

# RESTARTING STRUCTURALLY AFFECTED REGIONS: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ÚSTÍ REGION

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## Abstract

Regions that have historically relied primarily on mining, manufacturing, and the chemical industry are today referred to in the Czech Republic and similar contexts as structurally affected regions. They share common features such as low economic growth and a pronounced lag behind the country's most developed areas. In the Czech Republic, three regions fall into this category: the Ústí nad Labem Region, the Karlovy Vary Region, and the Moravian-Silesian Region. The first of these is widely recognised for its high unemployment, lower wages, and limited job opportunities, as well as for being an unattractive location for young and educated residents. The consequences of the decline of once-dominant industries are therefore closely intertwined with other structural challenges; however, these are being tackled through a range of initiatives and projects. One of the strategic projects under the Just Transition Operational Programme is the RUR project – Region to University, University to Region. Its aim is to integrate cutting-edge research, expertise, and knowledge transfer to facilitate a profound and sustainable transformation of the Ústí nad Labem Region. The project operates across three interconnected levels – individual (personal), collective (social), and comprehensive geographical (territorial) – with creativity as its core principle, understood as the capacity to generate added value, to transcend existing boundaries and limitations, and to discover new potential and opportunities within a rapidly changing society and landscape.

Keywords: Structurally Affected Region, Regional Restart, Regional Studies, Ústí nad Labem Region, RUR, Research

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## Introduction

In 2025, the Czech Republic marks twenty-five years since the establishment of its regions in their current form. The Constitutional Act on the Creation of Higher Territorial Self-Governing Units – that is, the regions – entered into force on 1 January 2000. The question of how to structure territorial self-government had been a matter of political debate throughout the 1990s (see Illner, 2015). After years of discussion, the Constitutional Act ultimately established that the Czech Republic is divided into municipalities, which represent the basic territorial self-governing units, and regions, which constitute the higher territorial self-governing units (Constitutional Act No. 347/1997 Coll.).

Over the past quarter of a century, the regional system has undergone only minor modifications – mainly changes in names or small boundary adjustments. Although the possible redefinition of the role and status of the regions occasionally surfaces in political debate, it has never become an urgent or dominant issue on the national political agenda. Within certain parts of the political spectrum, the prevailing view is that, since the regions have already been established, the key task is to ensure they function as effectively as possible. Other voices, however, tend to accept the existing regional structure without perceiving any pressing need for fundamental reform.

Since their establishment, seven regional elections have taken place (see Vajdová, 2001; Balík and Kyloušek, 2006; Eibl *et al.*, 2009; Kunštát *et al.*, 2010; Balík *et al.*, 2013; Eibl and Pink *et al.*, 2017; Šárovec, 2017; Kouba and Lysek, 2022; Maškarinec *et al.*, 2024; Hynčica, 2025). During this period, not only has the ruling political representation changed substantially in many regions, but their economic, social, and cultural characteristics have also evolved. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on how the regional system has performed, what progress has been made, and which areas still require sustained effort.

The purpose of this contribution is not to assess the individual successes and failures of regional governments, but rather to focus on the structurally affected regions – those that lag behind the rest of the country. In the Czech Republic, this category includes the Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary, and Moravian-

Silesian Regions. This single-case study concentrates specifically on the Ústí nad Labem Region. Although many similarities can be identified among structurally affected regions, each displays distinctive features, and the Ústí nad Labem Region is no exception.

The analysis situates the Ústí nad Labem Region within the broader context of structurally affected regions. The region has long struggled to achieve successful socio-economic convergence with the country's more developed areas. The study draws on qualitative and interpretive methods, using data from the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), primary documents (such as strategic development plans), and media monitoring. A particular section of the analysis focuses on projects contributing to the region's transformation potential – notably the strategic project Region to University, University to Region (RUR), co-funded by the European Union under the Just Transition Operational Programme. The paper seeks to answer the following research question: What specific features can be identified in the transformation efforts of the Ústí nad Labem Region?

It first defines the conceptual framework of structurally affected regions and empirically anchors the term through selected cases. The core of the paper then turns to the Ústí nad Labem Region itself – its municipal structure, transformation challenges, and examples of how these challenges are being addressed. Particular attention is devoted to the strategic RUR project, Region to University, University to Region. Although the transformation of a structurally affected area is an inherently complex and long-term process, several positive outcomes of these efforts can already be observed.

## Structurally Affected Regions

In the Czech Republic, we can observe a phenomenon known as regional selectivity – that is, the targeted provision of support to certain regions only. The causes of such regional disparities, however, are highly diverse. The development of regional differentiation must be understood in the context of society's return to a natural trajectory of socio-economic development, during which disparities that had previously been suppressed became increasingly visible (Blažek and Csank, 2007: 945–946). When addressing the issue of regional disparities, it is therefore necessary to consider at what point such differences become excessive and should be actively mitigated.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

When reviewing the scholarly literature, the concept of a structurally affected or structurally disadvantaged region – corresponding to what EU policy documents and UK academic literature often describe as industrial transition regions or economically lagging regions – is widely discussed in both international and domestic research (see e.g. Wolman *et al.*, 2015; Beneš, 2023; Janošec and Redlichová, 2023; Janošec *et al.*, 2024; Szakálné Kanó *et al.*, 2025).

In the Czech context, structurally affected regions are defined by a set of characteristics established by the Ministry of Regional Development (MMR) and the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MPO), based on several specific criteria:

- low economic performance (GDP per capita below the national average; low labour productivity);
- high unemployment (an average unemployment rate consistently above the national average; a high proportion of long-term unemployed persons);
- negative demographic trends (population decline, ageing, and outmigration of young people);
- low levels of education and investment (a small number of business entities, limited investor interest, and low educational attainment among the population);
- social issues (social exclusion, crime, housing problems) (MPO, 2017; MMR, 2025).

When defining structurally affected regions, it is also useful to consider several broader interconnections discussed in the literature. These include, for instance, analyses of the electoral success of populist parties or candidates – whether in presidential elections (Maškarinec, 2013; Bláha, 2023; Maškarinec, 2025) or in wider studies of citizens' political attitudes (Šaradín and Bielešová, 2023). Research consistently shows that populist success tends to be higher in peripheral areas (see Maškarinec, 2019; Maškarinec and Novotný, 2020; Suchánek and Hasman, 2022; Kevický, 2022; Maškarinec and Novotný, 2024). Structurally affected regions are also characterised by lower political participation (Ryšavý, 2013; Pink and Eibl, 2018) and lower trust in political institutions (Čermák *et al.*, 2016), which may, in turn, affect the quality of democracy within these regions (Maškarinec, 2023).

According to the Ministry of Regional Development, structurally affected regions should aim to achieve several key strategic objectives. Such regions are expected to be:

- characterised by a high quality of life and a healthy environment;
- economically revitalised, with sufficient numbers of quality jobs;
- free of derelict industrial sites and post-mining areas (MMR, 2025).

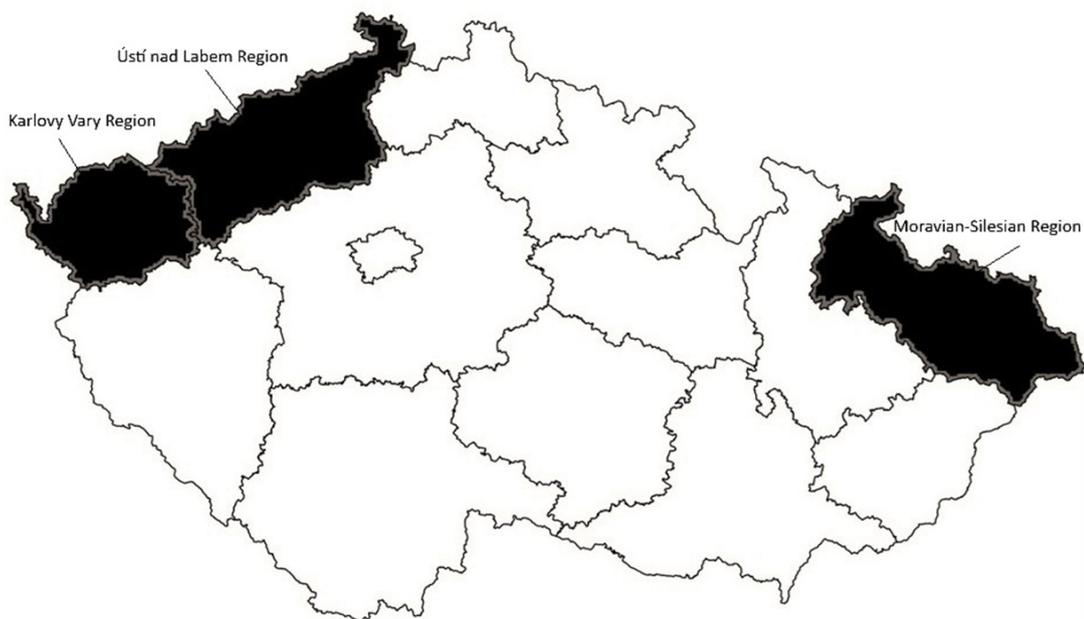
## Structurally Affected Regions in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, three structurally affected regions have been officially identified: the Ústí nad Labem Region, the Karlovy Vary Region, and the Moravian-Silesian Region. All three are currently characterised by low levels of economic growth and a significant lag behind the rest of the country. A common feature of these regions is their historical dependence on mining, manufacturing, and the chemical industry (MMR, 2025).

The Ústí nad Labem and Karlovy Vary Regions are located in the north-western part of the country and share a common border, while the Moravian-Silesian Region lies in the north-east (see Fig. 1).

Together, the three structurally affected regions of the Czech Republic cover 17.8% of the country's total area (14,080 km<sup>2</sup>). The Ústí nad Labem Region spans 5,339 km<sup>2</sup>, making it the second largest of the three – just behind the Moravian-Silesian Region (5,431 km<sup>2</sup>). In terms of population, the Ústí nad Labem Region also occupies an intermediate position between the Karlovy Vary and Moravian-Silesian Regions, with 808,356 inhabitants as of 31 December 2024 (compared with 293,195 and 1,182,613 respectively) (see Fig. 1).

The Ústí nad Labem Region, however, contains the highest number of municipalities among the three structurally affected regions – 354 in total – representing 5.7% of all municipalities in the Czech Republic. It also includes the largest number of former districts (seven), followed by the Moravian-Silesian Region (six) and the Karlovy Vary Region (three) (ČSÚ, 2025; see Tab. I).



1: Structurally affected regions in the Czech Republic  
Source: Authors' elaboration based on ČSÚ data (2025)

I: Overview of districts in the three structurally affected regions of the Czech Republic

Region	Districts
Ústí nad Labem Region	Děčín, Chomutov, Litoměřice, Louny, Most, Teplice and Ústí nad Labem
Karlovy Vary Region	Cheb, Karlovy Vary and Sokolov
Moravian-Silesian Region	Bruntál, Frýdek-Místek, Karviná, Nový Jičín, Opava and Ostrava-city

Source: Authors' elaboration based on ČSÚ data (2025)

## The Ústí nad Labem Region as a Case Study

As one of the structurally affected regions, the Ústí nad Labem Region shares many characteristics with the other two regions in this category. At the same time, however, it displays a few distinctive features that must be considered when designing and implementing transformation strategies. These specificities relate not only to the municipal structure and particular transformation challenges, but also to the unique approaches adopted in addressing regional development problems.

II: Size categories of municipalities in the three structurally affected regions of the Czech Republic in 2024

Name of Region, Administrative District (SO ORP)	Municipalities													Market Towns
	Total	up to 199 200–499 500–999 1,000–1,999 2,000–4,999 5,000–9,999 10,000–19,999 20,000–49,999 50,000–99,999 over 100,000												
		14	45	31	18	15	4	4	3	-	-	38	1	
Karlovy Vary Region	134	14	45	31	18	15	4	4	3	-	-	38	1	
Aš	5	-	1	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	
Cheb	21	3	9	3	3	1	1	-	1	-	-	5	-	
Karlovy Vary	41	4	14	13	5	3	1	-	1	-	-	9	-	
Kraslice	8	1	3	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	4	-	
Mariánské Lázně	14	3	4	1	3	2	-	1	-	-	-	3	-	
Ostrov	15	1	5	6	-	2	-	1	-	-	-	6	-	
Sokolov	30	2	9	6	5	5	1	1	1	-	-	9	1	
Ústí nad Labem Region	354	40	129	87	46	28	7	10	4	3	-	59	11	
Bílina	8	1	1	3	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	1	
Děčín	34	1	19	8	2	2	1	-	1	-	-	5	-	
Chomutov	25	3	9	6	5	-	-	1	1	-	-	3	-	
Kadaň	19	4	6	4	2	1	-	2	-	-	-	5	1	
Litoměřice	40	8	14	7	6	3	1	-	1	-	-	6	2	
Litvínov	11	2	4	1	-	3	-	-	1	-	-	5	-	
Louny	41	7	18	9	4	2	-	1	-	-	-	2	5	
Lovosice	32	5	15	7	3	1	1	-	-	-	-	3	-	
Most	15	1	8	2	2	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	
Podbořany	11	1	3	2	3	1	1	-	-	-	-	4	1	
Roudnice nad Labem	33	1	15	12	3	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	
Rumburk	12	1	1	2	3	3	1	1	-	-	-	7	-	
Teplice	26	1	6	6	4	5	2	1	-	1	-	7	-	
Ústí nad Labem	23	2	4	7	4	5	-	-	-	1	-	4	-	
Varnsdorf	6	-	-	3	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	
Žatec	18	2	6	8	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	



III: Table 3. Overview of the number of municipalities in the Ústí nad Labem Region by administrative district (SO ORP)

Administrative District (SO ORP)	Number of Municipalities			Population (as of 31 Dec 2023)			Population and Housing Census 26 Mar 2021			
	Total Municipalities with Town Status	Number of Municipal Parts	Number of Cadastral Units	Area (ha)	Total	Aged 0-14 Years	Aged 65 Years and Over	Occupied Houses	Occupied Dwellings	
									In Single-family Detached Houses	In Apartment Buildings
Ústí nad Labem Region – Total	354	59	1,154	533,870	811,169	125,649	167,379	123,776	119,410	228,215
Bílina	8	2	30	12,358	19,601	3,078	3,852	2,741	2,571	6,097
Děčín	34	5	121	55,379	74,893	11,333	16,773	12,519	12,781	19,568
Chomutov	25	3	78	48,607	80,828	12,465	15,563	9,635	8,732	26,464
Kadaň	19	5	95	44,963	43,119	6,378	8,570	5,495	4,929	13,317
Litoměřice	40	6	143	47,058	58,499	9,075	12,328	10,387	10,385	13,333
Litvínov	11	5	36	23,597	35,734	5,343	7,874	4,744	3,859	12,016
Louny	41	2	97	47,258	43,520	6,778	9,062	9,808	9,901	8,231
Lovosice	32	3	71	26,161	27,622	4,337	5,875	6,438	6,529	4,469
Most	15	1	39	23,112	72,218	11,143	14,027	5,399	3,914	28,669
Podbořany	11	4	62	34,096	15,622	2,433	3,252	3,800	3,725	2,619
Roudnice nad Labem	33	2	58	30,023	33,365	5,523	7,057	8,410	8,778	4,234
Rumburk	12	7	52	26,621	32,222	5,043	6,854	6,666	7,019	5,782
Teplice	26	7	85	34,534	108,317	16,702	22,055	15,386	14,894	32,800
Ústí nad Labem	23	4	103	40,475	118,433	18,600	24,449	13,856	12,999	39,137
Varnsdorf	6	2	20	8,885	19,419	2,956	4,323	3,724	3,845	4,429
Žatec	18	1	64	30,743	27,757	4,462	5,465	4,768	4,549	7,050

Source: Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), Malý lexikon obcí 2024

### The Ústí nad Labem Region in Terms of Its Municipal Structure

As shown in Tab. III, the Ústí nad Labem Region comprises a total of 354 municipalities. In comparative terms, the region has the highest number of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (see Tab. II) – 256 in total, representing 72.4% of all municipalities in the region. By contrast, the Moravian-Silesian and Karlovy Vary Regions have substantially fewer such small municipalities – 141 (47%) and 90 (67.2%) respectively.

A total of 59 municipalities hold town status. The largest numbers of municipalities are found in the administrative districts of Louny (41), Litoměřice (40), and Děčín (34). The most populous settlements in the region include the regional capital Ústí nad Labem, followed by Teplice, Chomutov, Děčín, and Most (see Tab. III).

### Transformation Challenges

Drawing on regional development documents and other sources (Heuer, 2018; ICUK, 2021; Government, 2023; Grim *et al.*, 2024; Rašková, 2024), several key transformation challenges can be identified for the Ústí nad Labem Region in light of new and emerging demands. These challenges can be grouped into five main categories:

- **Post-coal transformation and changes in the economic structure**

The Ústí nad Labem Region has long been heavily dependent on heavy industry and brown coal mining. The gradual phase-out of mining and the growing pressure to decarbonise the economy pose serious risks, including job losses, social destabilisation, and declining public revenues. Local governments must therefore play an active role in planning the region's economic transformation – by participating in the preparation of strategic projects and by seeking new, sustainable sources of prosperity.

- **High levels of social exclusion and demographic disparities**

Many areas within the region – particularly the northern housing estates of cities such as Most, Ústí nad Labem, and Chomutov – have long faced deep-rooted social exclusion, high unemployment, over-indebtedness, and low educational attainment. The region suffers from a brain drain, as young and educated people leave for other parts of the country, while populations with lower socio-economic status remain. Under such circumstances, municipalities often have to compensate for the absence of state support, yet they lack the necessary capacities and resources to do so effectively.

- **Low absorption capacity of local governments for fund utilisation**

Although the Ústí nad Labem Region is a priority recipient of support from European funding programmes (such as the Just Transition Fund, IROP, or OPZ+), many municipalities face significant limitations in securing co-financing, managing projects, or preparing high-quality project proposals. A lack of expertise in grant administration and limited staffing capacities frequently result in underutilisation of available funding.

- **Obsolete infrastructure and the need for requalification**

Municipalities are confronted with the dual challenge of modernising public buildings, energy systems, and transport infrastructure while simultaneously responding to changing social needs. In many cases, municipalities lack qualified development management, investment governance capacities, and mechanisms for collaboration with the private sector. Successful transformation will therefore require not only substantial financial investment but also a shift in mindset and competences among those responsible for local and regional development.

- **Specific security and reputational challenges**

Municipalities in the Ústí nad Labem Region also face specific security and social challenges. These include rising crime rates in areas with high concentrations of socially excluded populations, the region's negative reputation among investors and in the media, and a generally weak position vis-à-vis central government institutions. It is therefore all the more important that local governments are able to clearly articulate their needs, engage in negotiation processes, and actively participate in strategic decision-making structures.

### Selected Examples of Regional Problem-Solving Initiatives

A key role in initiating the successful transformation of the coal-dependent regions has been played by the RE:START Programme, a national government initiative that had previously developed a strategy defining the main priorities for their long-term development. In preparation for this process, a methodology for selecting strategic projects had also been created. Thanks to this groundwork, projects could be developed even before the official approval of the Just Transition Operational Programme (OPST), enabling an earlier start to implementation and smoother absorption of funds. This proactive approach allowed for the swift launch of funding and seamless project implementation, positioning the Czech Republic among the most successful EU Member States in implementing the Just Transition Fund (JTF) (OPST, 2025a).

The Just Transition Operational Programme (OPST) is a funding scheme with an allocation exceeding CZK 40 billion. It focuses on addressing the negative impacts associated with the phase-out of coal in structurally affected regions – namely the Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary, and Moravian-Silesian Regions.

The programme covers the 2021–2027 programming period and aims to help regions and citizens mitigate the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the transition, contributing to the European Union's 2030 energy and climate goals and the objective of a climate-neutral economy by 2050.

In terms of target groups, the programme supports a broad spectrum of applicants: municipalities, regional authorities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), universities, research institutions, and other stakeholders. Large enterprises, including those participating in the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), may also receive support. However, productive investments in large enterprises are eligible only if they are explicitly included in the Territorial Just Transition Plan, which must be preceded by a company-level analysis of job-creation potential within the region (OPST, 2025b, 2025c).

Of particular note is how the financial resources are distributed among the structurally affected regions (see Tab. IV). The coal regions allocate the available funding according to five indicators that reflect both their current socio-economic conditions and their future needs for a successful transition to a low-carbon economy. These indicators include population size, GDP, unemployment rate, area affected by mining, and the number of employees in research and development. Based on these criteria, the financial allocations are as follows.

IV: Distribution of funds among regions under the Just Transition Operational Programme

Region	Financial allocation	Share
Moravian-Silesian Region	CZK 18.9 billion	46.1 %
Ústí nad Labem Region	CZK 15.8 billion	38.6 %
Karlovy Vary Region	CZK 6.3 billion	15.3 %

Source: OPST (2025c)

## The Project “Region to University – University to Region” (RUR) as an Example of a Strategic Initiative

One of the strategic projects implemented under the Just Transition Operational Programme (OPST) is the “Region to University – University to Region” (RUR) project. The RUR project aims to prepare and support the transformation of the Ústí nad Labem Region in a professional, integrated, and comprehensive manner, addressing new challenges that will determine the region's future position both within the Czech Republic and in relation to developments in other advanced economies. The project primarily focuses on removing existing barriers to regional development (RUR, 2025a).

### Basic Specification of the Project

The project is led by Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem (UJEP) – the only public higher education institution based in the Ústí nad Labem Region. The total projected costs covered by OPST amount to CZK 1.2 billion, with the implementation period set from 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2027. The project's principal aim is to contribute to the fundamental transformation of the Ústí nad Labem Region at three interrelated levels: individual (personal), collective (social), and comprehensive geographical (territorial). This objective is to be achieved through excellent research, professional expertise, and effective knowledge transfer (RUR, 2025b).



2: Publicity materials of the RUR project

Source: RUR (2025c)

Project partners include: the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague; the House of Children and Youth and the Facility for Further Education of Teaching Staff, Ústí nad Labem (public organisation); the Brown Coal Research Institute, a.s.; the Regional Chamber of Commerce of the Ústí nad Labem Region; the Innovation Centre of the Ústí nad Labem Region; the Regional Authority of the Ústí nad Labem Region; the Czech Republic Employment Office; the Economic and Social Council of the Ústí nad Labem Region; and SEVEN Inntech a.s. (RUR, 2025d).

The core conceptual principle of the project is creativity – understood as the ability to generate added value, to expand existing boundaries and opportunities, and to identify new potential in a rapidly changing society and landscape (RUR, 2025b). This principle constitutes the project's main added value and a key source of its originality.

### Key Project Activities

The project is structured around four main pillars, which represent mutually interconnected components:

- **Creative People** – aims to achieve a comprehensive transformation of the regional education system by developing new educational content and innovative formats.
- **Creative Community** – focuses on transforming the society and economy of the Ústí nad Labem Region from a collective and community perspective.
- **Creative Environment** – seeks to regenerate and promote the diversified and sustainable use of the regional landscape, where the environmental legacy of coal mining and related industries intersects with the contemporary challenges of climate change.
- **Creative Institutions** – focuses on transforming the university and its campus into a model environment showcasing smart and sustainable solutions, thereby serving as an inspiration for other institutions and organisations within the Ústí nad Labem Region.

#### Creative People

The main objective of this activity is to initiate a process of raising the overall educational level across the region – from pre-school and primary through secondary and lifelong learning – while creating a comprehensive system of support for schools, teachers, pupils, and other learners. The activity seeks to bring about a qualitative transformation of the regional education system.

In the medium term, the goal is to improve the quality of education at all levels of the school system and to ensure that learning better prepares children, pupils, and students for life in a post-mining region. By enhancing educational quality, the project also seeks to reduce early school leaving, an area in which the Ústí nad Labem Region has long ranked lowest among all Czech regions.

The interventions further target individuals and pupils at risk of long-term social disadvantage, which negatively affects educational outcomes and contributes to low motivation to continue learning (RUR, 2025e).

#### Creative Community (Creative Society)

The aim of this second key activity – Creative Community (or Creative Society) – is to cultivate the region's social environment and to strengthen community development based on shared identity, awareness of the past, confidence in the future, shared values, and the ability to act collectively when addressing social challenges. The activity builds on the principle of path dependency, according to which the creation of a creative society must be grounded, among other things, in an understanding of the past.

An integral part of this activity is the support of cultural and creative industries (CCIs), since culture and creativity form the cornerstone of the region's economic and social transformation. CCIs also represent a key direction of economic restructuring, generating new forms of economic activity capable of substituting jobs lost in traditional sectors.

The activity further includes research leading to conceptual solutions to current transformation challenges, accompanied by the establishment of a professional training system for public administration staff (RUR, 2025f).

#### Creative Environment

The third key activity aims to initiate reform in the development of expert capacities and methodologies for addressing the environmental impacts of mining and industry, while also taking into account the current challenges posed by climate change. The reform will be implemented through expert centres open to regional stakeholders, offering training in innovative and validated methods for territorial planning, transformation monitoring, and evaluation.

This activity serves as a complementary knowledge base for the Creative Institutions pillar, where innovative concepts are practically implemented alongside the adoption of ESG principles (RUR, 2025g).

#### Creative Institutions

The objective of the fourth key activity is to create a model and inspiring institution that exemplifies the best practices of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century public organisation – both in terms of physical implementation and in the design and execution of policies and strategies. The central role is played by the UJEP campus, which is intended to serve as a showcase of verified innovative solutions emerging from the other key activities of the project.

The overarching theme that runs through all sub-activities is sustainability. Over time, the campus and the university are expected to become a place and an institution that inspire both businesses and public-sector actors. The activity itself encompasses four thematic areas: sustainable education and research, sustainable operations, and sustainable community engagement (RUR, 2025h).

## Achievements to Date

The project has generated a wide range of outputs in the form of events, seminars, and educational opportunities. In addition, the outputs include media coverage, public online platforms, research reports, publications, and, last but not least, competitions (RUR, 2025a). Since the project is not designed as a strictly research-oriented initiative, one of its major added values lies precisely in the broad spectrum of activities aimed at both professional and general audiences.

The central idea of the RUR project is that Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem (UJEP) will become the principal driving force behind regional transformation. As the project's main beneficiary, the university provides education and skills development for the region's population (including courses, exhibitions, excursions, and virtual tours), support for schools and teachers, and serves as a knowledge hub for public administration. Among the concrete outputs are a new STEM teacher training degree programme, the establishment of an Environmental Education Centre (a living lab demonstrating ESG principles), a lifelong learning portal, and a tutoring and remedial education system for pupils, as well as enhanced cooperation with public authorities and the preparation of strategic documents. The expected outcomes of the project include over 180 implemented activities and more than 12,000 supported individuals. During its implementation, the project also aims to promote digital solutions, publish open data sets and academic outputs, and strengthen cooperation between the university, regional governments, the non-profit sector, and private enterprises (OPST, 2025d).

Finally, it is worth noting that on 21 October 2025, the Czech Republic received significant recognition for projects such as RUR. At the Fifth Anniversary Conference of the Just Transition Platform (JTP), the country was awarded the JTP Champions Award in the category “Leader in the Implementation of the Just Transition Fund (JTF)”. Through this award, the European Commission highlighted the exceptional efforts of the Ministry of the Environment as the managing authority, the State Environmental Fund of the Czech Republic as the administrator, and all programme partners involved in promoting a sustainable, socially responsible, and innovative transformation of the coal regions. This recognition places the Czech Republic among the leading European pioneers of just transition. It also confirms that the integration of environmental, economic, and social dimensions of transformation is both meaningful and inspiring for other EU Member States (OPST, 2025a). It may be expected that this recognition will further accelerate progress and success not only within the RUR project itself, but also in the broader effort to drive transformation across structurally affected regions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The issue of regional disparities has been a recurring topic in the Czech Republic since the early 1990s, in the context of the country's development within a free democracy. The Czech Republic defines three structurally affected regions that share similar negative indicators while all striving for transformation aimed at closing the gap with more developed regions. Despite these commonalities, each region is to some extent specific in its characteristics and challenges. This paper has therefore focused on the particular features of the selected case.

In response to the research question, it can be concluded that the Ústí nad Labem Region indeed displays identifiable and clearly traceable specificities. Among the indicators examined were the region's municipal structure, its transformation challenges, and, last but not least, examples of concrete measures that have already been successfully implemented. One of the strategic projects in these transformation efforts is the unique RUR project, which positions the university as a key actor in regional transformation. A project of this scope and ambition is unparalleled in the Ústí nad Labem Region, a fact recognised by both the professional and the general public. Although the project is still in progress, positive outcomes for its target groups are already observable. Nevertheless, from an empirical perspective, a comprehensive evaluation of the project and its impacts will only be possible after its completion.

It will therefore be equally important to monitor which other transformation activities emerge as key to the region's development. Given the substantial financial resources allocated to regional transformation, further measurable improvements in relevant indicators can be expected. Subsequent initiatives will need to respond to these developments to ensure that both the efforts and the funds invested are allocated justifiably and effectively. What is beyond doubt, however, is that the Ústí nad Labem Region, as one of the structurally affected regions, holds considerable potential for growth and innovation – not only internally but also externally, in relation to partners across the Czech Republic and abroad.

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