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GEOSCAPE

Differentiation of developmental priorities of different-sized municipalities in the period of acceleration of developmental changes – an example of a mining region

Petr Hlaváček[1]✉ — Martin Mata[1] — Pavel Zdražil[2]

[1]Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, J. E. Purkyně University, Ústí nad Labem, Czechia
[2]Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Pardubice, Pardubice, Czechia
✉ *petr.hlavacek@ujep.cz*

Abstract

The aim of the research was to assess the developmental priorities of municipalities as they reflect the current policy objectives of the Czech Republic and the European Union, with a focus on the Green Deal and accelerating developmental changes in the external environment. To this end, the key priorities of the Just Transition Fund programme, which is designed for structurally affected regions in the Czech Republic, were selected. Specifically, these included themes in the areas of energy, waste management, transport, brownfield revitalisation and education. The method for obtaining information on the attitudes of municipalities was a questionnaire survey in 160 municipalities within the Ústí nad Labem Region, which also helped to assess the differences between small and large municipalities. The research found that municipalities are prioritising development in energy and waste treatment. At the same time, small municipalities, with under 1000 inhabitants, are slower to develop projects than larger municipalities, and larger municipalities were also more aware of the importance of sustainability issues for future municipal development.

Keywords

Municipality,
Regional development,
Sustainaility,
Funding programmes,
European Union

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Highlights for public administration, management and planning:

- In the context of sustainability challenges, municipalities prioritise the development of clean energy production and improved waste treatment.
- In larger municipalities, with more than 1000 inhabitants, increased importance is attached to sustainability topics in the municipal development planning than in smaller municipalities.
- The process of project preparation in the field of sustainability is slower in small municipalities, larger municipalities proceed more actively in the preparation of projects.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the trend towards the decentralisation of public powers has become evident. As part of this process, sub-national tiers of government (local and regional) have been increasingly empowered to formulate and execute developmental strategies which are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of areas and their inhabitants (Rodríguez-Pose & Wilkie 2017). Therefore, municipalities became key actors in regional development. This is assumed not only in the context of academic debates and the formulation of theoretical principles (Animitsa 2021; Gustafsson & Mignon 2019; Persson 2017, etc.). Municipalities are promoted, for example, by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as central to the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (U.N.General Assembly 2015). In fact, municipalities are the lowest level of public administration, the closest to the citizens, small and medium-sized enterprises, civil society organisations, but also the closest partner to many of the problems, which

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people and business are constrained by, and solutions (Suzuki & Ha 2018).

The importance of municipalities is also underlined in Europe, where approximately 70% of public sector investments come from local and regional governments (Maj-Waśniowska & Jedynak 2020). Since the Maastricht Treaty (Council of European Communities 1992), the key role of municipalities for development is declared in the base document - Treaty on the European Union, under one of the general principles of the EU, i.e., subsidiarity. However, it was declared in the 1980s that subsidiarity is a key element of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Congress of the Council of Europe 1985). The principle of subsidiarity itself is then nothing more than an implication of the classical theses of spatial competition (Tiebout 1956) and information asymmetry at central, regional, and local levels (Oates 1998). Following these theses, the efficiency of central decision making in providing for regional and local needs is less than that of regional and local bodies in many areas of governance (Balaguer-Coll et al. 2019).

Currently, municipalities face various challenging environmental, social, and economic sustainability issues, which vary substantially between contexts (Przywojska et al. 2019). Therefore, to ensure effective implementation of development through municipalities, it needs to be based on a systematic process of information gathering, discussion, goal setting, and implementation analysis (Plant 2009). As a result, increasing demands are placed on municipalities in many areas. Among the most significant ones, it can be mentioned that, in a dynamic environment impacted by rapid developmental changes, municipalities must discern and address their developmental priorities with precision and strategic intent (Bryson 1988; Guyadeen et al. 2023). However, the formulation and subsequent implementation of priorities are burdened with a number of principal problems (Retnandari 2022).

Pierre (2011) points out that, for example, in the field of economics, local development processes are hard to govern, since economic development is driven by markets, which local governments have very limited powers to control. Moreover, priorities should be in line with both national and international policies and plans while considering the costs of economic opportunities and social preferences (Eslambolchi et al. 2018). However, setting the right priorities is such a big job that many municipalities (for example, smaller ones) are not equipped or prepared currently and will not be in the near future (Křištofová et al. 2022). As a result, the priorities of local governments are often vaguely formulated in policies and thus impose high standards of administrative discretion and flexibility during implementation (Olausson 2020).

Also, there is the issue that neither the starting points nor the outcomes of decision-making on the priorities of economic and social development of the territory cannot be optimal (Zdražil 2019). The proximity to the problem provides valuable information which can be used to streamline the selection of priorities (Viturka 2010), on one hand. On the other hand, the process of priority setting is subject to both expert and political decision-making (Sager & Sørensen 2011). In particular, there is a struggle between different opinions and preferences, consensual and conflicting interests coming from different levels of public administration, i.e., local, regional, central, and possibly even supranational (Gustafsson & Mignon 2019), but also different contexts and interests of citizens, entrepreneurs, government, and other stakeholders (Wolfram & Frantzeskaki 2016; Chowdhury 2018). In addition, the actual phases of electoral cycles also play an important role in the priority setting processes (Alesina & Roubini 1992).

Amongst the numerous factors which impact the developmental priorities of municipalities, one of the most pivotal is the size of the municipality (McDonnell 2020). Municipalities, whether they are small towns or large cities, face distinct challenges and opportunities due to their size, which in turn influences the setting of their developmental priorities (Schlachter et al. 2013). In general, small towns may struggle with economic limitations, population decline, and limited access to services, while large towns contend with challenges such as traffic jams, housing affordability, social disparities, and environmental impacts (Przywojska et al. 2019; Keivani 2009; Hoppe & Bueren 2015, etc.). Therefore, tailoring development plans based on municipality size is indispensable for effective governance and sustainable growth (Medeiros & Zwet 2020).

In addition, the developmental activities of municipalities are influenced by the announcement of subsidy titles resulting from EU priorities and related European funds (Janský et al. 2016). In Europe, there has been a large shift away from the support of agricultural development based on modernising structures and intensifying and specialising production towards a vision of integrated, sustainable local development (Maurel 2008). Over the last few years there have been many European initiatives aiming at stimulating the interest and activities of local authorities promoting sustainable development. For instance, the Platform

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on Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans is designed to satisfy the mobility needs of people and businesses in cities and their surroundings (Kelemenis & Galiatsatou 2018). Moreover, the European Commission's Covenant of Mayors focuses on energy and climate mitigation and adaptation (Melica & Bertold 2018). The latter has a clear connection to discourse on climate targets, which has become an imperative of EU policy in recent years (Matern et al. 2023).

The development of municipalities is an important topic in the context of changes in the external environment, especially in the context of the Green Deal and energy prices. The Green Deal is the European Union's strategic framework for transforming the economy towards sustainability and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It can have a positive impact on municipal development by encouraging investment in renewable energy and improving the energy efficiency of buildings. High energy prices can increase the cost of living and of running municipalities. This makes it challenging to develop projects aimed at using energy more efficiently and promoting renewable energy. It is important to consider sustainable development, energy efficiency and emissions reduction when preparing community development projects in response to changes in the external environment, including the Green Deal and energy prices. This can include investing in solar panels, insulating buildings and supporting local economies. A key programme for the Ústí Region has been the Just Transition Fund, which has allocated CZK 42.9 billion to three regions in the Czech Republic.

The Just Transition Fund is a key instrument in public policy which was created by the European Union to support the economic and social development of regions facing challenges associated with the transformation of energy and industry. This fund helps these regions transition to sustainable ways of doing business, while supporting the creation of new job opportunities. The Just Transformation 2021–2027 operational programme sets strategic goals and priorities for the use of money from this fund. CZK 15.6 billion was allocated for the Ústí Region and it was able to identify 11 essential strategic projects and other support programmes and challenges for the sustainable development of the region (RSUK 2023). The Fair Transformation Fund contains a regional document, the so-called Transformation Plan for the Ústí Region, which was prepared by the Innovation Centre of the Ústí Region. The basis of the entire strategy was the determination of a global goal and individual areas of interest for support for companies, municipalities, and institutions. For municipalities, the area of support is determined by specific objectives II.3 to IV.2., which in Table 1 are marked in yellow.

The Ústí Region is an important mining region in the Czech Republic. Mining of raw materials, especially coal, has a long history in this region. However, in the context of the transition to more sustainable and environmentally friendly energy sources and green technologies, the Ústí Region has to adapt to new challenges. In particular, coal mining raises issues related to environmental protection and the social impact on the region's inhabitants. The Ústí Region is trying to cope with these challenges and is looking for strategic projects and funding to support the development of the region. It is important that this transformation takes place with regard to sustainability, environmental protection and improving the quality of life of the inhabitants of the Ústí Region.

Municipalities, as one of the main components of local government, are the carriers of projects in the midst of accelerating change. Municipalities show some budgetary independence due to their own revenues, which include taxes and local fees (Provazníková 2007; Peková 2004). While these direct sources of revenue are usable for financing and supporting development projects, they are very limited, forming a very low percentage in municipal budget revenues and are used more to ensure the functioning of the municipality. Due to the growth of municipal indebtedness, another important source of municipal revenues that are just usable for development projects are funds from the European Union. These funds will be a source of support for sustainability projects in municipalities and EU funds are becoming a key element in the development of sustainable local environments.

The aim of this paper is to assess the transformation of the development needs of municipalities in the context of accelerating developmental changes in the external environment. One of the key objectives is to determine the relevance of each development area from the perspective of local governments in order to identify which areas of sustainability are most important to them, which they place the highest priority on, and at what stage of project readiness the municipalities in the assessed areas are. In order to identify differences between large and small municipalities, another research objective is to compare the differences in priority importance and project readiness rates between small and large municipalities.

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Table 1 Areas of interest of the Just Transition Fund for the Ústí Region

Areas of interest (priorities)	I. Entrepreneur ship, research, innovation	II. Competent people and Smart Region	III. New energy and efficiently used resources	IV. Revitalised territories of the 21st century
Specific objectives	SOI.1: Increasing the innovation performance of the region, strengthening the research and innovation capacity with an emphasis on the region's areas of specialisation	SO II.1: Improving access to quality services and infrastructures of formal and further education in the region's areas of specialisation	SO III.1: Development of knowledge, technologies, systems and infrastructures for clean energy	SO IV.1: Improving the usability of the area affected by coal mining for new activities
	SO I.2: Increasing the competitiveness of SMEs	SO II.2: Increasing the employment and employability of workers on the labour market	SO III.2: Development of new energy sectors	SO IV.2: Greater use and transformation of the potential of the industrial heritage of the region
	SO I.3: Stabilisation and development of key sectors for the transformation of the economy	SO II.3: Greater use of digitisation for efficient and comprehensible public services to citizens	SO III.3: Development of community energy	
	SO I.4: Development of cultural and creative industries and their involvement in the overall development of the region	SO II.4: Increasing social cohesion and community development in municipalities	SO III.4: More efficient use of resources, transition to a circular economy	

2 Methodology

In the research, a questionnaire survey approach was chosen to obtain a comprehensive view of the attitude and experience of the representatives of the interviewed municipalities on topics related to smart municipal development. The questionnaire survey was used because it represents a quantitative research method which allows for the obtaining of otherwise undetectable information about development trends in municipalities. The questionnaire survey was conducted between June and August in 2023 and involved representatives of 160 municipalities from the Ústí nad Labem region acting as mayors or persons responsible for municipal development in the position of heads of the municipality's development department (Table 2).

Table 2 Composition of the sample of municipalities

Municipality population category by inhabitants	Number of municipalities
0–500	77
501–1000	37
1001–5000	38
5001–10000	2
10000 +	6
total	160

The questionnaires contained questions regarding the main trends in the development of the municipality in the context of the Green Deal; respondents were presented with closed questions with options for selection. Questionnaires were distributed to representatives of municipalities in the Ústí Region. In the questionnaire survey, it was assessed how important it is for the municipality to address the following areas of development:

A Investments in the implementation of technologies and infrastructures for affordable clean energy, including energy storage technologies leading to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

B Investments in renewable energy sources and investing in energy efficiency to reduce energy poverty.

C Investments in sustainable local transport using modern (smart) technologies, including decarbonisation of the local transport sector and its infrastructure.

D Investments in the renewal and increase of the efficiency of the district heating network, investments in the production of heat, provided that the production will be ensured mainly from renewable energy sources.

E Investments in the digitisation of services, digital innovations and shared IT infrastructure.

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F Investments in brownfield regeneration and decontamination, land restoration and possibly green infrastructure and regeneration projects.

G Investments in strengthening the circular economy, among other things, by preventing, reducing and recycling waste.

H Activities in the field of education and social inclusion.

The questionnaire survey of mayors with the following questions was carried out in such a way that each of the questions (A–H) contained a rating scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means ”extremely important” and 10 means ”insignificant”. The respondent marked their answer with a cross in the scale for the answer variant that best expresses the degree of significance of the given problem/need. Subsequently, another question regarding the project intention/intentions was added to each question, in four possible stages – a) there is no project, b) there is an idea, c) the project is being developed, d) the project is ready. The respondent chose one of these variants that best corresponds to the state of the project plan/intentions in the municipality they represented. In this way, a comprehensive assessment of the importance of the given areas was achieved. At the same time, information on the readiness of projects was obtained, which provided important data for determining which areas are priority for municipalities and at what stage the projects are ready in the given area. The results of the questionnaire survey provided a quantitative basis for understanding the attitudes of the representatives of the interviewed municipalities. This method made it possible to obtain an extensive data set, which was subsequently used to analyse the differences between small and large municipalities.

In order to determine whether there are real dependencies between the significance of the above mentioned areas as well as the relationships in project readiness, the correlation method was applied in the next part of the research in order to systematically evaluate the relationships between the analysed variables. For example, correlation analysis can reveal whether municipalities which are actively engaged in the revitalisation of abandoned industrial sites also tend to develop environmentally friendly energy measures, or whether municipalities with a higher level of waste management simultaneously invest more in renewable energy, as both areas are closely related to the environmental sustainability of municipal development. Last but not least, the results obtained through applied correlation will evaluate the interrelations between the different areas of municipal development.

As part of the evaluation, we also examined the differences between different categories of municipalities according to their size, i.e., between small and large municipalities. This allowed us to reveal whether there are differences in developmental priorities and project readiness between these two groups of municipalities.

3 Results

The results of this questionnaire survey provide a detailed view of the priorities of municipalities and intentions in the areas of development. The results of the questionnaire survey in Table 3 show the importance of individual areas of development of municipalities, i.e.: (a) clean energy sources, renewable energy sources, transport, hot water systems, digitisation, brownfield sites, waste management, transport, and education. This survey and the answers received were evaluated for all municipalities, as well as the division of municipalities into smaller-sized municipalities (up to 1000 inhabitants) and municipalities over 1000 inhabitants. This procedure allowed a more detailed view of the priorities of different types of municipalities.

Municipal representatives surveyed gave the highest priority to the regeneration of brownfield sites with a value of 1.69, which shows the importance of the revitalisation of these industrial areas. Local governments see the regeneration of brownfield sites as a step towards sustainable development and improvement of the quality of the environment. The waste area with a value of 3.33 points to the great importance of waste disposal and treatment solutions. This is related to the higher rating of the energy resources area with a value of 4.22; municipalities are aware of the responsibility of ecological transformation of the energy sector. These efforts are reflected by mayors as key to achieving sustainability. Renewable energy sources with a value of 4.32 and digitalisation with a value of 4.33 indicate the direction of municipalities towards the modernisation of infrastructure and processes, which is a cornerstone of sustainable development in the 21st century. Education (4.51) is thus identified as quite important for mayors, who perceive it as important for the human resources development and economic growth of local communities. The importance of transport was found to be lower (6.39), but it is viewed differently in terms of different size categories of municipalities. Thermal water infrastructure with a value

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Table 3 Evaluation of questionnaire survey - importance of areas and project readiness of municipalities

Municipality	Clean energy	Renew. energy	Trans-port	Hydro-nics	Digita-lisation	Brown-fields	Waste	Educa-tion
Importance of area								
Municipality 0–999 inhabit.	4,24	4,59	6,29	7,00	4,30	4,56	3,35	4,66
Municipality 1000+ inhabit.	4,11	3,68	6,52	6,23	4,45	3,84	3,27	4,18
Municipality % total	4,22	4,32	6,39	6,79	4,33	4,36	3,33	4,51
Project readiness								
Municipality 0–999 inhabit.	1,48	1,50	1,10	1,04	1,40	1,46	1,58	1,35
Municipality 1000+ inhabit.	1,91	1,95	1,14	1,48	1,91	2,27	2,00	1,80
Municipality % total	1,60	1,68	1,11	1,17	1,55	1,69	1,71	1,49

of 6.79, is not found to be significant in comparison with others, but nevertheless remains an essential element for a stable energy supply of towns and municipalities. The data obtained from the questionnaire also evaluated project readiness in individual development areas (Table 3), the extent to which municipalities have prepared projects and the overall situation in the respective municipalities.

In the questionnaire, project preparedness was given values where a higher mark indicates a higher degree of preparedness or maturity of projects. The research found that municipalities exhibit different levels of project preparedness, which may be a key factor in the planning and implementation of development initiatives. The results of the questionnaire survey showed that the areas of waste management (1.71), brownfield sites (1.69) and renewable energy sources (1.68) exhibit the highest levels of project preparedness. This indicates that preparations and projects have already been implemented in these areas which may be associated with an increasing emphasis on ecological sustainability and the revitalisation of abandoned industrial areas. On the other hand, the average values found showed that projects are being prepared rather than implemented. Overall, it appeared that project preparedness did not reach the wider implementation phase in most cases. The areas of digitisation (1.55) and clean energy resources (1.6) are in the middle of the awarded marks.

The research assessed project readiness in values where a higher score indicates a higher degree of project readiness, these values were then subjected to a correlation analysis (Table 4) to evaluate the correlations. The analysis found a statistically significant correlation in the area of energy projects, with municipalities preparing a range of projects, be they clean energy or renewable energy. A statistically significant dependence in the case of energy sources was found between the progress of project preparation in renewable and clean energy sources in conjunction with project preparation in transport and between and in waste management. In terms of comparing project readiness rates, the research found a statistically significant relationship between the readiness rates of brownfield sites revitalisation projects and waste management projects. It shows that the readiness rate of brownfield projects is comparable to that of waste management projects. This can be seen as an effort by cities and municipalities to improve the quality of life and public space, which should be facilitated by such projects. Brownfield sites in each community may carry a historical tradition associated with industry, particularly in mining regions, and are seen as places with potential for regeneration and improvement of the public realm. Areas of digitisation and projects in this area are conceived at a similar level of development as in other areas.

The level of preparation of transport projects is also similar to the level of preparation of waste management projects, which points to the need to develop functional transport and technical infrastructure. Different links are found between the preparation of projects in the field of education of local residents, where links are shown with projects in the field of digitisation, waste management and brownfield sites. These findings can be interpreted as municipalities' efforts to increase the competences of local residents in the field of digitisation, to improve recycling and waste sorting rates, or to point out the importance of brownfield sites as carriers of a certain historical tradition associated with industry and with objects or areas affected by mining in a mining region. The complex context in the case of project readiness in different areas means that municipalities apply a multidimensional approach to development. Beyond individual projects, there are also synergistic effects that can have

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Table 4 Dependence on the degree of readiness of projects in the analysed areas

		CleanE	REnerg	Transport	Hydronics	Digital-ization	Brown-field	Waste	Educato
CleanE	Pearson	1	,647**	,328**	,214*	,393**	,350**	,359**	,283**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,023	,000	,000	,000	,002
REnerg	Pearson	,647**	1	,520**	,332**	,466**	,364**	,324**	,477**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
Transport	Pearson	,328**	,520**	1	,614**	,472**	,462**	,205*	,512**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000	,030	,000
Hydronics	Pearson	,214*	,332**	,614**	1	,403**	,247**	-,001	,424**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,023	,000	,000		,000	,008	,993	,000
Digitalization	Pearson	,393**	,466**	,472**	,403**	1	,548**	,330**	,476**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000
Brownfield	Pearson	,350**	,364**	,462**	,247**	,548**	1	,284**	,346**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,008	,000		,002	,000
Waste	Pearson	,359**	,324**	,205*	-,001	,330**	,284**	1	,453**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,030	,993	,000	,002		,000
Education	Pearson	,283**	,477**	,512**	,424**	,476**	,346**	,453**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,002	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	

** is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), * is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

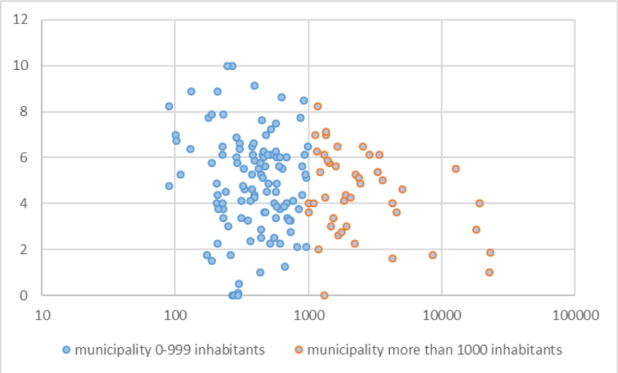

Fig. 1 Relationship between the size of the municipality and the perception of the importance of areas for the development of the municipality

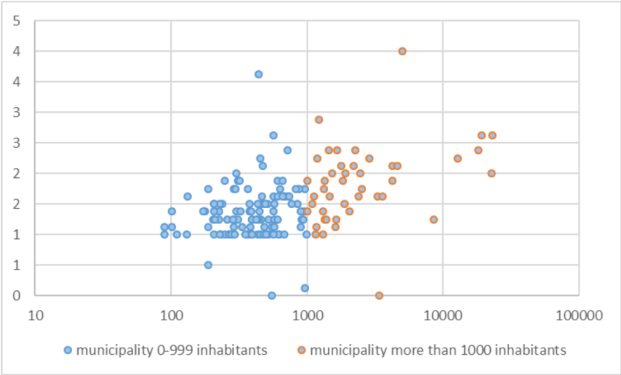

Fig. 2 The relationship between the size of the municipality and the level of project readiness

a joint impact and benefit on improving the quality of life of residents and the socio-economic and environmental sustainability of municipal development. This integral approach to urban and municipal development also essentially fulfils the objectives of public policy and key programmes to support municipal development, and in the Ústí Region, the objectives of the Just Transition Fund.

Detailed assessment of area importance and project readiness in the next phase of the analysis provided an assessment of the differences in responses by small and large municipalities. The higher the score, the more importance was assigned to the area. The research found that larger municipalities attached more importance to the identified areas for community development, as most areas were given higher marks in larger municipalities than they were in small municipalities (Fig. 1). This finding was based on the average for the ratings given for all areas, but was not the same in all areas, even though it was a majority. Small municipalities assigned more importance to the provision of transport, as they are more likely to face poorer access to services, especially in peripheral areas, and also to digitalisation, with a lower difference in scores. In this case, an explanation may be found in a greater difficulty in acquiring user competences and IT skills.

During a detailed assessment of project readiness in various areas, differences between small and large municipalities became apparent. A higher rating meant that the given area was more important for the municipality. The research revealed

that in larger municipalities, development areas usually receive a higher rating than in small municipalities (Fig. 2). This tendency is reflected in the average ratings of all monitored areas. However, it must be noted that this difference in priorities does not manifest itself equally in all areas. The difference in the evaluation of digitisation between large and small municipalities may be related to the higher demands on the acquisition of user competences and IT skills in smaller municipalities. The research also revealed that there are significant differences between individual municipalities in the approach to evaluating the importance of monitored areas and project readiness. This is evident in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, where the average values of importance and project readiness for the monitored areas at the level of individual municipalities are displayed. In Fig. 3 it can be seen that for about a third of the municipalities, the average significance value across all monitored areas is in the range of 3–5, i.e. these municipalities declare a higher number of priorities. Similarly, about a third of municipalities declare a lower number of priorities (range 5–7). However, approximately 17% of municipalities consider practically all areas (range 1–3) to be very important, which is why it is difficult to talk about real setting of priorities for them.

In terms of project preparedness (Fig. 4), the analysis showed that about 20% of municipalities do not have any projects ready and have no ideas for any. About 40% of municipalities then declare relatively low preparedness (range 1–1.5). Another about 30% of municipalities declare slightly higher preparedness (range 1.5–2), however, it should be noted that even these municipalities generally do not have projects ready or in progress in most areas. Conversely, only about 10% of municipalities declare that they have projects ready for most areas, are working on them or have at least an idea about them (range 2–3).

From a spatial point of view, it is interesting that municipalities with similar average values often form certain clusters. This is particularly evident from Fig. 3, i.e. in the number of areas that municipalities perceive as significant. Specifically, one can name, for example, municipalities in Most, Litoměřice, Děčín district or on the border of Děčín and Ústí nad Labem districts. To a lesser extent, similar clusters are also visible on Fig. 4, i.e. in terms of project readiness.

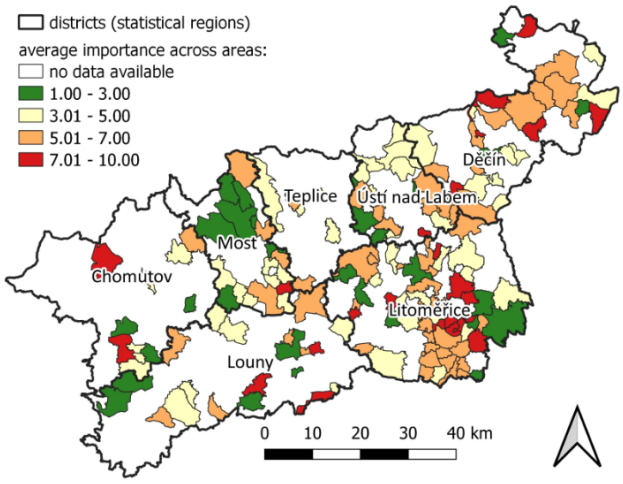

Fig. 3 Average values of importance of areas in individual municipalities – a territorial view

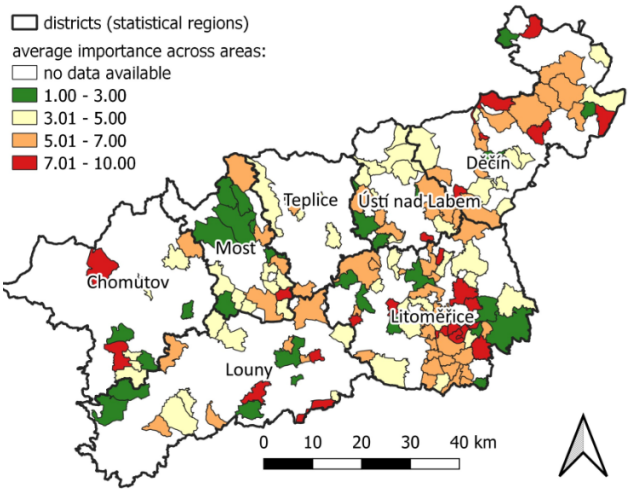

Fig. 4 Average values of project readiness in individual municipalities – a territorial view

4 Discussion

The results showed different priorities between different types of municipalities, and so developmental strategy should be adapted to the specific needs and conditions of a municipality. Municipalities showed different levels of project readiness in different areas, which can be a key factor in planning and implementing development initiatives.

With larger municipalities, they tend to have more projects ready for development – the link between the size of the municipality and the ability to generate and implement development projects is evident. The reasons for the differences between small and large municipalities can be seen in sev-

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eral aspects. Larger municipalities with larger budgets in absolute terms and on a per capita basis have more experts available, which creates better conditions for decision-making on the strategic development of municipalities and can facilitate the development of development projects. Also, with a larger population, the range of needs and problems to be addressed increases, which can lead to more project ideas. Larger municipalities are also generally more attractive for investors and gain more attention, which can lead to more projects. Larger municipalities often have more developed administrative structures and a greater staffing capacity, which makes it possible to better manage the processes involved in the preparation and implementation of projects. They have a better chance of receiving funding from different sources because they have more experience with grant applications and administrative procedures.

On the other hand, it cannot always be assumed that more implemented projects in larger municipalities generate better development of the municipality. On the contrary, smaller municipalities may in some cases show greater cohesion and the ability of individuals to cooperate on project ideas, which can lead to the creation of quality and relevant initiatives, including in the areas of social or environmental cohesion. Overall, therefore, the link between the size of the municipality and the number of projects is not entirely clear. Many factors need to be considered, including the organisational structure, human resources, financial capacity and needs of the specific municipality. At the same time, there are smaller municipalities with better preparedness than some larger municipalities, therefore the individual activity of local actors, not only mayors, is also of great importance, namely how the decision-making process works within the municipality and the involvement of other actors in their development.

A specific issue is the way of setting priorities and the topics of planned projects, which requires a high degree of consistency between the projects and the areas supported by public resources. While the distribution of EU funding at local level is one of the most important sources of revenue for these projects, this allocation may lead local authorities to focus on projects that are most in line with these priorities in order to obtain the necessary funding. The dependence of local development policy on EU funding may limit the ability of local authorities to formulate and implement their own development objectives. If local authorities had sufficient resources of their own, their investment priorities would certainly lead to a greater diversification of priorities compared to those preferred at EU level. Therefore, municipalities should always consider how this dependency affects local government autonomy and decision-making in the context of broader EU development objectives. These mechanisms point to the specific relationship between project funding, local priorities and EU objectives. While financial support from the EU can strengthen the ability of municipalities to implement certain projects, it can also influence the direction of their development. The analysis showed that municipalities face different challenges and priorities in different areas of development. When planning future projects and allocating resources, it is important to take this differentiation in project readiness into account and ensure that development initiatives are driven by the current needs and capacities of each municipality.

5 Conclusion

The research found some connections which point to some trends in development project planning and development strategies within municipalities. While municipalities plan their development with regards to economic, environmental and social aspects, they assign different importance to individual areas and are also at different stages of project preparation for the strategic priorities pursued.

Another part of the analysis focused on comparing differences in the evaluation of priorities between different municipalities, with an emphasis on differences between large and small municipalities. This approach identified trends in the planning of development projects and municipal strategies and showed that smaller municipalities are less aware of the importance of these areas for their development, and generally also lag behind in project preparation.

Within the municipalities of Ústí nad Labem Region there is a noticeable difference in how individual municipalities prioritize their objectives in their development. For example, the larger municipalities are usually at a more advanced stage of planning and implementation than smaller municipalities, which may be related to better access to resources and expertise. This spatial inequality is also evident in the preparation stages projects, where smaller municipalities often lack human and professional capacity.

The research provided a comprehensive view of the issue of municipal development and project readiness. This information can be used for strategic decisions and development planning in different

localities, and especially for regional management within the regions, i.e. how municipalities plan their development with regards to economic, ecological and social aspects, and which areas are most important to them, and how to support the sustainable development of municipalities in project preparation. Cooperation and a multi-dimensional public sector approach, including the use of EU funds, are necessary to achieve these objectives.

The results of this research have provided several recommendations for strategic management and development planning in different localities, and in particular for regional management within counties. First and foremost, to strengthen regional development processes in municipalities, it is necessary to set up financial mechanisms based on a spatial analysis of municipalities' needs in order to accurately target their needs and real absorption capacities. It is also important to strengthen capacity and training at the municipal level, which could help increase the capacity of municipalities to effectively plan and implement projects. Some development areas, such as community energy, will also require greater cooperation between municipalities; sharing resources and professional capacity would also help smaller municipalities to implement more projects.

The limitations of the conducted research lie in the possible lower representativeness, which can be compensated by the robustness of the sample, therefore the obtained set of questionnaires was also relatively large. Mayors' responses may be subjective and, given the election cycle, short-term, as these priorities may change in the next election period. Mayors may also have responded in a way that did not reflect their actual views and intentions for future years. In some cases, decision-making processes may also change over time to respond to new incentives and municipal needs.

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