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Deconstructing the Process of Europeanization of the Meso-level Administration in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. EU Conditionality vis-à-vis Domestic Societal Pressures

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Abstract

The introduction of regional self-governance in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) emerged from a paradoxical interaction of bottom-up and top-down decentralization pressures. Although regional reforms introduced direct and indirect channels of civic involvement in territorial governance, increased decentralization coincided with a proportional decline in the citizens' willingness to participate in subnational politics. In pre-1989 Czechoslovakia, where the rigidity of the regime impeded all decentralization initiatives, anti-Communist opposition promoted localism and regionalism as a precondition for a democratic society. Consequently, in the early 1990s, decentralization counterbalanced the centralism of the Communist era and gained euphoric support. The public and the elite have recognized an imperative need to formulate an independent subnational level, making decentralization a cornerstone of transformation. However, the institutionalization of municipal authority came with clientelism, non-transparent decision-making, and fragmentation, causing the rise of nationalism and separatism. Thus, further decentralization encountered growing scepticism about the efficiency of the new system and centralistic tendencies in public discourse. The lack of eloquent domestic actors endorsing change determined the technocratic, mainly unobstructed, character of the reforms in the Czech Republic, while in Slovakia the process was more controversial due to the presence of societal cleavages and ethnic regionalism. Nonetheless, the subnational level in the Czech Republic is currently experiencing legitimacy problems, reflected in the low election turnouts and the electorate's mistrust in the governance and representative abilities of regional politicians. This contrasts to the Slovak case, where the presence of domestic advocates of regional self-governance determined reforms beyond the *acquis* regardless of the Commission's involvement. Consequently, Slovak regional offices enjoy a higher degree of legitimacy and are more accountable with respect to the interests of the electorate. Accordingly, this paper puts forward a bottom-up analysis of the reforms of public administration in CEECs in light of the 2004/7 EU enlargement. In a qualitative comparison of the events and considerations leading up to the consolidation of a regional self-governance system in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia prior to EU accession, this paper establishes a correlative link between domestic societal discourse and the institutionalization of regional self-governance. The domestic context of reforms is examined against the backdrop of Europeanization by conditionality, aiming to determine whether EU conditionality should get direct credit for the new regional structures or whether these are the outcomes of indirectly unleashed societal pressures within the accession countries. The presence of bottom-up societal mobilization is viewed as a determinant of preference formation on the domestic level, and ultimately as a variable that mediates EU conditionality. The central problem is tackled from the perspective of Europeanization literature and builds upon neo-institutional premises.

1. Introduction

The introduction of regional self-governance in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) emerged from a paradoxical interaction of bottom-up and top-down decentralization pressures. Decentralization reforms, aimed at fostering democratic pluralism by increasing civil involvement in territorial politics, were implemented in a technocratic fashion following a decline in public support for the institutionalization of the meso-level government. In pre-1989 Czechoslovakia, where the rigidity of the system hindered vertical power dispersion, the opposition promoted regionalism and localism as cornerstones of democratic governance. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, the public and the elite recognized an

imperative need to restructure the over-centralized, over-bureaucratic and unaccountable territorial administration. However, negative experiences with growing clientelism and non-transparent decision-making on the municipal level blocked the institutionalization of regional self-governance. The separation of Czechoslovakia produced a further impediment. The subsequent debate opened up deep ideological questions about the necessity of regional self-government and the nature of democracy vis-à-vis public participation. Given that Prague and Bratislava were to lose significant political and economic competences and risk further fragmentation of state structures, regionalization presented a hazardous move. Whereas both governments resisted further decentralization throughout the 1990s, the following decade brought about the consolidation of regional self-governance in anticipation of EU accession. With reference to the above, the presented text puts forward a bottom-up reflection on public administration reforms in CEECs in light of the 2004/7 EU enlargement. The research focus is placed on the extent to which societal cleavages determined the institutional and political empowerment of the meso-level in the post-socialist period vis-à-vis Europeanization by conditionality. In a qualitative comparison of events and considerations leading towards the consolidation of a regional self-governance system in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia prior to EU accession, this paper establishes a correlative link between domestic societal discourse and institutionalization of regional self-governance. The tentative hypothesis views public perception of decentralization as a variable that mediates Europeanization.

Given that accession conditionality stipulates adjustments in the field of regional policy, territorial administrative structures in CEECs have been subjected to Europeanization since the conclusion of the Europe Agreements. Based on the premise that regional policy was inexistent prior to negotiations with the Commission, mainstream theory views regionalization as a technocratic top-down development and consequently grants the EU direct credit for institutionalizing regional self-governance.¹ The transformation is attributed to an uneven power distribution in which applicants are supposed to modify domestic legislation in conformity with the *acquis* without taking part in its formation. The opposing view is that the EU's role in decentralization was complementary. The irresolute *acquis*, in addition to the inconsistency of the Commission's approach, which at the later stage of negotiations substituted decentralization rhetoric with a preference for centralized accession preparations and territorial organization, diluted the effect of Europeanization.² This paper confronts these two competing hypotheses by deconstructing preference formation on the domestic level and consequently takes a mid-way stance, suggesting that the pre-accession negotiations encouraged institutional reforms, whereas the mobilization of domestic factors determined variation in policy responses across applicants. Despite the Commission's role within the context of the *acquis*, actual consolidation of regional self-governance occurs in proportion to favourable civil involvement. Thus, regionalization is portrayed as an outcome of the dichotomy between societal cleavages on the one hand and the absorption of Europeanization on the other.

The analytical choice of the Czech Republic and Slovakia is appropriate because Europeanization penetrated two comparable institutional settings and collided with similar political traditions. With reference

¹ Jacoby, Wade / Pavel Černoch: The Pivotal EU Role in the Creation of Czech Regional Policy, in: Linden, Ronald H. (ed.): Norms and Nannies. The Impact of International Organizations on the Central and East European States, Lanham/MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, pp. 317–340, here p. 319.

² Brusis, Martin: Between EU Requirements, Competitive Politics, and National Traditions. Re-creating Regions in the Accession Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in: Keating, Michael (ed.): Regions and Regionalism in Europe, Cheltenham: An Elgar Reference Collection, 2004, pp. 612–640, here p. 616.

to the homogeneity of the two settings in terms of the external pressures and institutional predispositions, this focus allows one to keep several variables fixed. In view of the identical nature of the alternative bottom-up and top-down variables, the comparison of regionalization in these two countries highlights the weight of domestic cleavages. Public perception of and participation in decentralization differs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Whereas the absence of an eloquent public discourse determined the technocratic nature of regionalization in the Czech Republic, reforms were more turbulent in heterogeneous Slovakia.

The central problem is tackled from the perspective of Europeanization literature and builds upon neo-institutional premises. By deconstructing preference formation on the domestic level, this paper offers an empirical assessment of how Europeanization interacts with the institutional, political, and cultural specificities of the applicants. Europeanization is defined as the EU-institutionalization of domestic 'polity, politics, and policy', and in light of the research of Hughes and Grabbe, applied in the context of the applicant countries.³ This framework distinguishes between the adoption of the *acquis* as a legislative problem and the adaptation of domestic norms to the *acquis* as a matter of deeper institutional and discourse transformation, while focusing on the latter one. Furthermore, with reference to argumentation raised by Radaelli and Pasquier, the proposed corpus rejects the model in which EU pressure is argued to be a primary change generator for its normativism.⁴ The specificity of the domestic context of reforms has gone largely unnoticed in the literature in that it has been treated as a dependent variable rather than a change-facilitating factor. Domestic change does not result exclusively from direct EU pressures, but is a consequence of bargaining shaped by societal groups.⁵ This corpus utilizes a bottom-up methodology for the study of Europeanization due to its actor-centred line and thus avoids the EU-centrism of top-down perspectives.⁶ In line with the above-stated parameters, the article is organized around the following questions:

- I. To what extent and how did EU regionalization conditionality interact with the domestic institutional setting in the Czech Republic and Slovakia during the accession negotiations?
- II. To what extent and how has the presence of societal cleavages or the lack thereof determined the differences in policy responses to Europeanization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia?
- III. How do the results of this study resonate with the broader premises of Europeanization literature?

2. Accession negotiations. Europeanization vis-à-vis the domestic level

Despite the initial enthusiasm for territorial decentralization to counterbalance authoritarianism by increasing the receptiveness and legitimacy of governmental structures, reform efforts have been diluted by Communist path dependencies and the negative experience of the Velvet Divorce. The rigidity of the pre-1989 regime contributed significantly to the ongoing societal cleavage regarding the viability of re-

³ Grabbe, Heather: Europeanization Goes East. Power and Uncertainty in the EU Accession Process, in: Featherstone, Kevin / Radaelli, Claudio M. (eds): *Politics of Europeanization*, London: Frank Cass, 2003, pp. 303–330, here pp. 309–317; Hughes, James / Sasse, Gwendolyn / Gordon, Claire: *Europeanization and Regionalization in the EU's Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. The Myth of Conditionality*, New York/NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 2.

⁴ Radaelli, Claudio M. / Pasquier, Romain: Conceptual Issues, in: Graziano, Paolo / Vink, Maarten P. (eds): *Europeanization. New Research Agendas*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 35–45.

⁵ Börzel, Tanja A. / Risse, Thomas: Conceptualizing the Domestic Impact of Europe, in: Featherstone, Kevin / Radaelli, Claudio M. (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 57–80.

⁶ Radaelli, Claudio M. / Pasquier, Romain: Conceptual Issues, in: Graziano, Paolo / Vink, Maarten P. (eds): *Europeanization. New Research Agendas*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 35–45, here p. 42.

gional autonomy. The Communist ideology of *democratic centrism* failed to recognize subnational interests distinct from the nationally defined (interests), and as such endorsed the system of bureaucratization and vertical subordination of territorial governments, with the central authority enjoying extensive competence over subnational developments. The above-stated scenario, in conjunction with the overall distrust in the state apparatus, undermined the arguments claiming the functional necessity of the meso-level. Although the Soviet-based system was abolished in 1990, the subsequent decentralization was only concerned with localization and failed to address the re-establishment of the regional level. In addition, the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 accelerated fears of further fragmentation of state structures. In the subsequently unstable political environment, calls for regionalization were not only silenced but they also collided with the more salient matter of privatization. Hence, the issue of regional self-governance was placed in institutional limbo for several years. Although the constitutions of both countries provided for the establishment of the missing meso-level, subsequent political interactions paved the way for étatism rather than regionalism. In the Czech Republic, the domestic discourse was characterized by the ideological split between regionalism and centralism supported by party politics, underestimating the bottom-up mobilization. The predominantly conservative ruling elite portrayed regionalization as an unnecessary and bureaucratic intervention into natural market flows. In contrast, the debate in Slovakia centred on socio-economic and politico-ethnic cleavages, with Mečiar relating the issue of decentralization to state-building nationalist rhetoric.

Hence, Europeanization did not penetrate a tabula-rasa-like environment. EU norms operated against the centrist tendencies of ruling parties, sectoral policy-making and the limited bottom-up support for regionalization. Whereas the Union showed only a limited interest in the administrative reforms of the applicants in the initial phase of the negotiations, the late 1990s saw a significant increase in EU presence in the national discourse.⁷ Although the Commission abstained from exerting direct pressure, regular progress reports reveal its preference for democratically elected political regional governments with substantive legal and financial autonomy.⁸ The *acquis* under Chapter 21 defines the rules for implementing the structural and cohesion programmes that are to be universally applied across applicant countries. The final provision of the Chapter asks applicants to have 'an institutional framework in place and adequate administrative capacity to ensure programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in a sound and cost-effective manner from the point of view of management and financial control.'⁹ Hence, demands are procedural rather than institutional and the extent of regional self-governance is sensitive to territorial traditions. In the absence of a firm constitutional framework, neither the Commission nor the applicants saw the conditions as strict targets and have applied them loosely. However, the pre-accession negotiations shifted the opportunity structures at the domestic level and consequently encouraged bottom-up regionalization.¹⁰ Domestic discourse analysis reveals Europeanization to be a facilitator of regionalization, despite the ambiguity of the *acquis*, which left room for the indigenous

⁷ Schepereel, John A.: *Governing the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Between State Socialism and the European Union*, Boulder/CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p. 6.

⁸ Regular Report on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession SEC (2001) 1746, European Commission, Brussels, 2001, pp. 1–124, here pp. 80–83; Regular Report on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession SEC (2002) 1402, European Commission, Brussels, 2002, pp. 1–156, here pp. 101–103.

⁹ European Commission: Chapter 21 – Regional Policy and Co-ordination of Structural Instruments, in: Europa.eu, December 2004, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/enlargement_process/future_prospects/negotiations/eu10_bulgaria_romania/chapters/chap_21_en.htm

¹⁰ Baun, Michael / Dan Marek: Směrem ke snižování regionálního deficitu?, in: *Mezinárodní vztahy*, 2006 (Vol. 41), No. 1, pp. 44–57, here p. 50.

factors to determine the exact structure of the reform. Notwithstanding the relatively uniform character of EU conditionality in the regional policy field, end reforms in the Czech Republic and Slovakia took considerably diverse forms due to the divergence in public involvement.

Fundamental ideological disagreements combined with a lack of financial resources resulted in a political deadlock in the matter of regional self-governance in the Czech Republic throughout the 1990s. As none of the actors was able to formulate proposals strong enough to terminate the status quo, policy-makers turned to international political designs in search of an adequate model. Jacoby and Černoč emphasize the pivotal role of the Commission in breaking the deadlock, although duelling ideologies continued to characterize the domestic political discourse.¹¹ Forces outside of the governing cabinet supported by civil servants responded positively to the Commission's communication and fostered technical amendments sympathetic to regionalization. However, the *acquis* and the subsequently developed *soft conditionality* were unable to circumvent the Euro-scepticism and centralized ideology of the governing elite, which vetoed pro-regionalization reforms beyond the introduction of a Constitutional Act on the Formation of the Regions and a politically limp Ministry of Regional Development (MRD). Thus, the government established fourteen regional authorities called *kraje*, but it failed to address the responsibilities of the regional governments and their consequent relationship with Prague. It was an attempt to respond to EU requirements without introducing substantial changes. The debate continued until April 2000, with the institutional and policy framework for regional government being introduced only after the fall of the Klaus government. In accordance with the Regional Development Act, the regions were given legal and financial competences over a substantial number of issues. Post-Klaus Europeanization of the Czech territorial administration was constructed as an integral component of a wider project of bringing the government closer to the citizens.¹² Due to its technocratic nature, it encountered minimal societal opposition, resulting in a relatively unobstructed operationalization of the reforms. Nevertheless, limited public scrutiny over the reforms reflected negatively on the weight of the policies, which focused more on maintaining the existing institutional setting while appeasing the EU than on bringing about substantial subnational empowerment.

In contrast to the Czech case, the course of action in Slovakia was highly politicized along socio-economic and politico-ethnic cleavages. Mobilized parts of civil society supported by the subnational level posited decentralization as a democratic answer to the totalitarianism of the Mečiar era.¹³ Although territorial division was established under Mečiar when the parliament passed legislation dividing Slovakia into eight regions subordinate to the central administration, the process took the form of a centralized power de-concentration with district administrators being centrally appointed with zero competencies.¹⁴ Moreover, the number and boundaries of the created regions conflicted with ethno-historical traditions and as such enhanced the further re-centralization of policymaking. Regional self-governance would provide minorities with an opportunity for political participation and was therefore

¹¹ Jacoby, Wade / Pavel Černoč: The Pivotal EU Role in the Creation of Czech Regional Policy, in: Linden, Ronald H. (ed.): Norms and Nannies. The Impact of International Organizations on the Central and East European States, Lanham/MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, pp. 317–340, here p. 327.

¹² Brusis, Martin: Regionalisation in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Comparing the Influence of the European Union, in: Keating, Michael / Hughes, James (eds): The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe, Territorial Restructuring and European Integration, Paris: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 89–105, here p. 91.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ NR SR č. 221/1996 Z. z. o územnom a správnom usporiadaní Slovenskej republiky, in: Územné a správne usporiadanie Slovenskej republiky, May 2006, <http://www.civil.gov.sk/p11/p11-01.shtm>

strongly opposed by pro-nationalistic forces. On the other hand, the Mečiar model was contested domestically and internationally once it was apparent that it was hindering the development of democratic pluralism and feeding into the nationalistic ideology of the ruling elite.¹⁵ Hence, the decentralization discourse in the period from 1993 until 1998 was characterized by broad ethnic, political, and economic societal divisions. Reforms introducing regional self-governance vocalized debates concerning nation-building and identity formation in Slovakia. Actors in Slovakia had many diverse visions about how the reforms should be formulated. Consequently, the coalition government led by Miloš Dzurinda, brought to power in the 1998 elections, was united only in its opposition against Mečiar. Dzurinda utilized the adherence to EU norms and principles to stop the authoritarianism of his predecessor, and consequently placed the adoption of the *acquis* at the centre of his governing agenda. This encompassed a comprehensive reform of public administration resulting in the introduction of regional self-governance. The reform was to amend the Mečiar model and to consolidate the political and economic powers of the regions. Nonetheless, whereas the threat of exclusion from the EU club contributed to the pro-democratic turn in Slovak politics, Europeanization was unable to overcome the deeply rooted societal divisions reflected in the composition of the coalition government. As Brusis puts it: ‘...[the] combination of conditionality and reward has generated a strong formal impact...[but] the EU did not have a tangible impact on the number, size, and location of regions...’¹⁶ However, in the post-Mečiar context, the political will for decentralization was never questioned, whereas disagreements about its exact nature blocked reforms regardless of the Commission’s critique.¹⁷ The question of regionalization caused a governmental split; coalition parties could not formulate a unified position with respect to either the form of territorial division or the extent of regional competences. Hence, the programme, introduced by expert-advisor Nižňanský, proposed the far-reaching decentralization of decision-making competences, finances and political power along the tripartite municipality-region-state structure. It was thus responsive to societal heterogeneity but also to EU pressures, but failed when subjected to political scrutiny in the parliament. The subsequent adoption of act 302/2001 was an agonizing process characterized by political bargaining, heated public debate, and party politics. The act institutionalized a vertical transfer of competences to the regional level, but the boundaries of the eight self-governing regions remained unchanged. A weakened version of Nižňanský’s plan was introduced as a face-saving measure with legislative competences and funding channels that were left largely unspecified. The coexistence of the three levels was to be determined in an ad-hoc manner.

The comparison of Czech and Slovak reforms up to 2002, when Chapter 21 was officially closed, reveals that both countries confirmed the centrist territorial legacy, seeing that the meso-level remained subordinate to political processes in Prague/Bratislava. Europeanization accompanied domestic ideological cleavages and party politics. Inconsistencies in the *acquis* and soft conditionality produced *decentralized centralization* influenced by domestic path dependencies, with EU norms being absorbed on paper but not carried out. Divergence in the consolidation of regional governance in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is attributable to divergence in societal structures. In terms of the institutional model, the Czech

¹⁵ Sloboda, Dušan: Slovensko a regionálne rozdiely. Teórie, regióny, indikátory, metódy, Bratislava: M.R.Stefanik Conservative Institute, 2006.

¹⁶ Brusis, Martin: Regionalisation in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Comparing the Influence of the European Union, in: Keating, Michael / Hughes, James (eds): The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe, Territorial Restructuring and European Integration, Paris: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 89–105, here p. 94.

¹⁷ Agenda 2000 – Commission Opinion on Slovakia’s Application for Membership of the European Union DOC/97/20, Brussels: European Commission, 1997, pp. 1–143, here p. 101.

Republic integrated administrative regional assemblies with the elected regional government, whereas Slovakia opted for a strict institutional separation of the two bodies.¹⁸ The disintegrated structure provides the central government with significant leverage over regional policy-making and can foster duplication of action. In relation to the consolidation of regional decision-making, both countries' regions act both autonomously and in line with centrally determined policies. However, by granting regions with a power of regional initiative, the Czech reform allowed for a higher degree of bottom-up mobilization of regional interests in comparison to the Slovak one. In addition, the Czech meso-level was given a wider list of independent competences and partial financial autonomy. The Slovak process was more cosmetic than substantial, leaving several significant questions undetermined.

3. Bottom-up mobilization for regional self-governance

Despite the relative uniformity of EU norms, the assessment of territorial-administration reforms in the Czech Republic and Slovakia indicates variance in both the model of regional governance and the legislative and political strength of the regional level vis-à-vis the central government. Whereas in both countries regionalization was commensurate with an increase in the Commission's pressure on Bratislava and Prague, the domestic context determined significant divergences in the form and extent of decentralization. This paper proceeds to examine how the presence of societal cleavages or the lack thereof determined the differences in policy responses to Europeanization in both countries.

The establishment of the regional level in the Czech Republic was a top-down project of the central government aiming to bring territorial administration in conformity with EU conditionality and additional international variables. Hence, Europeanization had a pivotal position whereas the role of the domestic level is seen as responsive. The voices of Moravia and Silesia, two historically distinct territories, were overpowered by the centrist ideology of the national government, the legacy of the Velvet Divorce, and the nonexistence of region-based identity. Hence, societal involvement in the process was minor. Consequently, the regionalization of the Czech Republic in the post-Klaus period was relatively unobstructed and brought about full transposition of the *acquis*. However, this came at the expense of the utilization of existing channels of representation at the national and supranational levels. The technocratic character of the accession negotiations marginalized the position of subnational units, which were excluded from the negotiations but were nevertheless expected to absorb and implement externally determined demands. Hence, the indifferent attitude of the population and the regional structures towards the EU as well as their resistance to regionalization can be traced back to a regional deficit of the enlargement process.¹⁹

On the other hand, the analysis of Slovakia points to an extensive bottom-up mobilization in favour of and against decentralization, whereas the EU was used as a legitimizing factor in the rhetoric of the pro-regionalization factions. Brusis describes Slovak reforms as a 'political project in its own right', whereby civil society joined experts in an effort to expand democracy and political pluralism in relation to the

¹⁸ Brusis, Martin: Regionalisation in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Comparing the Influence of the European Union, in: Keating, Michael / Hughes, James (eds): *The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe, Territorial Restructuring and European Integration*, Paris: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 89–105, here p. 92.

¹⁹ Hughes, James / Sasse, Gwendolyn / Gordon, Claire: *The Regional Deficit in Eastward Enlargement of the European Union. Top Down Policies and Bottom Up Reactions*, in: ESRC One Europe or Several, Working Paper 29/01, Brighton: Sussex European Institute, 2001, pp. 1–57, here p. 20.

central state.²⁰ This provided for a continuation of decentralization reforms even in the absence of the Commission's involvement, which did not occur in the Czech context. The most significant changes towards consolidating regional self-governance came about after the EU accession, which occurred in the second term of Dzurinda's government.²¹ Bottom-up mobilization arose as an answer to the centralism of the Communist legacy and political opportunism of the Mečiar era, in which regional borders, drawn according to political loyalties and thus maximizing the political benefits of the ruling elite, disregarded socio-economic and ethno-historic territorial specificities. Opponents denied the relevance of territorial restructuring from 1996, naming the process de-concentration rather than decentralization.²² The diversity of Slovak society contributed considerably to the cleavage between the centrists and regionalists, with regional, ethnic, social, and economic heterogeneity adding a political dimension to regionalization debates. Societal cleavages can be traced along the following lines: west to east, mountain to lowland, rural to urban, and along ethnic and religious differences. The legacy of being on the border between West and East and living under different empires and regimes had disrupted national identity formation. What Kundera refers to as a state of 'eternal uncertainty' resulted in a paradoxical situation in which citizens identified with local communities while submissively accepting centrally imposed decisions. In the early years of the Slovak state, the construction of national identity resumed along the lines of xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric. Hence, regionalization vocalized the trajectory between nation-building efforts on the one hand and regional/local and European identity on the other.

Accordingly, the nationalist path supported by nation-building rhetoric found more fertile ground in ethnically heterogeneous Slovakia than in the rather unitary Czech Republic. The negative perception of minorities in Slovakia hampered regionalization, which was portrayed as an attack on the stability of state structures and led to disintegration along ethnic lines. On the other hand, the discriminatory treatment of minorities resulted in the expression of ethnic regionalism and even autonomy aspirations, especially at the border regions with a large Hungarian minority. The aspiration of the ethnic Hungarian party SMK to unite Hungarians under one administrative unit by forming a region around Komárno placed the ethnic societal cleavage at the core of the regional self-governance debate. Socio-economic differences and a large divide between the urban and rural populations also contributed to the matter. In addition, one witnesses uneven economic development in both the eastern and mountainous territories, which remain economically challenged and continue to rely heavily on state subsidies.²³ Years of political marginalization and economic backwardness cemented the indifferent and submissive behaviour of the citizens towards the policies and politics once set by Vienna, Budapest or Moscow, and nowadays by Bratislava and Brussels. Cultural conservatism with highly entrenched traditions underpins the aversive attitudes towards modernization, change, and reforms, while sustaining political indiffer-

²⁰ Brusis, Martin: Regionalisation in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Comparing the Influence of the European Union, in: Keating, Michael / Hughes, James (eds): *The Regional Challenge in Central and Eastern Europe, Territorial Restructuring and European Integration*, Paris: Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 89–105, here p. 92.

²¹ The institutionalization of regional self-governance in Slovakia was finalized in 2005, when the government decentralized the financial system in favour of the regions. Nižňanský, Viktor / Kňážek, Miroslav: *Bilancia nekonečného príbehu 1995–2005*, in: Nižňanský, Viktor (ed.): *Decentralizácia na Slovensku*, Bratislava: Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky. Kancelária splnomocnenca vlády SR pre decentralizáciu verejnej správy, 2005, pp. 1–431, here p. 337.

²² O'Dwyer, Conor: *Reforming Regional Governance in East Central Europe: Europeanization or Domestic Politics as Usual*, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, 2006 (Vol. 20), No. 1, pp. 219–253, here p. 233.

²³ Buček, Milan: *Regional Disparities in Transition in Slovak Republic*, in: *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 1999 (Vol. 6), pp. 360–364, here p. 362.

ence, egalitarianism, and collectivism.²⁴ This proved to be fertile ground for post-1989 ethnocentrism and populism. In contrast, sociological research indicates a direct correlation between economic growth and pro-democratic attitudes on the one hand, and regional and local identification on the other, explaining why the economically more developed southern and western regions tend to be critical of paternalism and étatism.²⁵

Hence, notwithstanding EU conditionality, the above-presented societal cleavages led to a troublesome consolidation of regional self-governance in Slovakia. A palette of different societal groups ranging from trade unions, academics, minority representatives, and regional associations mobilized their diverse ideas about the form, number, and competences of regional territorial units. In the end, the deeply rooted path dependencies of the previous regimes entrenched in the political culture collided with the unwillingness of Bratislava to renounce power and consequently marginalized pro-regionalization supporters. Legislation passed left controversial questions about the role of bureaucratic district offices and the design of regional borders open while bringing about mainly cosmetic changes. This provoked criticism and disappointment among NGOs and regional associations. Moreover, it jeopardized the government's credibility in the eyes of the public and further destabilized the already weak coalition. Pro-regionalization groups continued to challenge governmental integrity vis-à-vis the regionalization question. Further steps towards financial and political decentralization were taken as a result of an increase in public support for regionalization and to the development of regional identity.

Despite its troublesome and lengthy nature, the reform providing for the consolidation of regional self-governance has proven to be more meaningful in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. In the context of limited bottom-up pressures for decentralization, Czech regional interests remain either unaddressed or are promoted by the central government. This contrasts to the Slovak case, where the presence of domestic advocates of regional self-governance has determined reforms beyond the *acquis*. Consequently, Slovak regional offices enjoy a higher degree of legitimacy and are more accountable with respect to the electorate's interests.

4. Conclusion. Societal bottom-up mobilization in light of broader Europeanization literature

This paper supports the theoretical premise of the Europeanization turn in EU studies while aiming to disprove the EU-centricity of top-down approaches. The conclusions arising from the comparative study of regionalization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia clarify how EU norms interact with the domestic setting of the applicants and consequently resonate in policy choices. While acknowledging the impact of EU conditionality, the results confirm the lack of policy convergence vis-à-vis Europeanization. The divergence of responses to the EU confirms the premise that CEECs ought not to be observed as a unitary block, but rather as individual actors with unique sets of preferences and political cultures. In the context of the decentralization of the public administrations in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the divergence in responses is attributed to the divergent role of societal groups. Whereas the lack of bot-

²⁴ Danglová, Olga: Populism in Local Politics and Issues, in: *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2005 (Vol. 1), pp. 85–92, here p. 86.

²⁵ Bitušiková, Alexandra: The Global vs. the Local – European vs. National: Paradoxes of New Identities, in: Skalník, Peter (ed.): *Sociocultural Anthropology at the Turn of the Century. Voices from the Periphery*, Prague: Set Out, 2000, pp. 51–61, here p. 52.

tom-up mobilization determined the technocratic nature of regionalization in the Czech Republic, visible societal cleavages defined the regionalization discourse in Slovakia. Hence, when examining the extent to which societal cleavages influence the institutional and political empowerment of the meso-level in the post-socialist period vis-à-vis Europeanization by conditionality, this paper concludes that the Commission had more leverage over reforms in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia.

Therefore, the introduction of regional self-government in the Czech Republic should not be observed in isolation from EU accession. Europeanization triggered the constitutional potential for regionalization. However, the resonance of EU norms in domestic structures was ambiguous, creating a gap between the adoption of and adaptation to Europeanization. The lack of bottom-up involvement in the pre-accession negotiations and the inconsistency of the Commission's rhetoric in conjunction with the weak nature of the *acquis* gave inconclusive results. Although post-Klaus developments led to the decentralization of territorial structures, the reforms failed to empower regional assemblies vis-à-vis the central government. The regional level therefore lacks the legitimacy and financial capacity to substantially contribute to domestic and supranational decision-making. The context of the reforms was considerably different in heterogeneous Slovakia, where the variety of clashing societal interests provoked a heated debate over the form and extent of decentralization. Societal cleavages, constructed along ethno-historical and socio-economic lines, fed into the discourse where regionalization and Europeanization were positioned vis-à-vis national identity formation. Whereas the domestic level was responsive to the Commission's conditionality in the Czech Republic, the EU has played only a complementary role in the regionalization of Slovakia. With the EU accession and EU norms portrayed as legitimizing factors in support of pro-decentralization rhetoric, the process was more receptive to domestic preferences than to the EU as a norm facilitator. In light of the heterogeneity of the domestic level, the reform of the public administration was a turbulent and long-lasting process. The bulk of substantial empowerment of the regional level occurred after EU accession. On the other hand, the presence of bottom-up mobilization circumvented the technocracy of policy adoption in response to EU conditionality. In comparison to the Czech meso-level, the Slovak regional reform reflects domestic preferences and as such enjoys a higher degree of legitimacy.