

Functional micro-region and its cultural potential: Skalica, Slovakia

Pavel Beták^{1*} 

¹ Slovak University of Technology, Institute of Urban Design and Planning, Bratislava, Slovakia

*Corresponding author

E-mail: pavel.betak@stuba.sk

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Abstract: This paper addresses the issue of the development and cooperation of micro-regions in the context of their cultural potential, which represents a significant, yet in practice often insufficiently and unsystematically utilised, territorial development factor. The topic reflects both the current academic discourse and the needs of applied practice and has a distinctly interdisciplinary character extending across the fields of spatial planning, regional development, cultural policy, and sustainable tourism. Despite the growing interest in this issue, the set of instruments for managing development processes at the micro-regional level remains, in many respects, theoretically and methodologically underdeveloped. The paper is based on research conducted in the Horné Záhorie micro-region (Skalica district) in Slovakia, defined as a geographically and functionally coherent area located between the White Carpathians, the Little Carpathians, and the Morava River, characterised by strong historical, cultural, and cross-border linkages. The aim of the paper is to identify, through an analysis of spatial, socio-cultural, and development processes, the key factors influencing the degree of cooperation among actors within the territory, as well as the ways in which cultural potential is reflected in strategic and planning documents. Based on the synthesis of the findings, recommendations are formulated to improve the effectiveness of development strategies and to strengthen cooperation at the micro-regional level. The generalisation of the identified approaches and diagnostic conclusions creates conditions for their application not only within the Slovak Republic, but also in a broader context of comparable micro-regions within the European Union, particularly in cross-border areas with similar structural characteristics.

Keywords: micro-region, regional development, cultural potential, cross-border cooperation, cultural landscape, Horné Záhorie, regional identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The issues of regional development and territorial cohesion currently rank among the key topics of academic discourse in the fields of urbanism, regional planning, and related disciplines. Increasing attention is being shifted from the national and regional levels towards smaller functional territorial units, including micro-regions. These represent a spatial intermediary between the local and regional scales and possess the potential to respond to specific development challenges through the mobilisation of endogenous resources, the strengthening of cooperation among settlements, and the creation of synergistic relationships within the territory that transcend the administrative boundaries of individual municipalities (Barca, 2009; ESPON, 2019).

One of the most significant endogenous resources of micro-regions is their cultural potential, encompassing tangible and intangible cultural assets, historical layers of settlement, cultural landscapes, local traditions, and forms of social life. In the context of regional development, cultural potential is perceived not only as a carrier of territorial identity, but also as a tool for strengthening social cohesion, increasing regional attractiveness, and support-

ing economic diversification, particularly through culturally oriented forms of tourism and leisure activities (Throsby, 2010; Richards, 2011; OECD, 2014). Despite the growing interest in this topic, the systematic integration of cultural potential into micro-regional development strategies remains insufficiently explored from an academic perspective, especially in relation to spatial planning and architectural-urban aspects of territorial development.

A specific category within regional development is represented by cross-border micro-regions, whose development is shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic linkages extending beyond state borders. In the European context, characterised by integration processes, the strengthening of territorial cooperation, and the promotion of the concept of a "Europe of Regions", cross-border cooperation has acquired strategic importance as a tool for mitigating regional disparities and fostering territorial cohesion (Paasi, 2002; Studzieniecki, 2005; Stoffelen, 2018). Research also indicates that the development of cross-border regions is closely linked to the quality of institutional cooperation, the degree of involvement of local actors, and the capacity to co-

ordinate and sustainably utilise the cultural and landscape resources of the territory (Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2017; Timothy and Gelbman, 2022).

This paper focuses on the Horné Záhorie micro-region in the Skalica district in Slovakia, which represents a typical example of a cross-border area with strong historical and cultural ties to neighbouring regions of the Czech Republic, particularly South Moravia. The geographical delimitation of the area between the White Carpathians, the Little Carpathians, and the Morava River creates a specific landscape and spatial framework in which significant cultural, architectural, and natural values are concentrated. The historical continuity of settlement, cultural landscape, and the interdependence of settlements create favourable conditions for the development of the micro-region based on the principles of sustainability, slow tourism, and the efficient use of local resources (Norberg-Schulz, 1994; Benkó et al., 2019).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the cultural potential of the Horné Záhorie micro-region in the context of its spatial structure and to identify its significance for strengthening cooperation and territorial cohesion. Based on the analysis of spatial, socio-cultural, and strategic aspects of territorial development, the paper highlights opportunities for a more effective use of cultural resources as a development tool for the micro-region. At the same time, it provides a basis for formulating recommendations applicable not only within the conditions of the Slovak Republic, but also in the broader context of comparable cross-border micro-regions within the European Union.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1. Cultural potential as a factor of regional development

In contemporary academic literature, the cultural potential of a region is understood as a complex set of tangible and intangible cultural resources that are embedded in a specific territory and shape its identity, social life, and development opportunities. It includes historical and architectural heritage, cultural landscapes, local traditions, language and dialects, folklore, crafts, as well as networks of cultural institutions, actors, and events that contribute to the creation and reproduction of cultural values. Cultural potential is also a dynamic category whose value depends not only on the mere existence of cultural resources, but also on the ways in which they are interpreted, managed, presented, and integrated into territorial development strategies (Throsby, 2010; UNESCO, 2016).

In the context of regional development, culture does not serve exclusively a representational or leisure function; rather, it acts as a significant developmental factor capable of strengthening social cohesion, improving the quality of life of residents, and contributing to the economic diversification of regions. This approach is particularly relevant for peripheral and rural areas, where traditional economic sectors often stagnate and where cultural and natural potential becomes one of the main resources for territorial development and stabilisation (OECD, 2014; Richards, 2011). The importance of cultural potential is also closely linked to the concept of sustainable development, which emphasises the need for balance among the economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions of territorial development, as well as their long-term mutual compatibility.

2.2. Regional identity and spatial dimension of development

Regional identity represents a key concept for understanding the relationship between inhabitants and the territory in which they live and with which they identify. At the theoretical level, regional identity is understood as a social construct that emerges through

processes of historical development, social interaction, and the spatial anchoring of human activities (Paasi, 1986; Paasi, 2002). Paasi distinguishes between the identity of a region, which expresses its external image, symbolism, and recognisability, and the regional identity of inhabitants, which reflects the degree of their identification with a given territory. Both dimensions are of fundamental importance for regional development, as they influence residents' willingness to participate in development processes, the degree of their social embeddedness, and the capacity of a region to assert itself within broader spatial and institutional contexts.

From an architectural and urban perspective, territorial identity is closely linked to the spatial structure of settlements, the historical continuity of habitation, and the relationship between the built environment and the surrounding landscape. The concept of *genius loci*, elaborated primarily by Christian Norberg-Schulz, highlights the importance of unique spatial qualities of place that shape its recognisability, atmosphere, and legibility (Norberg-Schulz, 1994). Similarly, Kevin Lynch emphasises the role of the mental image of the city and spatial legibility as prerequisites for identity and orientation within the environment (Lynch, 1960). In this understanding, territorial identity represents a long-term enduring quality that is capable of absorbing spatial and functional changes without losing its fundamental meaning and character (Rossi, 1982).

2.3. Micro-regions and cross-border cooperation in the European context

Micro-regions represent functional territorial units that emerge on the basis of historical, social, economic, and spatial linkages among settlements. Compared to administratively defined regions, micro-regions are more flexible in character and allow for a more effective response to specific local and supra-local development challenges, particularly through the coordination of actors at the local level (Barca, 2009). Their importance increases especially in border areas, where administrative boundaries often fail to reflect real functional, cultural, and social relationships within the territory. Cross-border micro-regions are characterised by the overlap of cultural patterns, economic linkages, and social interactions, creating conditions for the emergence of complementary development models.

Research on European cross-border regions indicates that the success of their development depends on the quality of institutional cooperation, the level of involvement of local actors, and the ability to coordinate the use of cultural and landscape resources in a systematic and long-term manner (Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2017; Stoffelen, 2018). An important role in this process is played by European Union cohesion policy instruments, particularly the Interreg programmes, which support joint planning, project implementation, and the exchange of experience among regions (ESPON, 2019). In the Central European context, characterised by a shared historical development and intensive cross-border linkages, micro-regions represent an important platform for integrating cultural potential into development processes. The use of cultural landscapes, historic settlements, and local traditions as development resources creates favourable conditions for strengthening regional identity, promoting sustainable tourism, and enhancing the long-term viability of the territory (Timothy and Gelbman, 2022; Benkó et al., 2019).

3. MATERIALS, DATA, AND METHODS

The research is designed as an interdisciplinary case study focusing on the analysis of cultural potential and its role in the development and cooperation of the Horné Záhorie micro-region and the adjacent areas of South Moravia. The methodological

framework combines approaches from urbanism and architectural-spatial analysis, demography, regional and spatial planning, and cultural geography. It is based on the assumption that development processes in a territory have a pronounced spatial, social, and cultural character, and that their understanding requires an integrated approach linking quantitative and qualitative analytical tools (Paasi, 2002; Barca, 2009).

3.1. Research design and analytical procedure

The research is conducted as a sequential multi-method design comprising five analytical phases. The first phase consisted of a quantitative demographic analysis aimed at identifying long-term population trends and internal demographic disparities within the micro-region, based on data from the years 2001, 2011, 2021, and 2024. The second phase focused on spatial analysis using GIS, examining the settlement structure, spatial relationships among settlements, and the landscape framework of the territory, including their mutual spatial interactions. The third phase involved systematic mapping of cultural and natural heritage through field research and the analysis of cartographic sources and recreational routes (utilising documentation from the project “Research Centre for the Earliest History of the Middle Danube Region 2010–2013,” GIS analyses, and datasets from OpenStreetMap). The fourth phase consisted of a structured content analysis of strategic and development documents of towns and municipalities. The fifth phase comprised the synthesis of partial findings and the interpretation of cultural, natural, and so-

cial potential as a developmental and stabilising factor of the micro-regional system. This analytical framework enabled the triangulation of statistical data, spatial datasets, and qualitative interpretative sources, thereby enhancing the methodological robustness of the research.

3.2. Definition of the study area and research design

The study area is the Horné Záhorie micro-region, located in the northern part of the Záhorská Lowland within the Skalica district, in immediate proximity to the Slovak border with the Czech Republic. The territory is geographically delineated by the massifs of the White Carpathians and the Little Carpathians and by the course of the Morava River, and is characterised by historically formed social, economic, and cultural linkages with the adjacent regions of South Moravia (Fig. 1). The selection of the study area is based on its borderland location, its rural-urban character, and the significant concentration of cultural, landscape, and architectural-urban values that create favourable conditions for development grounded in the mobilisation of endogenous resources and inter-municipal cooperation (Benkő et al., 2019). At the same time, the research builds upon the experience and analytical procedures of the Interreg DANuRB project, focused on territories within the Danube basin, which provides an applicable methodology for the categorisation and systematisation of cultural heritage at different spatial scales, as well as tools for identifying and designing thematic and tourist routes as instruments of territorial development (Benkő et al., 2019).

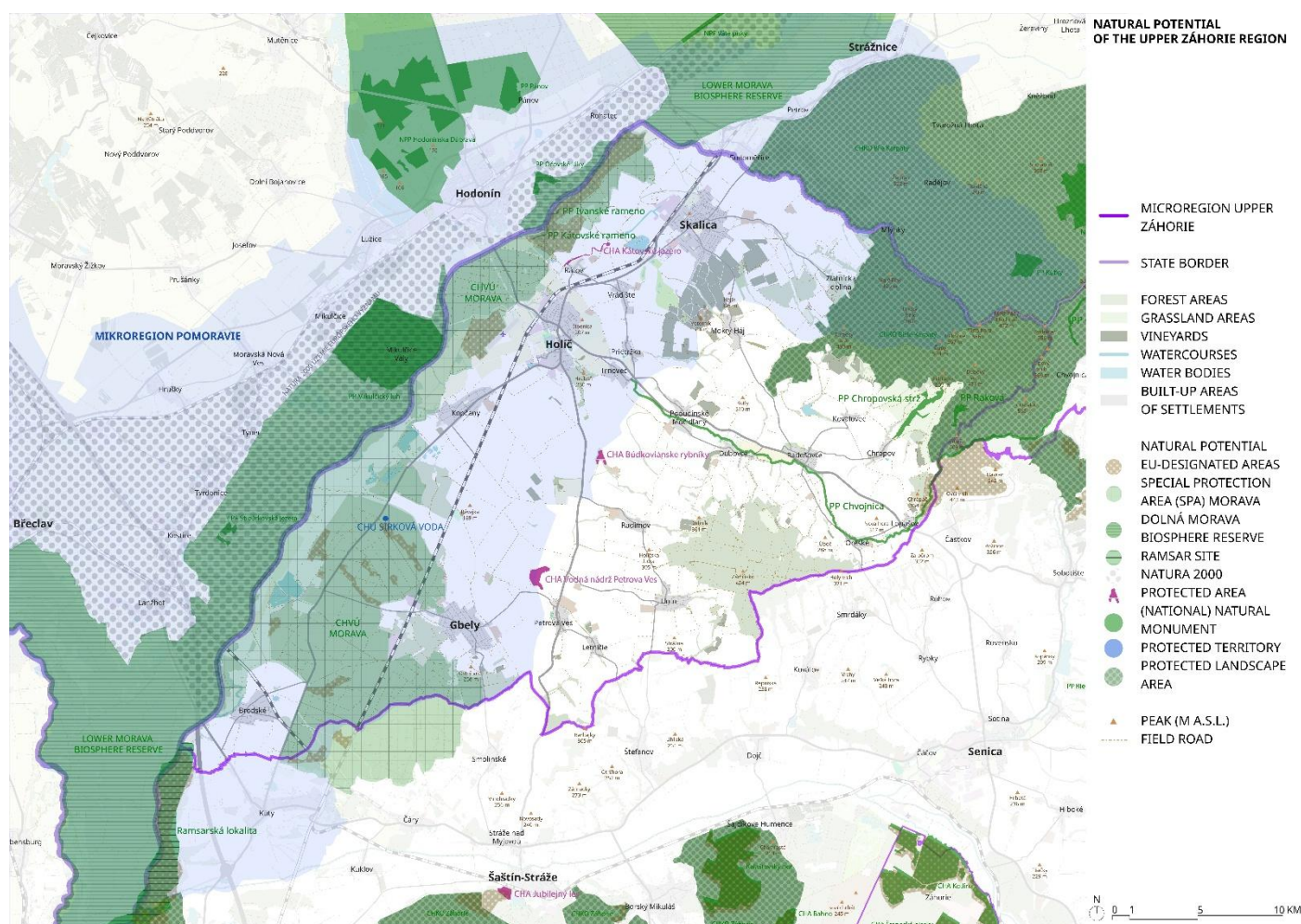


Fig. 1. Natural potential of the Horné Záhorie micro-region, Slovakia. (Source: Author, 2025)

3.3. Quantitative data and demographic analysis

The quantitative component of the research is based on the analysis of demographic indicators, primarily the ageing index, population development, and the size hierarchy of settlements. The analysis relies on statistical data from the years 2001, 2011, 2021, and 2024, which represent comparable census time points and enable the identification of long-term population trends and structural changes within the territory (Wittmann and Juřček, 2024). Demographic indicators are interpreted not only as descriptive characteristics but also as proxies of territorial quality and developmental vitality, reflecting the attractiveness of the area for residents and the functional efficiency of its spatial and socio-cultural structures.

The quantitative evaluation also included data on the settlement structure and functional relationships between the core Slovak towns (Skalica, Holíč) and smaller municipalities. These data were processed using Geographic Information System (GIS) tools, primarily based on vector datasets from OpenStreetMap complemented by national spatial datasets. The GIS analysis enabled the identification of spatial concentrations of phenomena, internal disparities, and interrelations between demographic processes, settlement hierarchy, and the landscape framework of the micro-region.

3.4. Mapping of tangible and intangible cultural heritage

The qualitative part of the research includes systematic mapping of cultural and natural heritage, covering tangible monuments, cultural landscapes, intangible cultural expressions, and local cultural events. The mapping was operationalised through a combination of (i) analysis of secondary sources and cultural heritage databases, (ii) field survey conducted within the territory, and (iii) synthesis of available cartographic and planning materials. Tangible heritage encompassed registered national cultural monuments, historical urban structures, sacral architecture, archaeological sites, and traditional vineyard landscapes. Intangible heritage comprised local traditions, folklore events, cultural practices, and forms of social life contributing to the reproduction of regional identity, as well as key actors operating within the studied area. The selection and categorisation of heritage elements were based on the criteria of spatial representativeness, historical continuity, and relevance for the formation of regional identity. Particular attention was paid to their spatial distribution and their relationship to the settlement structure and landscape framework, which enabled the identification of cultural cores, dispersed landscape elements, and potential integrative cultural routes (Ashworth et al., 2007; Richards, 2011).

In a cross-border context, the mapping of cultural heritage cannot be reduced to a mere inventory of individual objects; rather, it should be interpreted as an analytical process aimed at identifying complex cultural-spatial structures resulting from long-term historical, social, and economic interactions on both sides of the state border. Cultural resources are closely interconnected with the natural environment, ethno-cultural ties of the population, and existing transport and recreational routes, thereby creating conditions for the formation of integrated cultural-tourism systems and the strengthening of cross-border cooperation (Dunets et al., 2019). At the same time, they constitute a shared developmental capital transcending administrative borders, whose effective valorisation depends on coordinated cooperation among public authorities, cultural institutions, and the tourism sector, as well as on the unified presentation of cultural resources (Rădulescu and Pop, 2017).

Mapping tangible and intangible heritage is also closely linked to processes of regional identity formation and collective memory.

Material artefacts, historical events, and cultural narratives co-create the symbolic image of the territory and influence its perception as a shared cultural space, while the selection and interpretation of these elements represent a selective and socially conditioned process dependent on various actors and their interpretative frameworks (Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2018; Bitušíková, 2022). Such an understanding of heritage highlights its significance not only as a historical value but also as an active factor of social cohesion and regional identity formation.

Contemporary approaches to heritage mapping emphasise the importance of digital technologies and interdisciplinary methodologies that enable systematic documentation, visualisation, and interpretation of cultural resources in broader spatial and thematic contexts, thereby supporting their protection and sustainable use (Huang et al., 2025; Niu et al., 2025). In a wider regional and supra-regional context, cultural heritage can thus be understood as a network of interconnected cultural sites and destinations, whose significance is determined by the degree of their interconnectivity and the intensity of visitor flows. This network-based perspective makes it possible to identify the hierarchy of cultural centres and peripheral locations, while also demonstrating that administrative and state borders may significantly influence the continuity of cultural-tourism linkages and their developmental potential (Kádár and Gede, 2021).

3.5. Analysis of strategic and development documents

The key methodological component of the research was the content analysis of strategic and development documents of towns and municipalities within the Horné Záhorie micro-region of Slovakia, aimed at assessing the implementation and management of regional identity in local governance practice. The analysis focused on the extent to which regional identity is reflected in spatial planning, strategic, and marketing documents, as well as on the factors influencing its effective governance in territorial development. The research included an examination of key documents, particularly local socio-economic development programmes (PHSR), spatial planning documentation (ÚPN), municipal marketing strategies, and relevant regional strategic documents of the Trnava self-governing region. The research was conducted between June and October 2025 and covered 21 towns and municipalities of the Horné Záhorie micro-region (Trnava region, Skalica district, Slovakia).

The sample was purposively selected to reflect the diversity of settlement sizes, functional positions, and development potentials, thereby ensuring a comprehensive representation of regional identity management across the entire study area. Based on the research objective, the main research question was formulated as follows: How is regional identity integrated into spatial planning, strategic, and marketing documents of towns and municipalities in the Horné Záhorie micro-region? Supplementary research questions addressed the degree of integration of identity into local development policies and the identification of barriers hindering its effective implementation in development documents. On this basis, the following hypothesis was established: H1: The level of implementation of regional identity in strategic documents of towns and municipalities is low and uneven.

To test the hypothesis, a five-point Likert scale was employed to evaluate the implementation of regional identity in core development documents (ÚPN, PHSR, marketing strategies). The assessment was carried out using a set of indicators (RI1–RI6) capturing explicit definition of identity, use of visual and symbolic elements, strategic linkage between identity and development goals, level of stakeholder participation, coherence among documents, and the degree of actual implementation of measures derived from regional identity. This evaluation matrix enabled a comparative assessment of individual municipalities

and helped us identify the level of fragmentation or coherence in approaches to regional identity management at the micro-regional scale.

3.6. Synthesis and research limitations

The final synthesis of the research was carried out by linking quantitative and qualitative outputs in order to identify key development patterns, potentials, and barriers to cooperation within the Horné Záhorie micro-region and its cross-border linkages with South Moravia. The interpretation of results is based

on the assumption that cultural potential functions as an effective development tool only when it is systematically utilised, spatially valorised, and integrated into strategic and planning processes. The main limitations of the research include the uneven availability of data at the local level, differences in the quality and currency of strategic documents across municipalities, and the limited possibilities for quantifying intangible aspects of regional identity and social capital. At the same time, these limitations underscore the necessity of combined methodological approaches and highlight the importance of interdisciplinary evaluation of development processes in micro-regional and cross-border contexts.

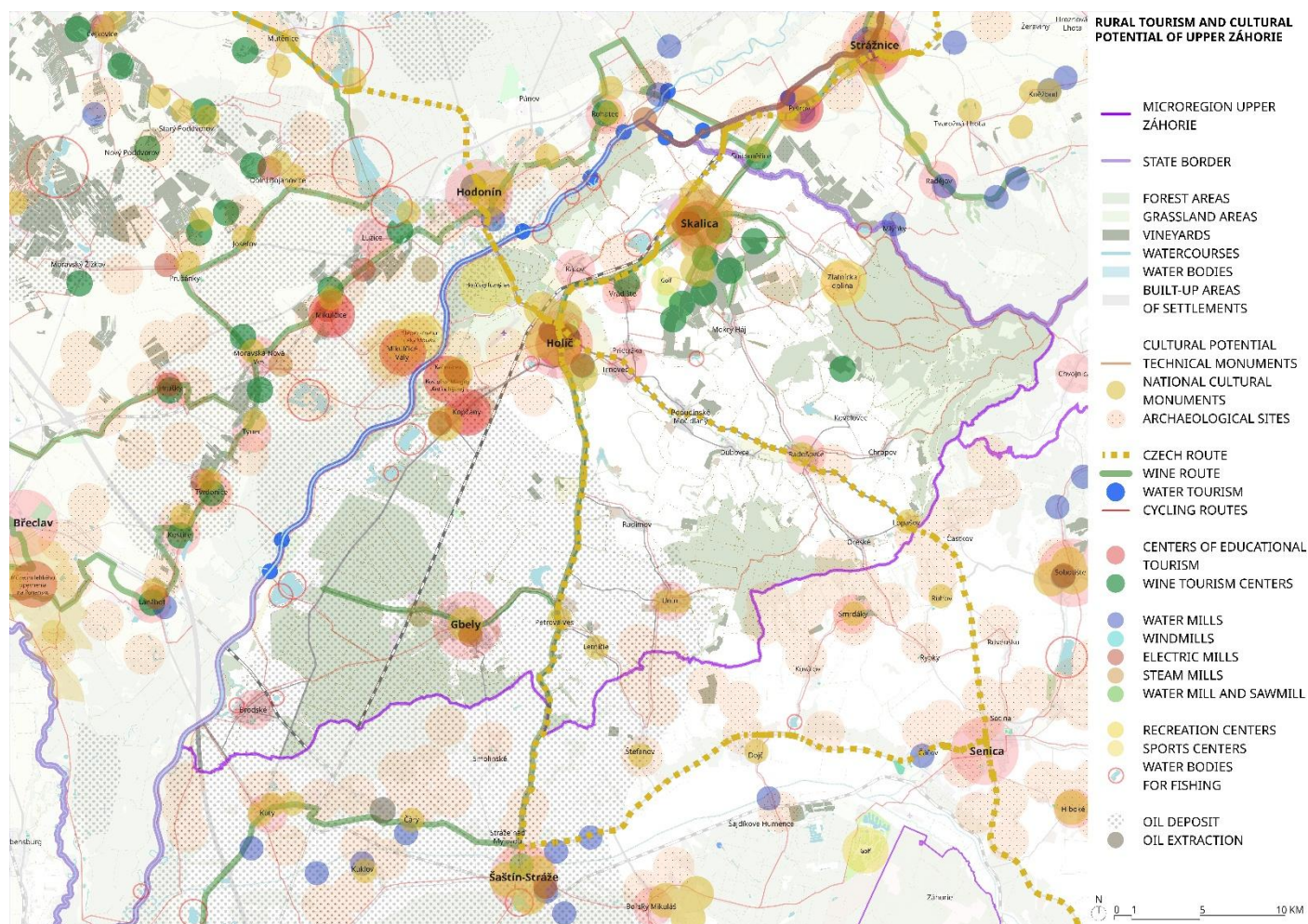


Fig. 2. Rural tourism and cultural potential of the Horné Záhorie micro-region, Slovakia. (Source: Author, 2025)

4. CASE STUDY: HORNÉ ZÁHORIE MICRO-REGION

4.1. Spatial and functional characteristics of the region

The Horné Záhorie micro-region of Slovakia represents a functionally interconnected cross-border territory located in the northern part of the Záhorská Lowland, situated between the massifs of the White Carpathians and the Little Carpathians and the Morava River. Administratively, the territory is defined by the Skalica district; however, its actual functional linkages extend beyond the state border towards South Moravia, particularly to the areas of Mikulčice, Hodonín, and Strážnice. This spatial configuration creates favourable conditions for the emergence of a cross-border micro-region with a high degree of historical, cultural, and socio-economic interconnection, based on long-term contacts, shared cultural heritage, and everyday functional relationships (Fig. 2).

The settlement structure of the micro-region has a pronounced rural-urban character, with the towns of Skalica and Holíč occupying a dominant position as natural local centres providing basic services, cultural functions, and employment opportunities. Smaller municipalities in the hinterland exhibit a higher degree of demographic vulnerability, manifested primarily through population ageing, the outmigration of younger age groups, and long-term population decline. Quantitative analyses of demographic development indicate increasing polarisation between core settlements and peripheral municipalities, which weakens the internal vitality of the region and increases the importance of non-economic development instruments. Among these, the cultural potential of the territory plays a key role as a factor of stabilisation and integration within the settlement network.

The results of the cultural heritage mapping confirm a high concentration of both tangible and intangible cultural values within the studied area. The most significant elements include the historic core of Skalica, the urbanistically valuable parts of the town of Holíč, the sacral and archaeological sites in Kopčany, as well as the network of vineyards and agricultural structures that jointly form the characteristic cultural landscape of the region. These values are complemented by a rich spectrum of traditional cultural events, folklore expressions, and local customs, which play an important role in shaping regional identity and the collective memory of the territory.

Spatial analysis indicates an uneven distribution of cultural potential, with pronounced centres of concentration in the main settlements and a more dispersed occurrence of values within the surrounding landscape (Fig. 3). The natural potential of the micro-region is represented primarily by the Morava River valley, floodplain forests, protected areas, and the contact with the Carpathian mountain environment, which together create favourable conditions for the development of soft forms of tourism. The interconnection of cultural and natural values creates a basis for the development of integrated tourism products based on authenticity, slow tourism, and local identity, in line with current trends in sustainable tourism.

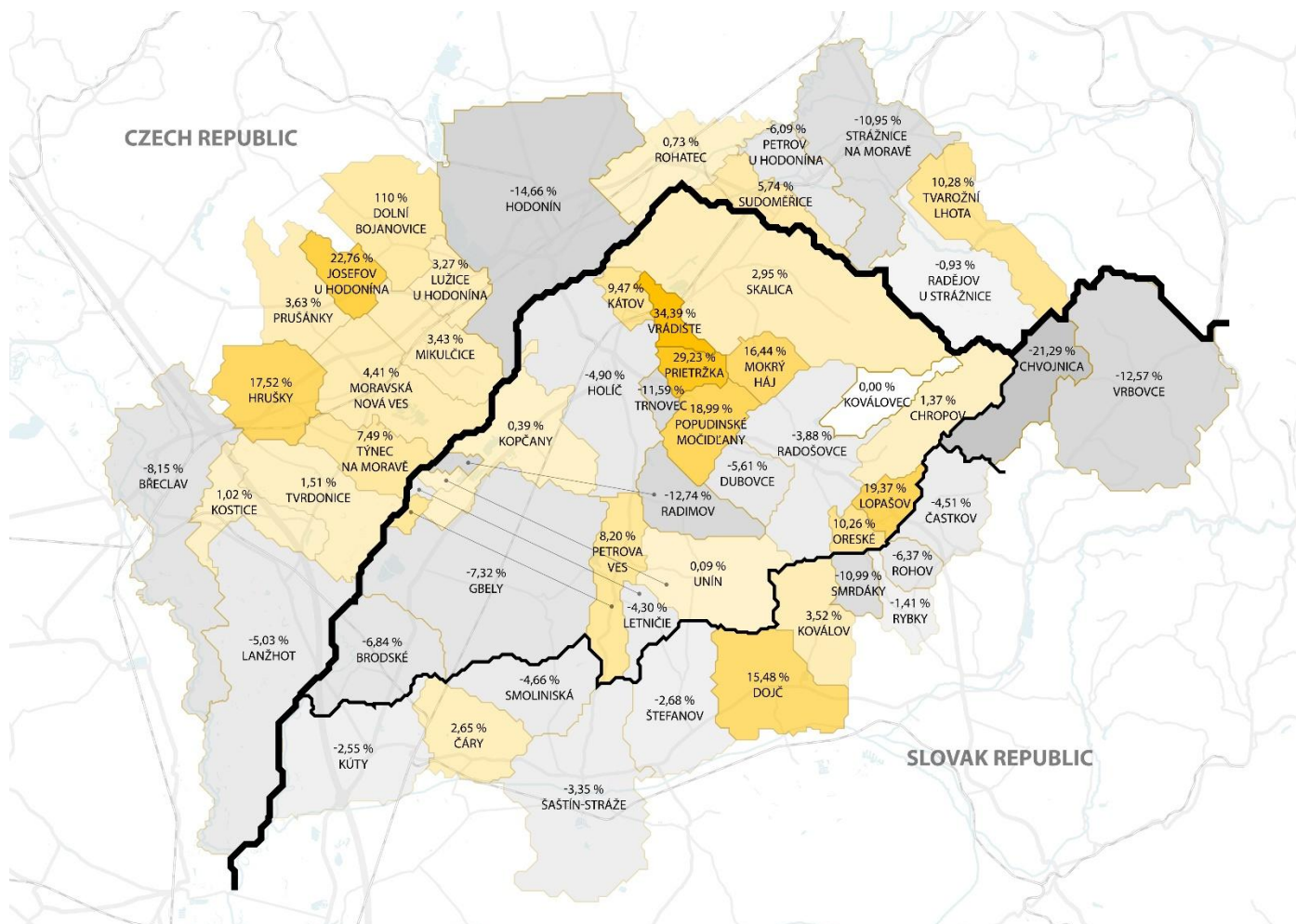


Fig. 3. Percentage change in population of the Skalica district and its surrounding area. (Source: Author, 2025)

4.2. Cross-border attractors and development axes

The analysis of linkages to various types of attractors reveals a strong orientation of the Horné Záhorie micro-region towards South Moravia. Cultural, natural, and social attractors in the towns of Hodonín, Strážnice, and Mikulčice form a functional cross-border system characterised by an intensive exchange of visitors, cultural stimuli, and development impulses. Existing thematic routes, cycling paths, and transport connections support this interaction; however, their potential is currently not systematically coordinated at the level of strategic planning and joint territorial promotion. The results of spatial analyses confirm that the Horné Záhorie micro-region functions as a complementary intermediary between Slovak and Czech territories, with its development conditioned by the ability to integrate local cultural values into a broader cross-border framework (Fig. 4). This complementarity is particularly evident in the field of cultural and educational tourism, where it is possible to create joint

products that transcend administrative boundaries and enhance the competitiveness of the region as a whole.

4.3. Regional identity in strategic documents

The analysis of strategic and development documents of the towns and municipalities in the Skalica district of Slovakia reveals differing degrees of implementation of regional identity and cultural potential within planning processes (Fig. 5). While in larger settlements territorial identity is partially reflected through the support of cultural events, city marketing, and tourism development, smaller municipalities often address this issue in a fragmented or predominantly formal manner. The evaluation results indicate the absence of a shared micro-regional vision and insufficient linkage among strategic documents across individual municipalities.

This fragmentation reduces the capacity of the micro-region to effectively utilise its cultural potential as a development instrument. At the same time, the identified shortcomings highlight the importance of cultural potential as a stabilising factor of the territory, capable of contributing to a strengthened cooperation, enhanced social cohesion, and improved internal coherence of the

micro-region. The results of the case study thus confirm that the cultural potential of Horné Záhorie represents a significant yet still insufficiently activated development resource, whose effective utilisation requires a coordinated approach at both the micro-regional and cross-border levels.

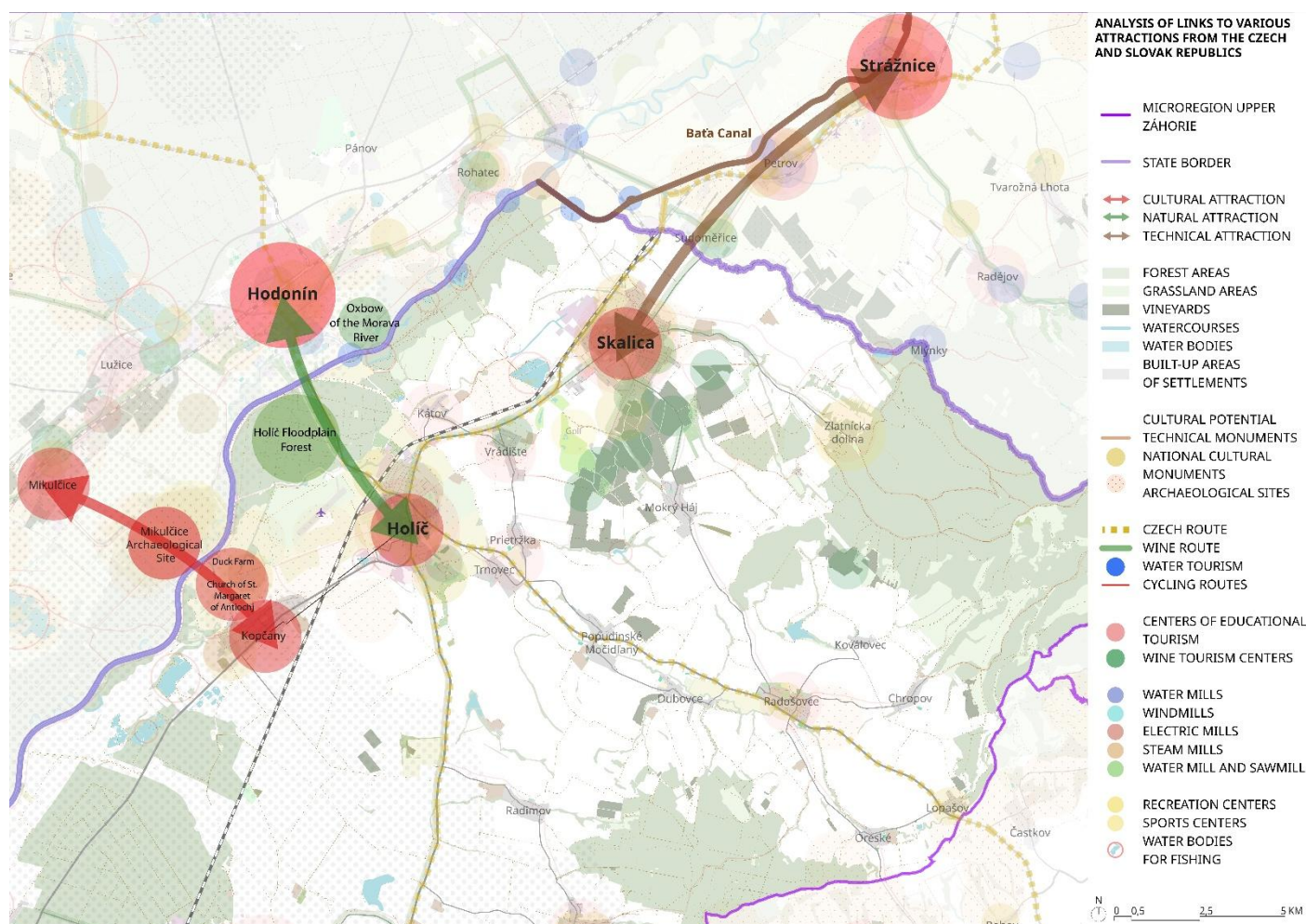


Fig. 4. Analysis of linkages to various attractors in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. (Source: Author, 2025)

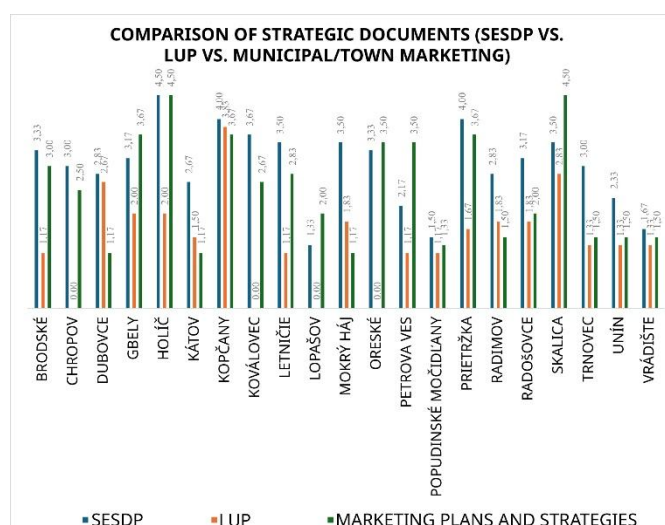


Fig. 5. Comparison of strategic documents of the Horné Záhorie micro-region. (Source: Author, 2025)

4.4. Urban structure and settlement-landscape relationship

The relationship between settlement and landscape in the town of Skalica is the result of a long-term urban development process based on a compact historic core with natural linkages to the surrounding vineyard and agricultural landscape. The historic centre, as a carrier of cultural and historical values, was originally an integral part of the landscape system, ensuring a high degree of spatial legibility and continuity between the urban fabric and the open landscape. During the 20th century, this model was disrupted by extensive urban expansion, which led to the emergence of a ring of newly developed built-up areas, large-scale housing estates, and industrial zones with a low level of urban integration, and later also suburban residential development.

The contemporary urban structure of Skalica is characterised by a weakening of direct pedestrian, visual, and functional connections between the historic core and the landscape, which is negatively reflected in the legibility of public spaces and the continuity of the city's spatial identity (Fig. 6). Nevertheless, in the context of the Horné Záhorie micro-region, Skalica continues to represent a stable urban pole, whose further development is conditioned by

the regeneration of transition zones between the settlement and the landscape. The systematic activation of landscape elements particularly the wine-growing landscape and recreational routes

creates favourable conditions for strengthening regional identity, developing sustainable forms of tourism, and improving the quality of life of residents.

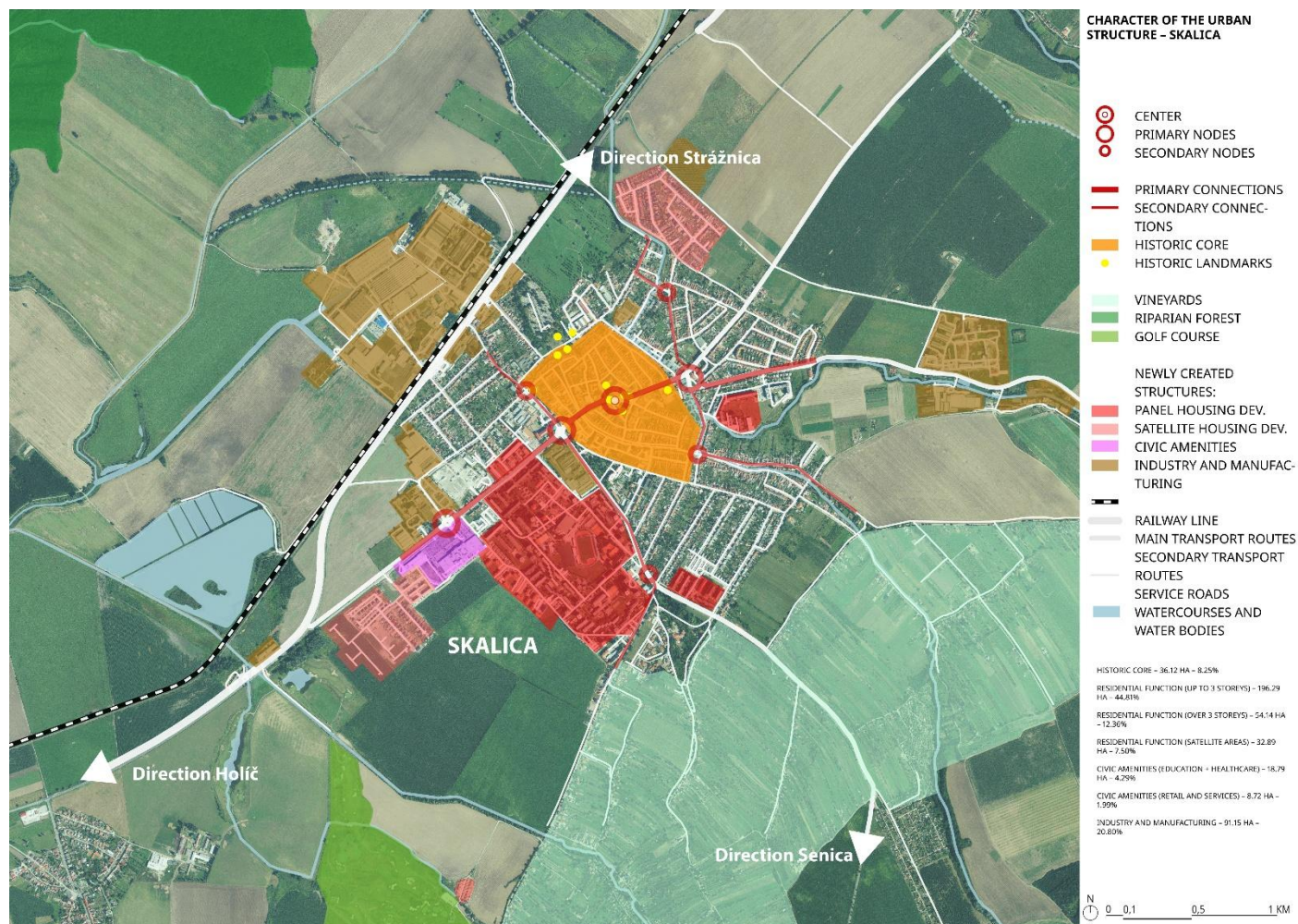


Fig. 6. Character of the urban structure – Skalica, Slovakia. (Source: Author, 2025)

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the case study on the Horné Záhorie micro-region confirm that cultural potential represents a significant yet currently only partially activated developmental resource of the territory. The identified concentration of cultural, historical, and landscape values, combined with a favourable geographical location and cross-border linkages, creates favourable conditions for development based on endogenous resources and the strengthening of local identity. At the same time, the findings indicate that the mere existence of cultural potential is not a sufficient precondition for development unless it is systematically integrated into strategic, spatial, and institutional governance frameworks and supported by effective coordination among actors at both municipal and micro-regional levels.

A particularly important finding concerns demographic trends, notably population ageing and decline in smaller municipalities of the micro-region. These trends cannot be understood solely as demographic characteristics but rather as complex indicators of territorial quality and vitality. Population stability or decline reflects the region's attractiveness for living, the availability of services, the quality of public spaces, and the capacity of the territory to utilise its cultural and landscape potential. Demographic processes thus represent not only consequences of

existing socio-economic and spatial conditions but also their drivers, as they influence territorial cohesion, development capacities, and the long-term sustainability of the settlement structure. In this sense, demographic stability can be regarded as one of the most relevant indicators of the quality of the micro-regional environment.

The research further reveals an uneven spatial distribution of cultural potential, manifested in the concentration of values within major settlements and their dispersed occurrence in the surrounding landscape. This pattern corresponds with theoretical insights on the hierarchical nature of settlement structures and the role of centres as carriers of cultural functions (Lynch, 1960; Rossi, 1982). However, from the perspective of regional identity, such concentration poses a risk of marginalising smaller municipalities unless cultural resources are functionally interconnected within a common micro-regional framework. In this context, the role of cultural landscapes, thematic routes, and transitional spaces between settlements emerges as particularly important, as these elements enable the integration of dispersed values into a legible spatial system while supporting soft mobility and tourism.

The analysis of strategic documents revealed varying levels of implementation of regional identity and cultural potential in the

planning and development policies of individual municipalities. The observed fragmentation of approaches and the absence of a shared micro-regional vision confirm that the institutional anchoring of identity and coordinated strategic planning are key prerequisites for the effective use of cultural potential as a development instrument. These findings correspond with theoretical approaches emphasising the importance of governance quality and the involvement of local actors in the successful development of cross-border regions.

The analysis of cross-border linkages indicates a strong orientation of the Horné Záhorie micro-region towards South Moravia, in line with studies on European border regions that identify cross-border cooperation as a key factor enhancing territorial competitiveness and resilience (Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2017; Timothy and Gelbman, 2022). However, the potential of these linkages is currently underutilised due to insufficient coordination of strategic documents, varying planning capacities of municipalities, and the absence of a shared micro-regional vision. This situation corroborates Paasi's (2002) assertion that effective formation of regional identity depends not only on the existence of shared cultural features but also on their institutional anchoring and long-term support by public actors.

From the perspective of architectural and urban research, the role of spatial structure and the settlement-landscape relationship emerges as a key carrier of territorial identity. The historical continuity of settlement patterns, the legibility of urban structures, and their linkage to the specific vineyard and agricultural landscape create a stable identity-forming framework capable of absorbing developmental changes without losing the fundamental character of the territory (Norberg-Schulz, 1994). The findings also indicate that insufficient systematic interpretation of these values in strategic and spatial planning documents limits their potential as active development tools. In practice, this is reflected in problematic situations where the relationship between settlements and landscape is weakened or disrupted by new developments of inappropriate scale and typology (e.g., suburban housing, large-scale residential complexes, or industrial "box architecture" zones), leading to a gradual erosion of spatial linkages and the weakening of the cultural-historical values of the territory.

These findings confirm the need for an integrated approach to regional development that interconnects cultural potential, regional identity, and spatial planning at the micro-regional level. The systematic integration of identity-forming spatial structures into strategic documents and development policies thus appears as a necessary precondition for their effective application in practice. In this context, Horné Záhorie can be understood as a complementary intermediary area within the cross-border space of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, whose further development depends on strengthened coordination among actors, systematic utilisation of cultural and landscape resources, and the establishment of a shared strategic framework at the micro-regional level.

From a scientific perspective, the case of the Horné Záhorie micro-region provides new insights into the stabilising role of cultural potential in cross-border micro-regions of Western Slovakia, once part of a historically unified socio-cultural and economic space later divided by an administrative border. The research demonstrates that cultural potential does not primarily function as a driver of economic growth, but rather as a factor strengthening social cohesion, regional identity, and the internal integrity of the settlement system, thereby indirectly supporting its demographic stability. At the same time, it identifies specific governance challenges, particularly the fragmentation of strategic documents and insufficient coordination among municipali-

ties even within the Slovak part of the micro-region, which represents a significant barrier to the effective use of endogenous resources in a cross-border context.

In a broader theoretical perspective, the results confirm the need for integrated approaches to regional development that interconnect cultural potential, regional identity, demographic stability, and spatial planning at the micro-regional scale. In this sense, the Horné Záhorie micro-region can be understood as a complementary intermediary area within the cross-border space of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, whose future development depends on strengthened coordination among actors, systematic utilisation of cultural and landscape resources, and the establishment of a shared strategic framework at the micro-regional level.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper focused on analysing the cultural potential of the Horné Záhorie micro-region in the context of its spatial structure, regional identity, and cross-border linkages. The results of the case study confirm that cultural potential represents a significant endogenous development resource that is richly present in the study area but currently only partially and fragmentarily utilised. Its developmental impact is conditioned by the level of coordination among stakeholders, the quality of strategic planning, and the ability to integrate cultural values into a broader micro-regional and cross-border framework, including their linkage to concrete spatial interventions and development projects (Throsby, 2010; OECD, 2014). From the perspective of architectural, urban, and spatial planning research, the paper highlights the need to perceive the cultural landscape, historical continuity of settlements, and spatial structure as active development resources rather than merely as objects of protection.

Their integration into planning strategies at the micro-regional level creates preconditions for sustainable development based on local values, sustainable (slow) tourism, and territorial identity (Norberg-Schulz, 1994; Richards, 2011). The cross-border context of the Horné Záhorie micro-region is of particular importance, as its historical, cultural, and functional ties to South Moravia create conditions for the emergence of a complementary cross-border region. The findings confirm that effective utilisation of this potential requires a systematic approach to cross-border cooperation, support for joint strategies aimed at enhancing urban structures and restoring their linkage to the landscape, as well as the institutional anchoring of regional identity as an integral component of development policies (Paasi, 2002; Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2017).

A significant finding is the demonstrated relationship between demographic development and the quality of territorial environment. Population stability or decline emerges as a complex indicator of the attractiveness and developmental vitality of the micro-region, reflecting not only socio-economic conditions but also the degree to which the cultural and landscape potential of the territory is utilised. Demographic trends thus represent not only the consequences of existing conditions but also indicators of their quality, confirming the stabilising importance of cultural potential for the sustainable development of the regional system.

From the perspective of scientific contribution, the research provides new insights into the role of cultural potential as a stabilising factor of the micro-regional system in the cross-border context of Horné Záhorie and South Moravia. In contrast to approaches that primarily emphasise the economic effects of culture (Throsby, 2010), the findings indicate that in peripheral and border micro-regions cultural potential functions mainly as a factor strengthening social cohesion, regional identity, and the

internal integrity of the settlement structure, thereby indirectly contributing to demographic stability.

The research also identifies specific governance challenges in the micro-region, particularly the fragmentation of strategic documents and insufficient coordination among municipalities, which limit the effective utilisation of endogenous resources in a cross-border context. In this regard, systematic mapping of tangible and intangible cultural heritage appears as a key instrument; rather than being reduced to a mere inventory of individual objects, it should be understood as an analysis of complex cultural-spatial structures shaped by long-term historical, social, and economic interactions on both sides of the border (Dunets et al., 2019).

Cultural resources thus constitute shared developmental capital transcending administrative border, whose effective valorisation depends on coordinated cooperation among public authorities, cultural institutions, and the tourism sector, as well as on the unified presentation of cultural values (Rădulescu and Pop, 2017). At the same time, heritage mapping is closely linked to processes of regional identity formation and collective memory, as material artefacts, historical events, and cultural narratives co-create the symbolic image of the territory and shape its perception as a shared cultural space, thereby strengthening social cohesion and the internal integrity of the settlement structure within the cross-border micro-regional system (Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2018; Bitušíková, 2022).

From a practical perspective, the research findings highlight the need for a systematic interlinking of cultural potential, spatial planning, and strategic development management at the micro-regional level. Based on the synthesis of the results, several key recommendations for planning and development practice can be formulated as follows:

1. the establishment of a shared micro-regional strategic framework aimed at the coordinated utilisation of cultural and natural potential;
2. the alignment of strategic and spatial planning documents of municipalities with an emphasis on regional identity and cultural landscape;
3. the systematic interpretation and presentation of cultural landscapes and thematic routes as integrative elements of the territory;
4. the support of cross-border cooperation in the creation of joint cultural-tourism products and project initiatives focused on slow tourism.

In terms of transferability, it can be stated that the identified principles and diagnostic conclusions are applicable to other comparable cross-border micro-regions within the Slovak Republic and the European Union that exhibit similar settlement structures, historical-cultural continuity, and fragmented systems of local strategic governance. However, the transferability of these findings is conditioned by the need to respect the specificities of the local context and to ensure a coordinated institutional framework at the micro-regional level.

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