

Major problems of administrative regionalisation and decentralisation in Central and Southeast Europe

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) promotes within its own member states decentralisation and regionalisation in the administrative sense. This survey is presented in more detail for the countries of Central Europe and just as a summary for the other countries. Driving forces for decentralisation in general and administrative regionalisation in particular are roughly quoted in the sequence of their importance at the average of the countries investigated. Regional disparities have always been more distinct in the eastern parts of Europe than in the West. The paper discusses also the concrete administrative structure of selected countries: Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia.

Key words: European Union, administrative regionalization, decentralization, central and southeast Europe

1 Introductory remarks

The European Union (EU) promotes within its own member states decentralisation and regionalisation in the administrative sense, i.e. in the sense of devolving administrative competences from the state level to the levels of regions in the sense of administrative units of medium size and to the local level (communes). At these subnational levels self-government is to be established. Self-government means that the citizens of a certain administrative unit (commune, region) govern themselves by the election of representative bodies (councils). In pursuing these goals the EU aims at (1) realizing the principle of subsidiarity, (2) establishing a balance of powers (not all the political power should rest with the national level), (3) maintaining Europe's cultural variety, since the regions and not the nation states are in many cases Europe's basic cultural components and at (4) promoting regional development by attributing regional development funds ("structural funds") to self-governed regions. In this respect the NUTS-2 level has a determining role.¹ To this level about 70% of the EU Structural Funds are awarded (Objective-1 funding). The NUTS-2 level is regarded to be also the most important with the elaboration of regional development policies, spatial statistics and analysis, information, comparison related to regional development.

¹ NUTS-2 has within the EU an average size of 15,800 sq. km and an average population number of 1.747 million. NUTS-3 has an average size of 3,050 sq. km and an average population number of 337,000.

EU also promotes regionalisation and decentralization in the candidate countries for EU accession. Regionalisation and decentralization was a chapter in the pre-accession negotiations, not with the aim to copy a “European model”, which in fact does not exist (also current member states have very different administrative systems), but with the aim of acknowledging the basic principle of subsidiarity without disregarding individual national traditions.

Most of the candidates have indeed already reorganised their territorial-administrative system, also with the intention to meet EU requirements, but so far with very different results.

2 Comparative survey over the state of administrative reform in the Central and Southeast European accession countries

This survey is presented in more detail for the countries of Central Europe and just as a summary for the other countries.

	PL	CZ	SK	H	SI	HR	R	BG	EST	LET	LIT	MAL
NUTS - 2												
NUTS - 3												
NUTS - 4												
NUTS - 5												

- Self-government
- Deconcentrated state administration
- Planning and statistical region
- Delegated self-government
- strong coincidence with functional regions
- weak coincidence with regional identities

2.1 Poland

Poland maintained her three-tier administrative structure of the interwar period after World War II and continued to have provinces [województwo], counties [powiat] and communes [gmina]. A basic reform in 1975 resulted in the dissolution of the counties and the existence henceforth of a two-tier administrative system. At the same time, the size of the provinces was reduced, their number going up from 17 (including 5 city provinces) to 49 (including 3 city provinces).

This system has remained essentially unchanged till 1 January 1999, when it has been replaced by the present structure. The current political-administrative system

represents a return to the three-tier administrative structure of provinces, counties and communes as it existed in the interwar period (1918–1939) and in the post-war period from 1950 to 1975. Also in spatial terms it resembles very much this former system: it has almost the same number of provinces (the new 16, the old 17), major spatial divergences are confined to an extension of the Masovia province [Województwo mazowieckie] to the South.

The average size of a new province is 19,543 sq. km with variations from 9,412 sq. km (Opole province [Województwo opolskie] to 35,597 sq. km (Masovia province), i.e. in the proportion 1:4, the average population number (as of 1997) is 2.4 million and varies between 1.0 (Lebus province [Województwo lubuskie]) and 5.1 (Masovia province), i.e. in the proportion 1:5. Thus, by size and population number the new Polish provinces resemble NUTS-2 regions in the larger countries of the European Union (Spain, France, Italy). Socio-economic disparities between the regions, however, are even higher varying in the proportion 1 : 10. GDP per capita is highest in Masovia and Upper Silesia [Województwo śląskie] and lowest in the Precarpathian province [Województwo podkarpackie] and in the Lublin province [Województwo lubelskie] (COR 1999, p. 42).

The new provinces are at the same time self-governing units as well as regional representations of the central government. The provincial parliament [Sejmik województwa] is composed according to provincial elections (every 4 years) and elects a province council [Zarząd województwa] with a chair person [Marszałek województwa]. On the other hand the head of the province [Wojewoda] is appointed by the government (Council of Ministers) based on a proposal made by the province council. He/she is empowered to annul decisions made by self-government should they contradict national law. Province budgets are only to a smaller extent augmented by own resources, e.g. regional taxes (property taxes, shared personal and corporate income taxes), but depend mainly on transfers of state tax revenues. These transfers, however, are modest and must be negotiated between state and region. This confines the provinces in spite of considerable self-governing competences (education, economic and spatial development, communication infrastructure, culture, health and social institutions, environment protection, public security, bilateral and multilateral co-operation with foreign partners), the strongest in Polish history, to still relatively weak units with rather limited executive effects. Counties (361 in number, corresponding to the NUTS-3 level) and communes (2,489 rural plus 65 urban), i.e. the 2nd and 3rd administrative level, are exclusively self-governing.

Their strong spatial coincidence with interwar and post-war structures gives practically all provinces a certain historical and cultural identity that may be traced back to times before World War I, when Poland did not exist as an independent state. Most current provinces correspond to historical cultural regions or to subregions of historical regions with a certain identity and are named after them: Lower Silesia [Województwo dolnośląskie], Upper Silesia, Polonia Minor [Województwo małopolskie], West Pomerania [Województwo zachodnopomorskie], Pomerania [Województwo pomorskie], Greater Poland [Województwo wielkopolskie], Masovia are just some more prominent examples. Pomerania and Polonia Minor are still not satisfied by their present level of autonomy (COR 1999, p. 42).

Some regional identities are also supported by a specific ethnic composition: The Opole province [Województwo opolskie] is the home of the majority of the German ethnic group in Poland with a share of about 15% in the province population. On the province Podlachia [Województwo podlaskie] the Belorussian minority in Poland is concentrated with a share of near to a quarter in the overall population number.

The 2nd or macro-regional level of the Polish central place system is in addition to the national capital Warsaw formed by ten cities (Grimm/Friedlein/Müller 1997): the historical provincial capitals of Cracow [Kraków], the historical capital of Poland and the centre of Southern Poland or Polonia Minor, Wrocław, the capital of historical Silesia, Poznań, the centre of Greater Poland, Gdańsk, the regional centre of historical West Prussia, Szczecin, the capital of historical Pomerania, the industrial centres and younger macro-regional central places of Łódź, Katowice (as the centre of the Upper Silesian industrial region) as well as the less-equipped macro-regional centres Bydgoszcz, Białystok and Lublin.

5 capitals of the recently implemented provinces are not at the same time 2nd rank central places of a macro-region: Gorzów Wielkopolski, the capital of the Lebus province², Opole with its province, Rzeszów, the capital of the Precarpathian province, Kielce, the capital of the Holy Cross province [Województwo świętokrzyskie] and Olsztyn, the capital of the Ermland-Masuren province [Województwo warmińsko-mazurskie]. When provinces are also macro-regions, their limits very frequently coincide. The strongest coincidences occur with the provinces of Masovia, Kuyavia-Pomerania [Województwo kujawsko-pomorskie], West Pomerania, Łódź and Lublin.

2.2 Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic a new administrative subdivision at the first level below the state entered into force on 1 January 2000. It has after a ten years' break replaced the 8 regions [kraj] which were in function till 1990 by 13, retaining provisionally 77 districts [okres] as a 2nd level with the only function of deconcentrated state administration. In 2003 the districts were replaced by the delegation of state competences to the capital communes of former districts. The 3rd level of the administrative system form and will remain to form the communes [obec] which are endowed with considerable powers of self-governance.

This reform is the most recent of 4 radical transformations since the interwar period. One year after the Communist government came into power (1949) the historic lands of Bohemia, Moravia and Czech Silesia (in 1928 Moravia and Czech Silesia had been merged into Moravia-Silesia) were supplanted by 13 regions that did not respect the historical borders. At the intermediate level between regions and communes the districts were retained. The 1960 reform reduced the number of regions to 7, the number of districts also went down dramatically. In 1990 the regional administrative level was removed and left only 76 districts and the communes behind.

² Gorzów Wielkopolski shares its capital functions with Zielona Góra: the head of the province resides in Gorzów Wielkopolski while the province council is located in Zielona Góra.

The present 13 regions essentially represent a revival of the first Communist structure introduced in 1949 with the major exception of the City of Prague which is now a separate unit. The other 12 regions correspond to the regions implemented in 1949 by name and capital, with a few exceptions (mainly the boundary between the regions Brno [Brněnský kraj] and Zlin [Zlínský kraj]) also in shape. With an average size of 5,633 sq. km (varying from 496 sq. km for Prague and 11,014 sq. km for Central Bohemia [Středočeský kraj]) and an average population number of 736,000 (varying from 305,000 for the Karlsbad Region [Karlovarský kraj] and 1.287 million for the Ostrava Region [Ostravský kraj]) the new regions correspond to the EU NUTS-3 level. In order to be eligible for Objective 1 assistance (a category of EU Structural Funding)³ the Czech government created 8 NUTS-2 units at the end of 1998. But they are just statistical, not political-administrative units (COR 1999, p. 18).

Although they are even mentioned in the preamble of the constitution (1 January 1993) as constituent parts of the new Czech Republic, it was avoided to restore the historic lands Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. They were not restored even though they still have distinct identities based on the role of religion (a-religious Bohemia shaped by the Hussite movement and a crude counter reformation, truly Catholic Moravia), the existence of strong gravitation centres (Prague for Bohemia, Brno for Moravia) and on diverging external orientation (Bohemia towards Germany, Moravia towards Vienna, Czech Silesia towards the now Polish North). A regional movement for Moravia and Silesia gaining 10% of the votes in the Czech Republic and up to a third in Moravia and Silesia with the first democratic elections in 1990 had advocated self-government for the historic lands, but lost support later on, especially after the separation of Slovakia (1993). The decision not to restore the historic lands may also have been influenced by their very uneven size and by the intention to avoid the traditional competition between Brno and Olomouc for the primate in Moravia.

Not at all coinciding with historical and cultural identities, the 12+1 regions are fairly in line with the central place system at the macro- and the meso-regional level (Grimm/Friedlein/Müller 1997). Not taking into account the special case of Prague, where the city is administratively separated from its catchment area, there are only two more administrative regions than socio-economic macro-regions: the macro-region of Brno is split into the administrative regions of Brno and Jihlava [Jihlavský kraj], the macro-region of Hrádec Kralové and Pardubice (twin cities sharing central place functions) is split into administrative regions of these two centres [Královéhradecký kraj, Pardubický kraj]. Also the shape of administrative regions corresponds very much to the central place system. However, only Prague, Brno, Plzeň and Ostrava can be regarded as macro-regional centres, whether they are at least well-equipped like Prague or Brno or ill-equipped like Plzeň or especially Ostrava. The centres of all other regions are according to their functions in fact only meso-regional centres (Grimm/Friedlein/Müller 1997).

By a law passed in December 1998 the powers of the new regions had roughly been defined, but establishment of regional authorities has not started before the end

³ EU Objective 1 funding is awarded for development and structural adjustment of those regions at the NUTS-2 level, whose development is lagging behind and whose per capita GNP is less than 75% of the EU average. Objective 1 receives 70% of the EU Structural Funds.

of 2000 and been completed before 2002. They are composed of a regional parliament with elected delegates, who in turn elect a regional council and the head of the region [hejtman]. Regional self-government is – like with Polish voivodships – accompanied by functions of deconcentrated state administration. The regions' budget is funded mainly from the state budget, but also by regional taxes.

2.3 Slovakia

As a constituent part of the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy up to 1918 what is modern Slovakia inherited the Hungarian county (in Slovakian language: župa) system which was – with some modifications in 1920 – preserved throughout the interwar period. At the occasion of the Communist reform in 1949, Slovakia, simultaneously with the Czech lands, introduced a three-tier system consisting of regions [kraj], districts [okres] and communes [obec]. 6 regions and 89 districts were established in Slovakia. The 1960 reform reduced the number of regions to 3, quite in line with cultural identities and socio-economic spatial relations. At the second level the number of districts was reduced to 33.

When in 1968 Czechoslovakia adopted a federative structure, the Slovak capital, Bratislava, was elevated to the status of a region, like Prague. The abolition of the Slovak regions on 11 July 1969 proved but a brief interlude and ended with their full restoration on 28 December 1970. From then to 1996, only minor revisions occurred at the higher administrative levels: in 1990 the number of districts was augmented from 33 to 38.

After the independence of Slovakia in 1993, intensive negotiations resulted by 24 July 1996, still under the government lead by Vladimír Mečiar, in a new administrative-territorial system⁴. It is formed by 8 regions [kraj] that are subdivided into 79 districts [okres] and 2,867 communes [obec]. Only the communes were granted self-government.

Not so much by size, but by population number the regions are rather similar. They vary in size between 9,455 sq. km (Banská Bystrica Region [Banskobystrický kraj]) and 1,982 sq. km (Bratislava Region [Bratislavský kraj]), but by population number just between 764,000 (Prešov Region [Prešovský kraj]) and 547,000 (Trnava Region [Trnavský kraj]). Anyway, they are too small to correspond to the NUTS-2 level in the EU. They do neither correspond to historical structures (e.g. the former county system), nor are they in line with the central place system. Especially the Slovakian capital Bratislava has been cut off from large parts of its hinterland. But also the “capital of Eastern Slovakia”, Košice, lost practically the northern half of its catchment area. A rather close coincidence occurs only between the Banská Bystrica Region and the catchment area of Banská Bystrica, with Žilina coincidence between administrative and socio-economic regions is not too bad.

Two ideas seem to have guided the abandoning of the former and the formation of the new region system: (1) The intention not to support Bratislava and Košice, the largest urban centres. There, with the 1994 parliamentary elections, Mečiar's

⁴ Act NR SR No. 221/1996, Act NR SR No. 222/1996.

Movement for a Democratic Slovakia [Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko, HZDS] has had its poorest results (25.4% in Bratislava, 19.2% in Košice compared to 35.0% at the average of Slovakia); (2) The intention to avoid shaping the regions in a way that would attribute the Hungarian ethnic group a 30% share in the overall population of a region which would in turn mean that a self-government at the level of regions, a higher level of minority rights and measures of cultural support for the Hungarian ethnic group had to be granted. Indeed, the largest share of the Hungarian ethnic group in the overall population of a region could be limited to 29.2% (Nitra Region [Nitriansky kraj]).

In autumn 1998, soon after the end of the Mečiar government and the formation of a coalition involving also the political representation of the Hungarian ethnic group (Hungarian Coalition [Magyar Koalíció/Maďarská koalícia]), the discussion on the administrative-territorial subdivision at the regional level and on self-governing competences at the regional level has been reassumed. After heavy political disputes going nearly as far as to the break up of the government coalition a parallel system of 8 Regions [kraj] and 8 Higher Spatial Units [Vyšši územni celky, VÚC] has been implemented by 1 January 2002. Spatially completely corresponding to the former system of regions as well as to each other, the Regions represent still deconcentrated state administration, while the Higher Spatial Units have elected bodies and represent self-government, albeit with rather limited competences. This recent reform did not affect the district and local level. Already in 1998, at the NUTS-2 level 4 statistical and planning regions have been established. They agglomerate 2 administrative regions each, but are no administrative regions in their own right, just instrumental to provide for the minimal structures for EU Objective-1 funding.

2.4 Hungary

Ever since the foundation of the first Hungarian state in the early Middle Ages, Hungary has been organised as a central state. The county [megye] system as the first layer of political-administrative subdivision is on the one hand as old as the country and therefore firmly rooted in popular consciousness. Even Communist rule did not dare to abolish it, although in all other Communist countries traditional administrative systems had been replaced. On the other hand it has never been very much else than a regional executor of central politics with only minor elements of self-governance. Especially under Communist rule the function of the counties as regional transmitters of state (and party) power was evident.

Having been discredited as a vehicle of Communist party rule, the first post-Communist constitutional reform in 1990 almost in a strive to abolish the counties diminished their powers essentially to the advantage of communes. Counties were only in the position to execute tasks that communes were (mainly for financial reasons) not willing to do. But an amendment to the constitution in 1994 had again to recognize the historical tenacity of the county system and specified at least some mandatory, though not exclusive tasks of counties, i.e. spatial planning, environmental issues covering larger areas, establishment of spatial information systems (COR 1999, p. 35). By this very amendment the general assembly of the counties turned into a body directly elected by the county population. The assembly's chair is elected by the delegates.

Still, counties are only (poorly) subsidised from the state budget and cannot levy taxes in their own right. They also still need the consent of all their constituent communes with any decision. This makes them functioning practically as coordinating units of communes. This makes it also difficult to co-operate on an equal footing with German, Austrian, Italian a.o. regions in the transnational Working Community Alps-Adriatic or in the Working Community of the Danubian Countries. For the same reason the creation of a Euroregion at the triangle of Vienna [Wien], Bratislava and Győr has proved to be problematic. The number of counties (19) is also too large and their size is too small (4,868 sq. km and 447,000 inhabitants at an average) to correspond to units of the NUTS-2 level in the European Union.

A parliament resolution as of 1998 (Government 1997) implemented 7 “planning statistical regions”⁵ ranging in size between 6,918 sq. km (Central Hungary) and 18,256 sq. km (South Great Plain), in population number between 1.000 (West Transdanubia) and 2.961 million (Central Hungary including Budapest) and in Gross Domestic Product per capita in the proportion 5 (Central Hungary) to 1 (South Transdanubia). These planning regions accumulate between 2 and 3 counties. Only 3 of the 7 are roughly in line with socio-economic regional structures (Grimm/Friedlein/Müller 1997): the South Great Plain Region corresponds to the macro-region Szeged, the North Great Plain Region to the macro-region Debrecen and North Hungary to the macro-region Miskolc. But these planning regions meet just the minimum requirements for EU Objective 1 funding. Besides regional development agencies they have no administrative bodies in their own right. They are in fact just accumulations of counties for special purposes. A later development into self-governing regions is, however, not principally excluded. Due to their lack of coincidence with any historical or cultural units they are, however, completely lacking cultural identity and identification by their inhabitants.

2.5 Slovenia

Although a very small country of little more than 20,000 sq. km, Slovenia has regions with very distinct historical and cultural identities that are not only apparent in the cultural landscape, but also deep-rooted in the consciousness of the population. These identities (Carniola [Kranjska], Styria [Štajerska], Carinthia [Koroška], Littoral [Primorsko], Prekmurje) have been founded by the lands of the Habsburg empire existing from the Middle Ages (13th century) up to 1918. They express themselves a.o. by styles of architecture, dialects as well as ecclesiastical subdivisions.

None of the administrative-territorial subdivisions after 1918 reflected these historical and cultural identities. What is today Slovenia was always subdivided into a lot of smaller units varying in number between 20 and 63 and in name from district [okraj, srez] to commune [občina] without being accumulated to larger administrative entities. Only from 1922 to 1929, in the frame of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes,

⁵ Besides “planning statistical regions” the National Regional Development Concept (Government 1997) defines “development” or “program regions”. They are bottom-up institutions for spatial planning purposes. So far around Budapest and Lake Balaton development or program regions have been established.

the subdivision of the then Slovenian territory (leaving the western part with Italy) into the regions [oblast] Ljubljana and Maribor reflected in a way the historical division between Carniola and Styria.

The first administrative-territorial restructuring within independent Slovenia in 1995 saw the replacement of 63 communes [občina] with an average size of 336 sq. km and an average population number of 28,000 by a much larger number of 147 self-governing communes [občina] having a size of 138 sq. km and a population number of 13,000 at an average. Authorities representing the state remained to be responsible for the territories of the former communes. In 1998 the number of autonomous communes has even been augmented to 193, lowering the average size to 105 sq. km and the average population number to 10,000.

An administrative super-structure has so far not been implemented, but intensively discussed. One possibility is the elevation of the 12 existing statistical regions to the status of administrative regions [pokrajina] with some degree of self-government. They are rather close to the historical and still vigorous identities mentioned before and would correspond to the NUTS-3 level of the EU (2,500 sq. km and 250,000 inhabitants at an average). The implementation of self-governing regions is, however, not without risks, since the strong cultural identities combined with the modern attractiveness of some historical central places abroad which have again turned into gravitation centres of the respective regions (Trieste, Udine, Gorizia, Klagenfurt, Graz, in a way also Varaždin, Zagreb and Rijeka) bear the danger of producing centrifugal forces. This is well understood in Slovenia and makes a larger part of the political spectrum opposing against this idea.

Historical and cultural identities coincide also closely with current socio-economic regional structures (Vrišer 1998).

In order to implement a NUTS-2 level to get eligible for Objective 1 EU Structural Funding, Slovenia has recently subdivided the country into three planning units: West (corresponding roughly to the Littoral), Central (Carniola) and East (Styria plus Carinthia and Prekmurje). This subdivision into planning units means, however, not administrative regionalisation and is also not meant as its preliminary phase.

2.6 Croatia

Similar to Slovenia, modern Croatia is a country with very distinct historical and cultural regional identities. There is the historical division between the lands of the Hungarian crown and the "Austrian lands", successors of Venetian possessions up to 1797. The formerly Hungarian lands were composed of Slavonia [Slavonija] and Croatia Proper, both with a high level of autonomy, as well as Baranja, an integrated part of Hungary till 1918. Croatia Proper was in turn composed of several smaller cultural regions. The former Austrian lands, enjoying also considerable self-governance, were – as regards the territory of modern Croatia – composed of the Croatian share in the former Austrian Littoral, i.e. Istria [Istra] and the Kvarner, as well as of Dalmatia [Dalmacija]). While Slavonia, Baranja and Croatia Proper have a Pannonian or Central European character, the former Austrian provinces at the Adriatic Sea are truly Mediterranean and Venetian in architecture and lifestyle.

In recent times, apart from the Serbian question which lead from 1992 to 1995 to a de facto separation of areas with a Serbian majority coinciding to a larger extent with the former Military Border, Istria displayed the strongest signs of a regional consciousness. In 1991, 45% of the Istrian population declared ethnic affiliations other than Croatian, while 16% declared a "regional" affiliation.

With the exception of the period 1929–1939 neither interwar Yugoslavia, nor Communist Tito-Yugoslavia respected historical regions in their administrative-territorial structures. From 1967 onward the communes, enlarged to the size of counties and endowed with considerable powers of self-government, functioned both as the basic political-territorial units and the only political units below the republican level. But finally amounting to a number of 106 and having an average population number of only 40,000 they were too small to function as regions. Mainly for regional planning purposes, communes accumulated to associations [Zajednica općina]. The 11 of them reflected very precisely the higher ranks of the central place system, i.e. the system of socio-economic macro- and meso-regions. But they were not political-territorial units in their own right, just associations of independent communes for certain purposes.

In a somewhat curious hurry and obviously to stop discussions on real regionalisation, Croatia implemented already in 1993 a new system of 20 counties [županja] plus the City of Zagreb [Grad Zagreb], mainly by merging existing communes. After the end of wars in Croatia (1995), i.e. in 1996 and 1997 the county system has been modified in shape, especially on the territory of the ephemeral Serbian Republic and around Zagreb. Having an average size of only 2,700 sq. km with a variation from 1,291 (City of Zagreb) to 6,353 sq. km (Zadar-Knin County [Zadarsko-kninska županja]) and a population number between 779,145 (City of Zagreb) and 53,677 (Lika-Senj County [Ličko-senjska županja]), these counties comply to the NUTS-3 level of the EU. They have self-government, but with rather limited competences. At the same time they execute functions of deconcentrated state administration.

Although in most cases the county system splits historical and cultural regions, it completely corresponds to a distinct historical and cultural identity in one single case and is close to it in another. The Istria County [Istarska županja] corresponds to Istria in the sense of the cultural region (not as a peninsula), i.e. to the Istrian peninsula west of the Učka mountain range leaving the Liburnian Riviera outside. Another coincidence of a modern county with a historical unit and identity occurs with the Dubrovnik-Neretva County [Dubrovačko-neretvanska županja]. Dubrovnik, formerly Ragusa, was a practically independent city republic for centuries till 1797.

Since 2000 a replacement of the county system by "real" regions along cultural lines and in the size of NUTS-2 units is discussed. Among others 5 regions have been proposed: Slavonia and Baranya [Slavonija i Baranja], Dalmatia [Dalmacija], Central Croatia [Središnja Hrvatska], Littoral and Lika [Primorsko-lička regija] and the City of Zagreb [Grad Zagreb] (Slobodna Dalmacija 23/8/2000, p. 7). Problem cases are Istria which in spite of its distinct identity would be part of the Littoral and Lika region, as well as the attribution of the capital function in Dalmatia: should it be attributed only to Split, the largest city and the economic centre, or shared by Split, the historical Dalmatian capital Zadar (formerly Zara) as well as Dubrovnik with its free town traditions?

Regionalisation bears, this must be admitted, still some risk for a young and inhomogeneous country like Croatia, although centrifugal forces may be regarded as not being as strong as with Slovenia due to a lack of adjacent and attractive foreign gravitation centres (except Trieste for Istria). It can, therefore, not be excluded that courage shrinks when it comes to a final decision. But it can be taken for granted that the larger units mentioned above will at least be endowed with functions in the kind of Hungarian planning and statistical regions, i.e. with the minimum necessary for complying to EU requirements for Objective 1 funding.

2.7 Intermediate conclusion

From the examples discussed in more detail as well as from the other countries just schematically displayed in the Figure it can be concluded that at the local level (NUTS-5) self-government is established in all countries. In Slovenia and Croatia it had already existed in Communist times (Yugoslavia had developed a specific system of self-administrative socialism), in Bulgaria it has been established in 1988, in all other countries in 1990 and later.

When it comes to discuss the regional levels (NUTS-2 to NUTS-4), it can be summed up that only Poland has self-government at the NUTS-2 (province) level. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and Romania have self-governing units at the NUTS-3 (region) level, Slovakia with a very specific solution: 2 administrative bodies at the same regional level are responsible for the same territory. Bulgaria has self-government only at the lower regional level (NUTS-4, the level of districts or very large communes). In Estonia and Latvia is no self-government at regional levels, although administrative regions exist. Slovenia and Malta have not implemented administrative regions so far.

Future Objective-1 funding at the NUTS-2 level will be directed to self-governing units only in Poland, while other countries have established only planning units at this level. Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta have even not defined such planning units so far.

3 Major problems accompanying decentralisation in accession countries

3.1 Danger that socio-economic disparities grow

Regional disparities have always been more distinct in the eastern parts of Europe than in the West. They have in the Communist period been somewhat disguised by an industrial location policy not corresponding to market principles, but have again gained momentum in the transformation period. There are clear "winner" and "loser" regions of transformation. Winners are metropolitan and other large cities and their catchment area, western border belts and areas of specific attraction for tourists. Losers are the rural space, if it is not situated at a western border or in a touristically attractive area as well as agglomerations of old heavy industry and mining.

Decentralisation stresses disparities, since it widens the financial autonomy of sub-national administrative bodies. Subnational bodies must rely on own financial resources

more than before, transfer payments from the national level decrease. Economically sound and active units have sufficient own resources and income, peripheral and economically weak units lack sufficient own resources.

3.2 Lack of qualified and trained personnel especially at the local level

Lack of qualified and trained personnel is one of the most frequent arguments of “centralists” against decentralisation. The quality of public services indeed declines, when they are executed by insufficiently trained personnel. This is a huge problem mainly in small communes and in rural areas. They suffer from brain drain and an unfavourable demographic structure (over-ageing), a lack of money. This impedes also the participation of these administrative units in EU pre-accession programmes, since participation is based on the elaboration of good projects (and there is nobody able to do this).

National governments, associations of communes, political parties, educational institutions do a lot to improve this situation by offering training courses, but real improvement needs time.

3.3 Lack of civil participation

Democracy and self-government needs their engagement for public and community affairs not only of some officials, but of a wider public. Readiness to engage oneself in public and community affairs is, however, weak, especially with older people and in the rural space. This is due to bad experiences in the Communist period, also due to another heritage of the Communist period, to the still prevailing idea that “the state is caring for everything; I must not engage myself”, due also to a lack of emotional contact and loyalty towards political parties. They are young institutions, have only to a minor extent a permanent clientele and lack the power of mass mobilization. Mediation from abroad could help. This is a wide field for NGOs, since neutral actors are required, not associated with parties or other political forces.

3.4 Lack of coincidence between administrative and cultural regions

Regional identity is important for the acceptance of an administrative unit by the citizens, for making them engaged for the region. Regional or cultural identity is constituted by a common history, common traditions and can be accentuated by certain ethnic, linguistic and religious characteristics. But distinct regional and cultural identities only partly exist. Only some countries are composed of a complete set of such identities: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta. In others only some parts of the country can boast of such identities: Slovakia, Bulgaria, Estonia. Among the countries in question only Poland has utilized this potential for its recent administrative reform.

3.5 Lack of coincidence between administrative and functional regions

If functional regions in the sense of gravitational zones or catchment areas of cities at several spatial levels do not coincide with administrative regions, this means not utilizing possible synergetic effects which result from the fact that the same centre is

not only the administrative centre, but also the centre of social and economic spatial structures. There is not really a “lack” of such coincidence, since most countries have adapted their administrative regions to functional regions very well. But there are some exceptions: Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Latvia, partly also Poland.

3.6 Self-government has only exceptionally been established at the NUTS-2 level

The NUTS-2 level will receive Objective-1 funding of the EU (70% of overall structural funding). It is within the intention of this funding structure that funds should be received by administrative units governing themselves and deciding themselves on the use of these funds and not by authorities dependent on the central government or on other subnational units. However, self-government at this level exists only in Poland. In other countries only planning units have been established at this level. They are no juridical persons. In some countries they depend on regions with self-government (Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania), in others on the central government (Slovakia, Bulgaria). In Croatia, the Baltic countries and Malta even planning units do not exist so far.

One may raise the question, why it was so difficult to implement self-government at the NUTS-2 level? One answer is that central governments are afraid of a “federalisation” of the country and of strengthening centrifugal forces going eventually as far as regionalism, ethnic particularism and even irredentism. This may apply to the Czech Republic (as regards Moravian regionalism), Slovakia (as regards the large Hungarian minority), Slovenia (as regards the strong regional identities), Croatia (as regards mainly Istrian regionalism), Romania (as regards the large Hungarian minority), Bulgaria (as regards the large Turkish minority). A second explanation is that an additional administrative level should be avoided, especially in the smaller countries, since it consumes expenses and needs another layer of civil officers. A third explanation is that representatives of the administrative levels already established are afraid of losing competences, financial resources and do not want to be subordinated to higher units.

3.7 Share of competences between the administrative levels

In the course of implementation of a comprehensive new administrative system it is not easy to arrive at the optimum share of competences from the beginning. Most desirable would be precise and exclusive attributions and the avoiding of overlapping and shared competences. For the optimum share, however, there is no general rule. It depends on the size of the country, the size of subnational units, population density, settlement structure, economic structure and administrative traditions.

3.8 Lack of horizontal networks

While vertical connections exist (between units at different levels and between subnational units and the national level), horizontal networks are very frequently missing. They would be desirable and useful between cities of similar rank, between cities and their catchment area, between rural communes across regional boundaries,

between regions and communes at both sides of an international borders. Horizontal networks would a.o. promote a better share of functions, a concentration on and better utilization of comparative advantages and exchange of know-how

4 Driving forces

Driving forces for decentralisation in general and administrative regionalisation in particular are roughly quoted in the sequence of their importance at the average of the countries investigated.

- **Cities and economically prospering regions:** They are clearly the winners of decentralisation. They dispose over ample resources of their own, which they can use for their own purposes and projects in a decentralised system. They are not as dependent on state transfers (which decline) and dispose over sufficient human capital, since they gain from brain drain. They are therefore also able to elaborate good projects that are funded.
- **Readiness of political elites to comply to the requirements of EU accession.**
- **Regional and local media:** Liberalisation and diversification (especially of electronic) media are more advanced in some accession countries than they are in some member countries. A plenty of regional and local broadcasting and television stations create a regional and local consciousness and engage themselves for regional and local interests.
- **Conservative and liberal political parties:** They are not bound to a centralistic ideology or background.
- **Other political actors with** a regionalized or localized organisational structure of their own or aiming at regionally or locally diversified political goals, e.g. culture associations, farmers' associations, fishermen's associations, chambers of commerce.
- **Good coincidence between administrative and functional regions.**
- **Good coincidence between administrative and cultural regions.**
- **Ethnic minorities**, if they are not regarded (by the central government or by the majority population) as a threat to national integrity.

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