Regionalization in Central and Eastern Europe: Limits and Perspectives of an Externally Driven Process

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1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the process of regionalization of powers in Central and Eastern Europe (hereinafter CEE) in the period following the fall of communism.1 Two aspects are considered: on the one hand, the influence of domestic and non-domestic legacies on this process; on the other hand, its main institutional outcomes. First, the aim is to analyse to what extent a series of endogenous and non-endogenous factors, such as historical background, European Union (hereinafter EU) conditionality or economic pressures, have affected the decentralization process in this area. Furthermore, the chapter describes the institutional arrangements at subnational level, examining the procedures and outcomes of both administrative and political reforms. It emerges quite clearly that no effective regionalization took place in this area in the last 20 years, as the core product (with a few exceptions, such as Poland) has been the establishment of statistical or functional regions set up mostly in order to meet EU requirements for accession rather than to answer to internal problems.2

* Section 2 was written by Martina Trettel, while section 3 was written by Sara Parolari. Both authors wrote the introduction and conclusion.

1 In this chapter, both ‘decentralization’ and ‘regionalization’ will be used to indicate a process of decentralization of functions and competences to substate entities placed at a level between the national and the local. In general terms, it is quite difficult to define exactly what makes up a ‘region’. In this context, we shall use the term region in a broad sense to include a wide range of institutional arrangements.

2 This chapter mainly relies on the findings included in the book edited by F. Palermo and S. Parolari, Regional Dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe: New Approaches to Decentralization, (Leiden: Brill) 2013, though further reflections have been added.
2 The Influence of Endogenous and Non-Endogenous Factors on the Decentralization Process

In central and eastern Europe, the transition from democratic centralism\(^3\)—the heritage of the Soviet Union model of administration—to a decentralized democratic State implemented European norms and requirements regarding regional development policies and the creation of local self-governing bodies, responsible for significant issues and matters, such as economic growth.

In this chapter, we shed light on the evolution of decentralization processes in CEE by analysing how domestic legacies, such as historical evolution and market economy, and non-domestic legacies, such as European conditionality, impacted on the decentralization processes of the central and eastern European countries (CEECS).\(^4\) In so doing we focus on single experiences taken from specific case studies—Romania, Poland, Hungary and Serbia—in order to combine the analysis of the theoretical framework with the practical implementation.

2.1 The Historical Legacy: From the Soviet Union to the EU

The implementation of decentralization policies in the CEECS took a long time and faced several obstacles deriving in particular from the historical legacies of these countries. In fact, regionalization processes have been strongly influenced by the communist regime in place for more than 60 years.\(^5\) Some of the difficulties met during the different transitional phases are common to the whole area,\(^6\) while some are peculiar to the countries analysed here (Romania, Poland, Hungary and Serbia).

\(^3\) As stated by Kruglashov, democratic centralism was “[h]ostile toward any kind of democracy […], strictly hierarchical with all the real power concentrated in the hands of the communist party’s nomenclature; in which democratic feature served only as a rhetorical decoration for complete centralism.” See A. Kruglashov, “Central and Eastern Europe Regional Reforms: From Dismantling a Soviet Model to Europeanizing a National One”, in F. Palermo and S. Parolari (eds.), Regional Dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe, supra, 7–34, at 9.


\(^6\) Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.