

Schengen without seamlessness: How past policies shape contemporary cross-border transport across the Czech-Polish border

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Abstract: *Despite being part of the Schengen Area and benefiting from European integration, the Czech-Polish borderland faces challenges in cross-border mobility and regional development. The study aims to analyze the historical evolution, contemporary status, and future potential of cross-border railway transport between Czechia and Poland. It identifies the dismantling of numerous cross-border railway connections in the mid-20th century due to geopolitical tensions. It examines the persistent barriers to their re-establishment despite the removal of physical border controls. Through a multidisciplinary approach rooted in human geography and border studies, the research analyzes timetables, literature, and interviews with regional stakeholders to assess these lost railway links' socioeconomic and infrastructural impacts. The findings reveal that while cross-border integration has improved in recent decades, cross-border transport remains fragmented, with regional disparities and administrative obstacles limiting integration. The study highlights key areas for potential railway restoration and the importance of European funding. The results contribute to broader discussions on border permeability, regional integration, and transport policy within the European Union. Strengths of the study include methodological diversity, empirical richness, and policy relevance. Limitations arise from significant reliance on secondary data and an emphasis on transport infrastructure and policy, leaving other aspects underexplored. In addition, differences in transport governance between Czechia and Poland resulted in uneven representation in the interviews.*

Keywords: *cross-border integration, public transport accessibility, historical transport networks*

Introduction

Nowadays, the Czech-Polish borderland geographically belongs to the central part of the European Union (EU). It is part of the Schengen Area, which, together with cross-border cooperation (CBC), is the cornerstone of free border crossings and cross-border integration (CBI) (Perkmann 2003). The mentioned cross-border collaborations imply that the studied area can be viewed as a sizeable cross-border region (Pászto et al. 2019). Still, we prefer to divide this sizable territory into smaller areas. Several drawbacks in CBI and peripherality can be observed in the studied borderland. Affected areas can be either cross-border or national. Deficiencies are often connected to low-quality cross-border transport possibilities, both in terms of speed and frequency. The Czech-Polish borderland was crisscrossed by many railways a century ago, but most were canceled and not reinstated.

Despite its significant implications for border integration and regional development, the issue has received little scholarly attention. Some mentions were made by Vaishar et al. (2013), Graff (2017), and Kołodziejczyk (2020b). However, the literature on cross-border transport in Central Europe is rich (e.g., Roider et al. 2018, Cavallaro and Dianin 2020, Wilczewska 2024).

The text is anchored in human geography and border studies and aims to identify canceled or dismantled cross-border railways, the reasons for their cancellation and prospective renewal efforts. It also attempts to address subregional differences. We expect that geopolitics played a crucial role in their cancellation, and economic circumstances prevented their renewal when the geopolitical situation was no longer tense.

Theoretical background

Borderland, peripherality and cross-border ties

The strength of a border depends mainly on its type, function, openness, and permeability, and the nature of neighboring regions across the border. A lower permeability of a border means a stronger border effect, leading to an economic orientation toward the inland and the peripheralization of an area. Within a skip effect, intensive cross-border flows of goods and people may bypass peripheral border regions because of their isolation, distance from economic centers, and low-quality transport lines (Capello et al. 2018).

Borderland often embodies characteristics of peripheral regions exhibiting negative socio-economic trends and an uneven position compared to central parts. At the EU level, peripheral regions have a GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average, qualifying them for structural funding support. The Czech-Polish borderland belongs to this group. Examples of vulnerable borderland peripheries are territorial protrusions where one state's land juts into another (Alpini 2003). They are frequent on the studied border (Frýdlant, Broumov, Javorník, Kłodzko, Osobłaha, Sudice and Turosszów protrusions) and often face transport challenges, as the most practical route between two locations within the same country may pass through a neighboring territory. In these regions, there is a substantial border effect (attenuation of cross-border interactions, see Drápela and Bašta 2018).

Research on CBC and CBI has developed conceptual tools for understanding the multiple dimensions of interaction across state borders. Building on Perkmann (2003) and Durand and Decoville (2019), we adopt a multidimensional perspective that treats borders not merely as territorial divides but as social constructs shaping economic, political, and everyday practices. We draw on the four-dimensional framework of CBI:

- The structural dimension refers to the borderland's physical infrastructure and spatial organization. Railways, roads, and public transport lines are key indicators of connectivity.
- The functional dimension captures the intensity of cross-border flows, such as commuting, shopping, tourism, and trade. Transport availability is both an enabling factor and an outcome of functional integration.
- The institutional dimension concerns the governance mechanisms and cooperative arrangements that facilitate or hinder CBC.
- The ideational dimension addresses perceptions and identities attached to the border.

Cross-border railway transport

Cross-border transport strengthens CBC and CBI in border regions, primarily their functional dimension. However, it also positively affects the ideational dimension of CBI. Efficient transport networks reduce transit times and costs. Political factors, including legal and administrative discrepancies and a lack of cooperation between countries and regions, can create barriers to effective transport integration (Medeiros 2019).

Cross-border railways are a crucial transport mode in countries with dense railway networks, such as Czechia (121.2 km of railway per 1,000 km²) and Poland (62 km of railway per 1,000 km²) (Eurostat 2025). However, establishing and maintaining cross-border railway connections face bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of coordinated planning. In many cases, the railway infrastructure in one country may not be compatible with that of its neighbor.

This issue is pronounced in regions where historical investments in railway infrastructure have varied significantly (Smolarski 2018).

Canceling cross-border railways

Canceling or dismantling cross-border railways has significant implications for regional connectivity and related sectors. Rail transport has historically been a cost-effective and efficient means of moving goods across borders. Closing railway lines can lead to increased reliance on road transport, which is often less sustainable and more expensive. Moreover, removing cross-border lines can decrease accessibility for residents in border areas. Railway infrastructure stimulates local economies by attracting businesses and facilitating tourism. For example, border towns that historically served as railway hubs have experienced economic decline following the closure of railway services, leading to reduced employment opportunities and emigration (Krzysztofik et al. 2014).

As the EU aims to create a unified railway area, the removal of cross-border connections contradicts the goals of interoperability and seamless travel across borders (Rojas-Morales et al. 2021). After the fall of socialism, railway closures were frequent in Central Eastern Europe due to economic and partly demographic reasons. In Poland, over 90% of third-category lines and more than 44% of second-category lines were closed between 1989 and 2011, while in Czechia, only 14% of regional lines were discontinued during this period (Taczanowski 2012).

Methods and data

We operationalize CBI dimensions (see the previous part) as follows:

- Structural: identification of dismantled versus operational railways, analysis of timetables, and assessment of infrastructural condition.
- Functional: mapping the frequency and type of services (regular, seasonal, tourist-oriented), and examining demand as expressed in interviews.
- Institutional: investigating the role of Euroregions, regional authorities, and transport associations in negotiating or operating cross-border connections.
- Ideational: interpreting interview statements and historical legacies that reveal perceptions of the neighboring side as accessible or distant.

This framework allows us to link historical path dependencies (Pierson 2000) with contemporary disparities in cross-border transport.

A variety of sources were utilized for desk research in this study. First, historical sources were examined to analyze the development of public transport, particularly railway transport, within the present-day Czech-Polish borderland. Second, professional publications on this topic were reviewed. These sources provided the basis for reconstructing the state of public transport across the Czech-Polish border in the past.

Another key data source consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with representatives from three types of crucial institutions:

- Euroregions along the Czech-Polish border (twelve interviews across six Euroregions conducted on both their Czech and Polish sides),
- transport departments at regional authorities (five interviews across five regional offices), and
- institutions responsible for coordinating and operating public transport (three interviews covering four regions: KORID in the Liberec Region, IREDO for the Hradec Králové and Pardubice Regions, and KODIS in the Moravian-Silesian Region).

Coordinating institutions exist only on the Czech side. On the Polish side, access to equivalent stakeholders was complicated by the decentralized structure of public transport management and the absence of strong regional coordinating bodies. Although voivodeships

in Poland formally have transport departments, their role is limited compared to the Czech regional governments.

Interviews aimed to assess the current state of public transport across the Czech-Polish border, gauge public demand, understand the level of interest from political leadership and relevant institutions, identify key obstacles to implementing cross-border connections, and determine whether efforts are being made to overcome these challenges. They were recorded and transcribed. The study cites their crucial parts. The respondents were previously informed about the purposes of the research.

The third data source consisted of current public transport timetables, which were accessed through online platforms such as IDOS.cz for the Czech side and jakojade for the Polish side or the official websites of transport carriers. All internet sources were last checked on August 11, 2025.

Finally, some of the collected data was visualized using GIS tools.

The language and style of this paper were refined using ChatGPT for clarity and consistency.

Results

Historical-geographical characteristics of the studied region

Before 1918, most of the current Czech-Polish border was the border between Austria-Hungary and Germany. The eastern part of the border (on the Olše/Olza River) did not exist, as compact Teschen Silesia was a part of Austria-Hungary (Kladivo et al. 2012). After World War I, Czechoslovakia and Poland were established as independent states. Teschen Silesia was divided, and so was the city of Teschen (Český Těšín and Cieszyn). After World War II, Poland's borders shifted to the west along the Oder/Odra-Nysa/Nysa line.

Many changes happened after 1989. They include the fall of the Iron Curtain, the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the foundation of independent Czechia (1993), the creation of Euroregions (1990s and 2000s), accession to the EU (2004) and the Schengen Area (2007). The current Czech-Polish border was formalized by the Treaty on Common State Boundaries in 1996 (Pászto et al. 2019).

When the studied border divided Austria-Hungary and Germany, it was freely passable because of large German communities in the Czech lands and friendly ties between the empires. These settings led to building most of the mentioned cross-border railways. After 1945, Czechoslovakia and Poland were not interested in intensive regional cross-border traffic, which led to the cancellation of many railways and a strict border regime (Rychlík 2017). The accession of both countries to the Schengen Area in 2007 meant the possibility of crossing the border freely without controls.

Population relocations after World War II have impacted the demographic and socio-economic landscape of the border region. Probably more so in Czechia than in Poland, when considering the differences between the affected borderland and core regions around the capitals. Generally, the Czech-Polish border shifted toward a peripheral status (Vaishar et al. 2013).

Except for the Teschen region, the borderland was inhabited predominantly by Germans. They were expelled in the turbulent post-war period. Generally, new settlers on both sides of the border rapidly repopulated the borderland, creating an industrialized region marked by high migration rates. Concerning the political situation in both Czechoslovakia and Poland at that time, there was no political interest of (pre)authoritarian regimes in cross-border contacts of the population, and the population itself, as an allochthonous element, did not show much interest in these contacts either.

The Czech-Polish border, stretching 796 km, runs through three Polish voivodeships (NUTS 2): Lower Silesian – Jelenia Góra and Wałbrzych (NUTS 3) Subregions, Opole – Nysa and Opole Subregions, and Silesian – Rybnik and Bielsko Subregions, and five Czech regions

(NUTS 3): Liberec, Hradec Králové, Pardubice, Olomouc, and Moravian-Silesian. Regarding Euroregions, Neisse-Nisa-Nysa, Glacensis, Pradęd/Pradziad, Silesia and Těšínské Slezsko/Śląsk Cieszyński lie along the border (see fig. 1).

In our analysis in the following parts of the study, we work mainly with the level of Czech regions, as they secure transport conditions and are small enough to cover local issues compared to much larger Polish voivodeships. Of course, we systematically include the adjacent Polish side, evaluating cross-border pairs at comparable spatial scales.

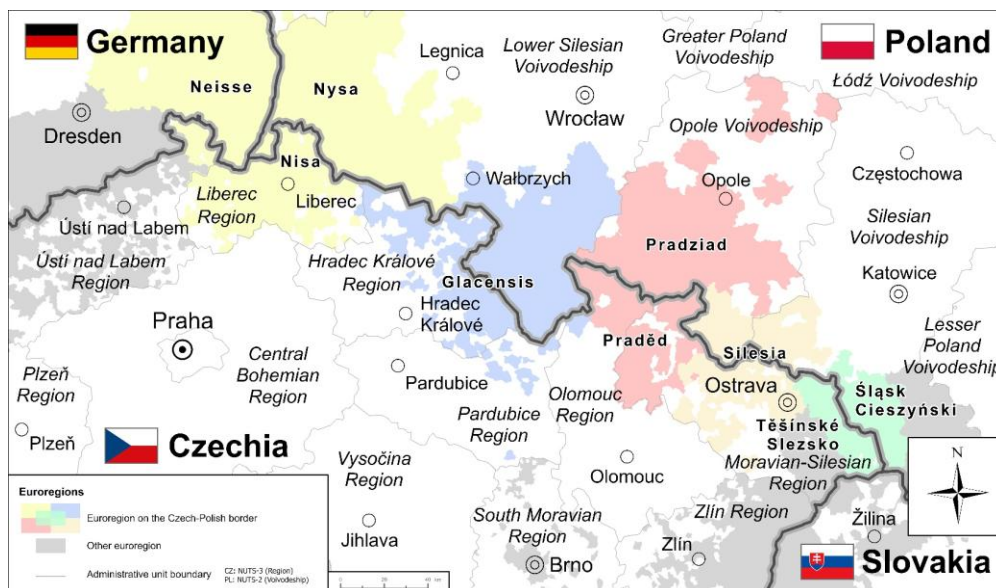


Fig. 1. Map of the Czech-Polish borderland, its administrative regions and Euroregions;
Source: Authors' elaboration

The Czech-Polish region was very industrial in the past in the areas of Liberec, Trutnov and Ostrava on the Czech side and Wałbrzych and Rybnik on the Polish side. After 1989, the borderland is undergoing an economic transformation from heavy industry and agriculture to light industry and services, especially tourism. On the one hand, many natural protected territories exist in the borderland, and on the other, several areas are polluted by mining and industry.

Despite transport deficiencies in some parts, the Czech-Polish border is known for functional CBI, especially in shopping and commuting to work, primarily dependent on car transport. Disparities in tourism infrastructure and accessibility remain challenges. Research indicates that the Czech side of the border often has better-developed tourism facilities than its Polish counterpart, highlighting the need for balanced development strategies (Kołodziejczyk 2020a). Despite the progress made in CBC, asymmetries in demography, economic development, infrastructural disparities, and differing regulatory frameworks can hinder effective collaboration in transport. For instance, the closure of railway lines and insufficient public transport connections have been identified as barriers to mobility and economic integration (Smolarski 2018).

Regional extraterritorial railways

Two unique cases of extraterritorial peage railways exist on the Czech-Polish border, and they are connected to problems with their condition and cross-border communication about their maintenance. Both railways are subject to the same international agreement between

Czechia and Poland (Sdělení č. 6/2007 Sb. m. s.) and were canceled several times after World War II, but were not dismantled.

From April 1, 1951, the railway transport from Liberec to Varnsdorf via Zittau was restored. Trains passed there without stopping, and passengers were not subject to passport or customs checks. Transit transport existed here already in the interwar period. Still, after the war, it could not be restored for a long time, according to the original Czechoslovak-German agreement, because the 5 km long section between Hrádek nad Nisou and the bridge across the Nisa/Nysa River became Polish territory. A special Czechoslovak-Polish agreement had to be concluded. In exchange for permission to pass through the territory of the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia allowed the transit of German Railways from Zittau to Seifhennersdorf via Varnsdorf (Rychlík 2017). This route is still problematic because of its state on the Polish side. Trains have to go there at around 20 km/h. However, there is a plan for reconstruction and even building a train stop in Porajów, a part of Bogatynia. After the end of the Czech-Polish dispute over the Turów Mine and its environmental effects, there is hope for success. It is worth adding that Czechia and Germany pay the Polish national carrier PKP for the transit. The train is operated by the Saxon company Die Länderbahn (trains Trilex). Until 2010, it was operated by the Czech Railways.

Another extraterritorial railway connects two parts of Czechia through the Polish town of Głucholazy. The intergovernmental agreement concluded between Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1948 set strict conditions (Sdělení č. 45/2005 Sb. m. s.). Passengers from Czech trains were not allowed to get off on Polish territory, they were not allowed to open the windows while driving on the Polish railway line, and they also had to close the curtains. Conversely, Polish citizens were not allowed to board Czech trains. Polish border guards with guns accompanied the Czech train throughout its stay in Poland. The train stopped at the border in a lighted and fenced zone. These restrictions were gradually eased, but even after 1989, entry and exit were prohibited in Głucholazy. The railway on the Polish territory is in bad condition, and the train runs there at 30 km/h. A reconstruction is planned, and a new stop in the historical center of the town should be added. There is a train stop in the center nowadays. Still, it is on a different rail, and infrastructural investments are needed to adapt the central railway station for the second track (Strauchmann 2024). Now the train stops 2.5 km from the center.

From an institutional perspective, the operation of extraterritorial railways illustrates how historical agreements continue to shape transport practices. Interview evidence confirms that even where physical infrastructure exists, formal regulations and informal arrangements jointly determine the actual usability of cross-border services, particularly in cases where governance responsibilities are unclear or politically sensitive. Ivo Muras, the head of the transport department of the Moravian-Silesian Region, said: *“Regarding Głucholazy, officially, passengers should not enter or leave the train there because of political and technical reasons. However, an informal agreement exists about permission for these actions.”* (interview, December 4, 2024) The interview also emphasized the transport and general development disproportion between the Teschen Silesia and the Opava, Raciborz, Krnov, and Głubczyce regions. Piotr Bąk, the employee of the Polish part of the Euroregion Pradziad, noted: *“There is a lack of effective public transport on the Polish-Czech border in the Euroregion Pradęd/Pradziad. Legal restrictions and a lack of interest on the part of private communication operators cause it. Another problem is the lack of stops on the Polish side for the Czech train, which makes traveling less attractive even for Czechs.”* (interview, April 10, 2024)

Current status of cross-border public railway transport

While some border sections experience relatively frequent cross-border connections, others have none. The frequency of these connections largely depends on the Czech side's approach,

as Poland lacks equivalent regional integrated transport systems or regional transport associations. Consequently, negotiations for establishing cross-border services are more challenging. Interview data consistently confirm this asymmetry. Czech respondents repeatedly referred to the existence of regional transport coordinators as a prerequisite for negotiating cross-border services and the lack of such bodies on the Polish side.

Eight operational cross-border railway connections exist between Czechia and Poland (tab. 1).

Tab. 1. *Historical overview of railway connections across the Czech-Polish border and their current use*

Railway	Time of opening a cross-border connection	Operation status (year of termination of cross-border passenger traffic)
(Liberec –) Hrádek nad Nisou – Porajów – Zittau	1859	Travel possible only from Czechia to Germany
Frýdlant – Bogatynia – Zittau	1889	Dismantled (1945)
Frýdlant – Zgorzelec	1875	Passenger traffic canceled (1945)
Jindřichovice pod Smrkem – Pobiedna/Gryfów Śląski	1904	Dismantled (1945)
Harrachov – Szklarska Poręba	1902	Functional
(Trutnov –) Královec – Kamienna Góra	1869	Functional
Meziměstí – Mieroszów (– Wałbrzych)	1878	Regular passenger transport canceled (2003), only seasonal trains Wrocław – Adršpach
Otovice – Tłumaczów – Ścinawka Średnia	1889	Dismantled (1946)
Náchod – Kudowa Zdrój	1945	Dismantled (1947)
Lichkov – Kłodzko (– Wrocław)*	1875	Functional
Bernartice – Otmuchów	1893	Dismantled (1945)
Vidnava – Nysa	1911	Dismantled (1945)
Jeseník – Glucholazy – Krnov	1875/1888	Travel possible only from Czechia to Czechia, with an informal stop in Glucholazy
Krnov – Glubczyce	1873	Dismantled (1945)
Opava-západ – Pilscz	1909	Dismantled (1945)
Chuchelná – Racibórz	1895	Dismantled (1945)
Bohumín – Chalupki*	1847	Functional
Bohumín – Zebrzydowice*	1855	Functional
Český Těšín – Cieszyn	1888	Functional

* international connections with InterCity relevance

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Graff (2017)

Liberec – Zittau (via Poland)

The westernmost route runs from Liberec through Porajów, where trains do not stop, to Zittau in Saxony and Dresden. Despite its primarily regional significance, this line offers many connections, including semi-fast services that bypass less important stops. Establishing

a stop in Porajów is considered too administratively burdensome by operators. The cross-border service is not part of the Integrated Transport of the Liberec Region (IDOL).

Harrachov – Szklarska Poręba

Another cross-border railway operates near Harrachov, where line L1 runs between Liberec and Szklarska Poręba. It operates four times on weekdays and six times per day on weekends. The route is included in IDOL only up to Harrachov, and it mainly serves visitors traveling to the Jizera and the Giant Mountains.

Trutnov – Kamienna Góra – Sędziszów

In the Hradec Králové Region, a railway line connects Trutnov with Kamienna Góra. Cross-border operations take place on the Královce – Kamienna Góra – Sędziszów section (line D66) with seven daily connections operated by Koleje Dolnośląskie. In Královce, passengers must transfer to a Czech train. Some services originate from Trutnov (line 043 Trutnov – Lubawka, three times daily), but the cross-border section is not integrated into the regional transport system IREDO.

Meziměstí – Wałbrzych (seasonal)

The second railway connection in the Hradec Králové Region links Meziměstí with Wałbrzych. Currently, this route operates only as a seasonal service for tourists. Line D67 connects Adršpach and Meziměstí on the Czech side with Wałbrzych and Wrocław in Poland. Operated by Koleje Dolnośląskie, this line primarily caters to Polish tourists visiting the rock formations in the Broumov region. However, it is also helpful for Czech travelers who want to visit Wrocław or the Polish border region.

Lichkov – Wrocław

One of the most significant international railway connections runs between Lichkov (Pardubice Region) and Wrocław. This route provides relatively fast access from the Lower Silesian capital to major Czech cities such as Prague and Brno. Leo Express operates six daily services on this route, requiring passengers traveling from Prague to Wrocław to transfer in Lichkov. These services are not integrated into IREDO. Meanwhile, České dráhy offers four daily direct connections within predominantly tourist EuroCity (EC) trains between Prague and Wrocław (and Gdynia), also not included in IREDO. Koleje Dolnośląskie operates an additional daily train from Lichkov to Wrocław and Rawicz, which is likewise not integrated. Interestingly, despite being classified as regional trains, these services stop at almost every station, making them useful for local cross-border mobility.

Jeseník – Krnov via Głucholazy

A railway line connecting Jeseník and Krnov (the Olomouc Region and the Moravian-Silesian Region) runs through Głucholazy. Officially, this is considered a transit route, operating four times daily. However, in practice, passengers can disembark, board, and purchase tickets from Głucholazy, allowing Czech travelers to continue further into Poland. Onward connections into the Polish interior are infrequent (only twice daily), limiting the attractiveness of this route. Additionally, the Czech train stops at a station on the outskirts of Głucholazy rather than the central railway station, where Polish trains stop – perhaps why unofficial boarding and alighting are permitted. Unfortunately, this route does not offer better connectivity between the Jeseníky Mountains, a popular destination for Polish tourists, and nearby Polish cities, as it could have a similar impact on tourism as the Adršpach connection. The route is not integrated into the Czech regional transport system beyond the respective regional borders.

Bohumín – Chałupki

The Bohumín – Chałupki line is part of a major international corridor extending to Katowice and Warsaw. Czech trains typically start in Bohumín or Ostrava, but some services continue to Brno, Prague, or Břeclav. On the Polish side, certain trains extend to Opole and Wrocław. In addition to EC and InterCity (IC) services, regional trains operate between Bohumín and Katowice. The latter is a well-utilized route, though the cross-border service is not integrated into the Moravian-Silesian Integrated Transport System (ODIS).

Bohumín – Zebrzydowice

Another railway connection runs between Bohumín and Zebrzydowice, serving several international long-distance trains, including connections to Kraków, Břeclav, Prague, Vienna, and Budapest. However, no regional trains operate on this route.

Český Těšín – Cieszyn

The only cross-border railway line integrated into ODIS (although passengers must purchase a special ticket for CZK 20) is the Český Těšín – Cieszyn route. The S7 service operates nine times daily, connecting Frýdek-Místek with Cieszyn.

Abandoned railway lines on the Czech-Polish border

The Czech-Polish border has more abandoned railway lines than any other section of the Czech and Polish international borders. Notably, operations on these lines ceased exclusively between 1944 and 1946 due to the retreat of the German army and the subsequent post-war distrust between Czechoslovakia and Poland. As a result, cross-border railway sections were deliberately dismantled, and the tracks were removed.

The situation was further exacerbated by a gradual cancellation of local railway transport in Poland during the socialist era. This trend peaked in the 1990s. Silesia, once home to one of the densest railway networks in the world, saw widespread track closures and service reductions (Miszewska and Szmytkie 2015). Besides backbone routes, railway transport on the Polish side remains sparse, although recent signs indicate potential improvements.

Abandoned lines in the Liberec Region

One of the abandoned lines once connected Frýdlant with what is now the town of Bogatynia and Zittau. The route was discontinued due to the opening of the Turów brown coal mine. Restoration of this line is, therefore, not feasible. There is now a local road on the route of the former railway. The road is interrupted by a concrete barrier on the Czech-Polish border next to the former railway station in Heřmanice. Heřmanice officials installed this barrier because of alleged raids by motorized Polish burglars into the Czech territory (fig. 2).

Another discontinued route runs from Černousy to Zgorzelec. If the Polish section was reconstructed, it could be reopened, linking the Liberec region to the Polish railway network or connecting the Frýdlant region with the German railway system via Görlitz.

A second abandoned railway section is the short stretch between Jindřichovice pod Smrkem and Mirsk. Restoration is technically possible, and the Polish side has already revived the railway to the spa town and mountain resort of Świeradów-Zdrój, which could be easily reached via Mirsk. However, the area is currently connected to the Czech side by bus line 691, which conveniently stops near the ski slopes, whereas the railway station is located in a valley below the town. Although restoring train service is not impossible, it remains unlikely.



Fig. 2. Roadblock between Heřmanice and Bogatynia; Source: Authors

Abandoned lines in the Hradec Králové Region

Two abandoned cross-border railway sections are located in the Hradec Králové Region: Otovice – Tłumaczów and Náchod – Kudowa-Zdrój. Both were deliberately destroyed in 1945 due to Polish concerns that the Czechoslovak army might attempt to occupy the Kłodzko region. These are relatively short sections that could still be reinstated today.

On the Polish side, there have been initial discussions about restoring the Otovice railway, as it would link two desirable tourist destinations: the Broumov region in Czechia and the Kłodzko and Owl Mountains in Poland. However, the idea remains in its early stages. Similar discussions have emerged regarding the Náchod railway, but here, two competing bus routes, line 392 from Náchod and line 352 from Hronov, currently provide better service at a lower cost.

While buses are more economically viable, railway restoration could offer an advantage in avoiding the frequent traffic congestion on the Náchod – Kudowa-Zdrój road. A railway connection would allow tourists to bypass these delays. Jaroslav Štefek, the secretary of the Czech part of the Euroregion Glacensis, stated: “*Railways belong to the priorities of the Hradec Králové regional government. Recently, the restoration of the railway between Broumov and Tłumaczow has also been addressed at the regional level. About 3 km of tracks are missing in the border area. Renewal is seen as a means of regional development and reducing car traffic, evident in Adršpach after introducing train lines from Poland.*” (interview, October 16, 2024) Notably, cargo traffic exists from the basalt quarry in Tłumaczów to the Polish inland. Štefek’s statement highlights the differences in regional political priorities, with some Czech regions explicitly framing railway restoration as a development and environmental policy tool rather than a purely transportation issue.

Abandoned lines in the Olomouc Region, specifically the Jeseník District

In the Jeseník District, two additional abandoned railway lines exist: Bernartice – Otmuchów and Vidnava – Nysa. Infrastructure is missing primarily on the Polish side, where these sections were dismantled entirely. While both routes could help connect this peripheral area with the tourist-attractive Polish borderland, such as Otmuchów and Nysa lakes, which could appeal to visitors from the Jeseníky and Rychlebské Mountains, restoration is unlikely due to financial constraints. Additionally, the Olomouc Region is not interested in operating cross-border rail services.

Abandoned lines in the Moravian-Silesian Region

The last three abandoned railway lines are located in the Moravian-Silesian region: Krnov – Głubczyce, Opava-západ – Pilszcz, and Chuchelná – Racibórz. This region once had a dense railway network, but after the closure of cross-border sections, the Polish side rationalized its network by shutting down less significant routes.

The potential benefits of restoring these lines are debatable, as the Polish border region is accessible via Bohumín. Furthermore, the area is not a major tourist attraction. If any cross-border transport services were introduced, they would most likely be bus routes rather than rail connections. Roman Tománek, the secretary of the Czech part of the Euroregion Silesia, remarked: *“Our Euroregion Silesia was founded primarily to coordinate the building quality road connection between Opava and Racibórz with bypasses of settlements. However, in the end, the priorities of political representations were different.”* (interview, November 4, 2024) This statement shows that there were no efforts to rebuild the railway between Chuchelná and Racibórz, which would allow transport between Opava and Racibórz. Still, some Polish representatives can view the public transport situation in the region as good. Daria Kardaczyńska, the director of the Polish part of the Euroregion Silesia, stated: *“Sometimes, someone asks why there are no buses connecting Racibórz and Opava or other towns in the borderland. Such a connection would already exist and be managed by a private company if a mass demand existed. We have the advantage that we can get on the train in Chalupki or Racibórz and go to Bohumín or Ostrava and then continue with other connections.”* (interview, November 19, 2024) However, this preference for the main railway corridor brings the skip effect to border settlements around Opava and Racibórz. The contrasting interview statements of national parts representatives demonstrate a clear divergence in problem framing. While Czech actors emphasize the need for connectivity and institutional responsibility, Polish representatives tend to interpret the absence of services as a demand-driven issue rather than a governance failure.

Current status of cross-border public bus transport

Apart from commercial routes connecting major cities on both sides of the border, such as Prague, Ostrava, Wrocław, and the Katowice conurbation, several local bus lines cater to regional demand. However, the availability of these services varies significantly by region (fig. 3).

Cross-border bus services in the Liberec Region

The Liberec Region is one of the more active regions in commissioning cross-border public transport. As part of the IDOL system, it operates routes 691 and 630 to Świeradów-Zdrój.

- Route 691 runs three times a day, twice departing from Zittau and once from Hrádek nad Nisou. It travels through Bogatynia before re-entering Czechia, stopping in Frýdlant, Raspenava, and Nové Město pod Smrkem, and terminating in Świeradów-Zdrój. This service crosses the border five times, connecting three countries and effectively replacing discontinued railway lines in the Frýdlant region.

- Route 630 typically operates between Prague and Liberec but extends to Świeradów-Zdrój on weekends. It stops in Frýdlant, Raspenava, Hejnice, and Nové Město pod Smrkem, targeting tourists from Prague seeking access to hiking trails in the Jizera Mountains.
- Route 645 serves commuters, transporting workers to the Liberec South industrial zone. It runs three times a day, aligning with work shifts, and includes stops in Bogatynia.
- Route 669 also connects the South Industrial Zone, linking it with Zawidów, Wrociszów, Sulików, Koźmin, and Zgorzelec. Previously, services were extended to Bogatynia, but this was discontinued due to low demand, as the Turów energy complex provides intense local employment competition.

These industrial zone routes are among the few for commuter transport rather than tourism.

Beyond IDOL routes, some commercial long-distance services operate in the region. For example, a line runs from Karlovy Vary via Prague and Liberec to Bogatynia, Zgorzelec, and Legnica, continuing to Ukraine. FlixBus also provides cross-border services, such as a route connecting Harrachov, Szklarska Poręba, and Jelenia Góra before continuing toward Białystok. However, these buses operate only once per day, limiting their impact on cross-border mobility.



Fig. 3. Map of cross-border public transport connections;
Source: Authors' elaboration, data IDOS.cz (2025) and jakojade (2025)

Cross-border bus services in the Hradec Králové Region

The Hradec Králové Region has a relatively high number of cross-border bus services to Poland:

- Seasonal Route IREDO 401 operates a circular route connecting Trutnov, Žaclěř, Královec, Bernartice, and Trutnov again, with three weekend services extending from Královec to Lubawka.
- FlixBus Services between Prague and Warsaw via Wrocław pass through Lubawka, with stops in Trutnov and Kamienna Góra. A second FlixBus service runs from Prague via Wrocław to Olsztyn, both operating twice daily.
- Route IREDO 378 connects Broumov and Otovice with Polish villages such as Tłumaczów, Ścinawka Górna, Włodowice, and Nowa Ruda. However, it operates only once per day.

- Routes to Kudowa-Zdrój: The Polish spa town is well connected to Czechia:
 - Route IREDO 382 runs every 90 minutes to Náchod.
 - Route IREDO 352 operates three times a day to Hronov.
 - CDS Náchod offers four weekday and two weekend services between Náchod, Kudowa-Zdrój, and Kłodzko.

Several commercial long-distance routes pass through Kudowa-Zdrój, but they are not viable for regional travel.

While cross-border services exist in this region, there is untapped potential for better connectivity between touristically attractive mountain and rock city destinations.

Gaps in cross-border bus services

A long section of the Czech-Polish border between Náchod and the Ostrava metropolitan areas lacks public bus connections. Even attractive Czech mountain regions have failed to attract Polish transport providers to establish regular routes.

Ostrava is well-connected to Polish cities via multiple long-distance routes. Most travel from Ostrava to Katowice and Kraków or toward Warsaw via Częstochowa. A few exceptions include:

- FlixBus Route N1309, which stops in Jastrzębie-Zdrój before reaching Katowice.
- FlixBus Route N1395, which serves Rybnik, Gliwice, and Zabrze.

Since these are long-haul routes operating across Central Europe, their departure times are often inconvenient for regional travel and prices for short distances are high. None of these routes is integrated into the Czech transport system.

Cross-border public transport between Czechia and Poland faces additional challenges due to Poland's administrative structure, which lacks regional integrated transport systems or public transport associations. In rail transport, cooperation is managed through the PKP and regional self-government operators Koleje Dolnośląskie in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship and Koleje Śląskie in the Silesian Voivodeship. In contrast, bus transport is funded and operated at the municipal and local levels. As a result, collaboration between Czech regions and Polish voivodeships has yet to materialize due to Poland's complex public transport funding and organization system.

Discussion

The interpretation of the obtained data can be done on several levels. Firstly, it is a historical perspective, where we identified five phases of cross-border railway development:

1. Imperial period (1871-1918) – the emergence of cross-border railway connections between Austria-Hungary and Germany, with a highly permeable border.
2. Interwar/war period (1919-1945) – the emergence of new countries such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, a less permeable border, but especially the Czechoslovak-German border was still relatively permeable and regional railways were in operation.
3. (Pre)Socialist period (1946-1989) – less permeable border than in the previous period, cross-border railways often canceled or even dismantled for geopolitical reasons.
4. Pre-Schengen democratic period (1990-2006) – democratization, mitigation of border crossing barriers, but without renewal of cross-border railways.
5. Schengen period (2007-present) – intensive cross-border contacts without any barriers, renewal of one railway connection, several plans for reviving other connections with the help of the EU funds and push from the regional governments, still entrenched preference for less costly and binding bus connections.

A pivotal moment in the history of the Czech-Polish borderland occurred between 1945 and 1948 when a population exchange took place, severing long-established cross-border ties.

Following the expulsion of Germans, the borderland was repopulated by Czech and Polish migrants with little incentive to interact across the border. Exceptions to this pattern included Teschen Silesia and certain areas of Eastern Bohemia. The subsequent imposition of politically motivated restrictions on border crossings further reinforced the division between the two states.

The second perspective evaluates the post-World War II development through the analytical framework for studying CBI:

- Structurally, cross-border connections were severed, both in terms of infrastructure and the marginalization of border areas, as once densely populated industrial territories were transformed into peripheral zones with disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions.
- Functionally, cross-border mobility and economic ties were severely restricted by authoritarian regimes.
- Institutionally, regional governance structures weakened in line with the logic of socialist centralization, while distant administrative centers gained influence, further undermining CBI.
- Ideationally, the largely inaccessible and difficult-to-cross border created a sense of separation, rendering the territory beyond it unfamiliar.

De-bordering after the Schengen Area accession in 2007 was not complete. In regions actively promoting CBC in public transport, new cross-border routes have been introduced – primarily bus lines rather than rail, due to their lower operational costs and greater flexibility. Notable examples include the Liberec and Hradec Králové Regions. In contrast, most of the border remains without cross-border public transport connections. This disparity is primarily because cross-border public transport is currently driven by tourism (Kołodziejczyk 2020b). If the neighboring subregion lacks appeal in this regard, institutional support for cross-border transport remains minimal. In this context, dismantling cross-border railways established a path-dependent trajectory (Pierson 2000) of road-based transport preference and administrative inertia determined by historical institutional arrangements and infrastructural investments.

Assessing the level of change in CBI reveals that, while significant progress has been made in all areas, there remain aspects where further improvements could be expected.

- From a structural perspective, cross-border infrastructure has not been fully restored, particularly in railway connections and road networks. Many border subregions remain economically marginalized and face population decline.
- Functionally, cross-border mobility has increased, yet it is driven more by differences in product prices and tourism rather than substantial economic ties, with cross-border commuting occurring only in specific subregions.
- Institutionally, considerable progress has been achieved thanks to rebuilding the local government and cross-border municipal connections, also facilitated by INTERREG projects. Still, in cases where subsidy programs do not cover specific activities, such as the operation of cross-border public transport routes, regional interest remains limited. Cooperation is further complicated by the structural imbalance between Czech regions and their Polish counterparts, which consist mainly of districts and municipalities. Institutional perspectives collected through interviews reveal that cross-border transport deficits are not solely a matter of infrastructure, but also of governance capacity, administrative coordination, and political prioritization. The institutional fragmentation observed on the Polish side corresponds with ongoing expert and policy debates on reforming public transport governance. Recent discussions surrounding the draft Act on Public Collective Transport (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2025) have emphasized the need for more inclusive public transport, particularly stronger regional coordination structures, drawing inspiration from Czechia and Slovakia. This activity is also in line with Polish efforts to improve the condition of the above-mentioned extraterritorial railways.

- From an ideational CBI perspective, the long history of restricted border crossings and the absence of cross-border infrastructure have shaped the perceptions of current generations, for whom the region across the border remains, in many cases, unknown territory.

A perspective to consider is the analysis of results through the lens of the center-periphery dichotomy, where much of the Czech-Polish borderland is considered peripheral, with needs that starkly contrast those of the more centrally located urban centers. For instance, when planning public transportation, the small population of the Jeseník District is afforded much lower priority compared to the larger Olomouc agglomeration. From the perspective of the central region, the primary concern is facilitating public transportation to connect these remote areas to the regional hub, but extending services beyond the state border is typically not a priority. This approach, however, exacerbates the negative impact of the border effect.

Our findings align with other studies conducted in the Czech-Polish borderland. For instance, Böhm et al. (2024) examine the impact of border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic on cross-border cooperation, drawing similar conclusions regarding the effects of these closures on cross-border relations as outlined in this article. Additionally, Böhm et al. (2025) present the perceptions of the border among young people in the Teschen Silesia region. Their study reveals that, despite this region being the most active in cross-border interactions within the entire Czech-Polish border area, many respondents only visited the neighboring territory sporadically and had limited familiarity with it. The notable exception was members of the Polish minority in Czechia, who were more familiar with and frequently visited both sides of the border. Persistent difficulties with the permeability of the Czech-Polish border, especially in the central section, are stated in the work of Kolejka et al. (2015), and we can confirm this finding. Additionally, existing studies on cross-border transport in Central Europe have convincingly demonstrated the importance of accessibility patterns, service efficiency, and institutional coordination (Roider et al. 2018, Cavallaro and Dianin 2020, Wilczewska 2024). Our findings complement this literature by demonstrating that, even where formal cross-border connections exist, their contemporary performance is significantly influenced by historically embedded policy decisions and asymmetric national priorities. This suggests that accessibility-based or efficiency-oriented evaluations alone may underestimate the role of long-term path dependencies.

Conclusions

The study is the first comprehensive and historically grounded analysis of dismantled and unrealized railway connections across the Czech-Polish border. It highlights the persistent challenges stemming from historical decisions, geopolitical shifts, and socioeconomic disparities. Despite European integration and the promise of seamless cross-border mobility, the Czech-Polish borderland remains affected by transport fragmentation, limited railway connections, and infrastructural deficiencies.

The text identifies five key phases in the evolution of cross-border railway networks. Due to geopolitical tensions and population resettlement, dismantling numerous railway lines in the mid-20th century has left a lasting impact, with many routes never being reinstated. Historical divisions shape contemporary mobility patterns. Overcoming these barriers will require sustained political commitment, strategic investments, and a recognition of transport infrastructure's vital role in regional development. Economic constraints, political inertia, and the preference for road transport over railway investment continue to hinder these efforts.

The interview material highlights that institutional fragmentation and asymmetrical governance structures are among the most persistent obstacles to improving cross-border transport. It complements the infrastructural analysis and provides a basis for policy recommendations in the following paragraphs.

Findings suggest that while specific subregions, particularly those with obvious economic or tourism potential, have seen improvements in transport links, others remain marginalized. The findings also lead to several recommendations. We suggest that enhancing cross-border railway accessibility in peripheral border regions necessitates targeted policy interventions centered on institutional coordination rather than isolated infrastructural investments. In line with evidence from the cases involving extraterritorial railways, progress often depends on proactive advocacy by regional and local authorities, particularly in addressing critical bottlenecks located on foreign territory, where sustained sub-national cross-border pressure frequently proves more effective than relying solely on national governments.

Cross-border fare integration should be treated as a core accessibility instrument, building on existing models of integrated regional ticketing, rather than as a supplementary measure. In parallel, the strategic placement of new or reactivated stops, preferably within town centers or near major tourist destinations and multimodal hubs, is essential to ensure that infrastructure investments translate into tangible accessibility gains. At a systemic level, reforms in inter-governmental fiscal arrangements are necessary to reflect cross-border mobility patterns in budget allocations, enabling stable, long-term funding rather than short-term, project-based solutions. Finally, strengthening institutional cooperation through Euroregions and more formalized governance frameworks, including European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, could provide co-management mechanisms for cross-border services and reduce dependence on fragmented or outdated bilateral structures. Supporting regional integration, economic cooperation, and sustainable transport development aligns with the broader EU cohesion objectives. Additionally, the symbolic dimension represented by bilingual signage could support transportation integration.

The Czech-Polish border has the most canceled cross-border railways in the EU. In the second place is the German-Polish border. A comparison between these borders highlights many similarities. In both cases, geopolitical realignments and post-war distrust led to the deliberate removal of numerous railway links, especially across rivers or in peripheral areas, while preserving the crucial international corridors. However, the economic strength of Germany and efforts to unite European space manifested in re-establishing three connections after the fall of socialism, compared to one on the Czech-Polish border, which is almost twice as long.

The study advances understanding of border studies by applying a multidimensional cross-border integration framework to transport infrastructure, showing how structural, institutional, and ideational factors intersect in shaping mobility. However, it is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis primarily relies on available secondary data, which may not fully capture all socioeconomic and political factors influencing cross-border railway development. Second, the study mainly focuses on transport infrastructure and policy aspects, while other factors, such as public perception, environmental concerns, and private sector involvement, could also offer additional insights. Third, the differing structures of transport coordination institutions in Czechia and Poland result in certain unevenness in the number of interviews.

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