPEJSKA EVROPSKÝ FOND PRO REGIONÁLNÍ ROZVOJ EUROPEJSKI FUNDUSZ ROZWOJU REGIONALNEGO</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Euro Institut Institut Institut</p> </div> </div> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The debate is organized within 'EURO-IN.NET' project</i></p>
13:00	<p>Lunch</p>
14:00	<p>Bus transfer towards Olza river, passage along developed shores called 'Two shores garden' and cross-border walk to the second part of the forum in Český Těšín</p>
<p>2nd PART at The Congress of Poles in the Czech Republic, Český Těšín Organized and moderated by Institut EuroSchola</p>	

<p>15:00</p>	<p>Panel discussion with forum participants consisting of 3 thematic blocks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 1st thematic block: Involving civil society in twin cities functioning and development - good practices on European borders ▪ 2nd thematic block: Cross-border civil societies - current and future opportunities and threats from European border perspective ▪ 3rd thematic block: How to enhance the involvement of civil society in twin cities activities (possible solutions/recommendations) <p>Hot and cold beverages as well as snacks are available for all panel discussion participants</p>
<p>16:45</p>	<p>Presentation of key findings from panel discussion</p>
<p>17:00</p>	<p>End of forum</p>