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DEVELOPMENT POLICIES ON RURAL PERIPHERAL AREAS IN VISEGRAD COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE POLICY ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of regional policies dealing with peripheral rural areas in the Visegrad countries from a historical perspective. As it is demonstrated in the paper despite the common political and ideological framework the goals and means of regional policy remained rather different in these countries during state-socialism. The systemic changes demanded the re-conceptualisation of regional development policy and the reconfiguration of the institutional background. As the comparative policy analysis showed in the early 1990s there was a lack of coherent regional policy that would efficiently mitigate growing regional disparities or foster regional competitiveness. The conceptual, legal and institutional foundation of the new regional policy took place in the second half of the 1990s, with some time lag among the countries. In the formulation of strategic documents regarding regional policy the foreseen EU accession played a very important role. The preparation of national development plans were based on the EU's standardized development handbooks, therefore a considerable similarity among the new member states' regional policy documents can be observed. One can say that earlier differences in regional development priorities were gradually eliminated by the European integration among the new member states. However, rural areas were considered in regional economic development policies only in the context of agriculture and tourism development. In addition to local infrastructural development, preservation of natural and cultural heritage, job creation only agriculture and tourism were defined for EU and national subsidies.

Key-words: regional policy, rural areas, regional disparities, peripheries, EU accession, Visegrad countries.

Introduction

Countries of the Visegrad have a lot of similarities regarding regional disparities and the socio-economic development of rural peripheral areas, often associated with poor economic performance coupled with high unemployment rates, marginalisation of the population, ageing and an exodus of the younger and better educated segment of the population (Turnock 2001). They also have many similarities in how regional development policies during state-socialism tried to counter these problems and also with respect to policy responses elaborated after the change of regime. In all four countries the 25 years of transformation has been coupled with a steady increase in spatial differences and an increasing marginalisation of substantial rural areas.

The main aim of this article is to provide a comparison between past and present regional policies on peripheral rural areas in the Visegrad countries. The main research question of our comparative policy analysis is: Do these countries formulate similar policies to support the development of rural peripheral areas, or are there distinct differences? We would also like to find out whether these policies focus exclusively on the development of agriculture or regional development in the context of rural development policies related to the support of other economic sectors.

The article is organised as follows. First we examine the roots of the concept of regional development during state-socialism. Then we look at the effects of the post-socialist transformation on regional development in Visegrad countries and the subsequent policies applied by comparing their objectives. Finally, in the conclusion we turn back to our research question and provide an overview of the development of concepts and regulations with respect to the economic development of rural areas.

Regional development policies in Visegrad countries during state-socialism

After 1945 regional policy became an integral part of national economic policies and as such remained under the control of national planning authorities in the state-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. However, despite the common political and ideological framework distinct features regarding the goals and means of regional policy appeared among these countries.

Enyedi (1990) defined three phases of regional policy in Central and Eastern Europe during the state-socialist period. The first phase which ran until the late 1950s was characterised by regionally polarised growth based on socialist industrial and urban development policy. Regional disparities clearly intensified due to the highly concentrated allocation of resources, while differences between cities and villages substantially grew. The second phase lasting until the late 1970s involved a deconcentration of industry and modernisation of the urban network. In addition to urban places growth was concentrated in larger villages and key settlements with the result that isolated peripheral villages declined rapidly. In the third period, from the early 1980s, the first signs of a post-industrial era appeared in attempts at regional equalisation of living conditions. Enyedi (1990) also pointed out that regional policy throughout the region had a consistent urban bias with a very small proportion of central resources directed towards villages.

In **Poland** the overarching objective of the state from 1945 onwards was to recover from the aftermath of World War II. Due to changes in Poland's territory there emerged a need for the development of the newly incorporated western and northern regions. Although the country suffered severely from the wartime collapse of statehood, there appeared the possibility for radical transformation of Poland's spatial structure aimed at balancing regional disparities. The Three-Year Plan for Reconstructing the Economy (1947–1950) was the first, centralized strategy developed by the Central Planning Office. Unfortunately, despite promising theoretical assumptions, polarization concerning social and economic development in different parts of Poland increased. This was due to the fact that the vast majority of available means was aimed at rebuilding Warsaw and industrial centres.

The national policy of the People's Republic of Poland (Three-Year Plans, Five-Year Plans and a Six-Year Plan) primarily focused on the development of heavy industry and enhancing urbanisation. The necessity of equalizing regional disparities became more pronounced from the 1960s onwards. The policy aimed at developing new industrial centres and mid-sized cities equipped with technical infrastructure and – as a result of intense urbanisation – gaining new functions.

In 1970 the Communist Party initiated a new period concerning national policy. There was an immense increase in investment and with the support of foreign loans new production sites were set up. This was the most intense period of industrial investment dispersion over the country which to some extent fostered mitigation of regional disparities. Through the 1970s, numerous concepts concerning the spatial organization of Poland were developed. These provided significant input to the Plan for the Spatial Organization of the Country to the year 1990. A system of polycentric concentration and the foreseen transfer of industrial potential from the south of the country to less-developed regions reflected an attempt to establish a more balanced spatial structure. However, the Plan based on the assumption of the dynamic industrial development of Poland was overly optimistic and became merely a tool for propaganda. Moreover, impressive, large-scale investment plans exceeded the state's economic capacity. This led to the economic recession of the 1980s and the subsequent social crisis (Bański 2007).

The national policy in the period of state-socialism was to some extent effective in terms of mitigating regional disparities. However, certain parts of Poland – with a greater endogenous potential or being under the influence of local/regional growth poles – were clearly favoured by the ruling party. Much less attention was paid to peripheral rural areas, in which state intervention in terms of investment was not economically justified. Regional policy directed at rural areas was primarily restricted to the development of agriculture, neglecting numerous economic and social issues that had been arising. This, over time led to the occurrence of *problem areas*, which were identified and considered within scientific studies conducted by Polish geographers in the 1980s – for instance the project *Diagnosis of the state of Polish spatial economy* (conducted in 1981–1983).

In **Czechoslovakia** the main objective of regional policy was to reduce the significant regional disparities between the Czech and Slovak regions after World War II. One of the tools in how this goal was to be achieved was the transfer of complete factories to Slovakia from areas affected by the expulsion of the German population after the war. However, the outcome of this policy was rather controversial as the expulsion of Germans and the re-settlement of production capacities caused huge economic and social problems in the borderland areas during the whole socialist period.

In addition, regions where heavy industry with massive state support was concentrated (e.g. Ostrava agglomeration, the Ore mountains basin, the Košice region) suffered from social tensions resulting from the increased demand for new housing. The development of these regions overshadowed the capital city Prague, which was supported only after 1968 (the federalization of Czechoslovakia), as previously the development of Bratislava was preferred (ÚRS 2009). The development of rural areas, similarly as in other Visegrad countries, was subordinated to agricultural development. From the beginning of the 1970s, when the system of central settlements was implemented, the development of villages on the bottom position of this hierarchy was de facto restricted. Therefore, this tool, which should have served for rationalization of the settlement system, was heavily criticized both by professionals and the public (Hrabánková and Trnková 1996: 45).

In **Hungary** 63 percent of the population lived in villages and 54 percent worked in agriculture in 1949. Due to industrialisation and collectivization of land during state-socialism the ratio of rural inhabitants dropped to 38 percent and those working in agriculture to 14.2 percent by 1990. Even though the system of central planning was supposed to reduce the level of regional differences, the dominant growth pole of the country remained Budapest throughout the period. Rural-urban differences in income, which declined between 1962 and 1982 because of household plots in subsidizing wage income, were by 1992 at the same level as in 1962 (Andorka 1993).

The economic reform of 1968 opened a new chapter in regional development which was previously based on large-scale investments in the heavy-industrial axis stretching east-west in the northern hilly part of the country. The new regional development policy was outlined by the government decree in the National Plan for Settlement Network Development approved in 1971. The decree regulated the administrative procedures of regional planning, and included, for the first time in the history of Hungarian regional policy a social objective: to reduce inequalities in the standard of living among the population of different settlements at identical functional levels in the settlement hierarchy in the country (Horváth 2005). Ironically the two principal objectives formulated by the document (i.e. to improve the efficiency of the national economy and to reduce disparities in the standard of living in the population of different regions) remained valid until today.

In 1985 a Parliamentary Decree defined the long-term tasks of regional policy in Hungary, and a resolution for a more rapid development of peripheral areas was passed. Peripheral areas according to socio-economic indicators were delimited, most of them fell in the category of rural areas near the national border (Fig. 1). Settlements lying in these regions were entitled to state support within the so-called 'programme of catching-up' (Kovács 1989). The programme was not able to achieve any serious result as the financial resources were insufficient and the institutional system was inadequate.

COMECON, the disintegration of the state farm and cooperative system, and restitution of agricultural land. Therefore, the new situation demanded the re-conceptualisation and re-territorialisation of regional development in the form of new concepts, strategies, laws and institutions (Momsen 2000). From the mid-1990s anticipated EU integration brought about the growing influence of the European Union also in terms of national regional policies. As a precondition of accession the new member states had to prepare and implement an efficient regional policy aimed at decreasing regional differences and increasing territorial cohesion (Horváth 2010).

Poland

The political discourse on the development of peripheral and rural areas in Poland

After 1990 in Poland similarly to other states of the former Soviet Bloc the withdrawal of the state from the concepts of the socialist planning system could be observed, adapting the economy to the conditions of the European free market and competition from the global market (Grosse 2004). Restructuring of the centrally planned economy resulted in the collapse of industries and many unprofitable state enterprises. Inflation skyrocketed and the rate of structural unemployment began to increase rapidly. Disparities between the core and peripheral areas deepened and the risk of poverty as well as social exclusion became prevalent especially in remote peripheral areas, where state farms had been the dominant form of economic activity before. The aftermath of the centrally planned economy along with inefficient policy making of the 1990s is well reflected by Figure 2, which illustrates concentrations of areas with very diverse social and demographic trajectories at the municipal level in Poland.

Unfortunately, as concluded by Grosse (2004), in the 1990s there was a lack of coherent regional policy that would efficiently mitigate growing regional disparities or foster the development of regional competitiveness. Experts including Gorzelak and Kozak (2012) critically evaluated economic policies pursued in Poland in the 1990s. These were often uncoordinated providing ad hoc solutions and recommendations. The top priority of macroeconomic interventions was to unilaterally fight against inflation.

During the first years of political transformation, apart from its evident benefits, foreign investments significantly contributed to spatial polarization between the regions of Poland. Investors preferred urbanised regions with a developed infrastructure, skilled workforce and high accessibility. The inflow of foreign capital to Poland was favourable for the economically most developed regions of Mazowieckie, Śląskie, Dolnośląskie and Wielkopolskie. Polarisation between these regions and other parts of Poland deepened, among which the peripheral regions are considered to be the five provinces (NUTS2) – Lubelskie, Podkarpackie, Podlaskie, Świętokrzyskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie. When Poland was about to join the EU, these regions were eligible for special economic intervention, as their GDP per capita measured in purchasing power parity did not exceed 40 percent of the EU mean (*Strategia rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego Polski Wschodniej do roku 2020, 2008*). Their socio-economic disparity is also expressed by a lower level of attractiveness for investment, low level of entrepreneurship and poor macroeconomic indicators (Fig. 2).

One would think that policy directed at rural areas should be one of the most significant state interventions in Poland, where 93 percent of the territory is considered rural.

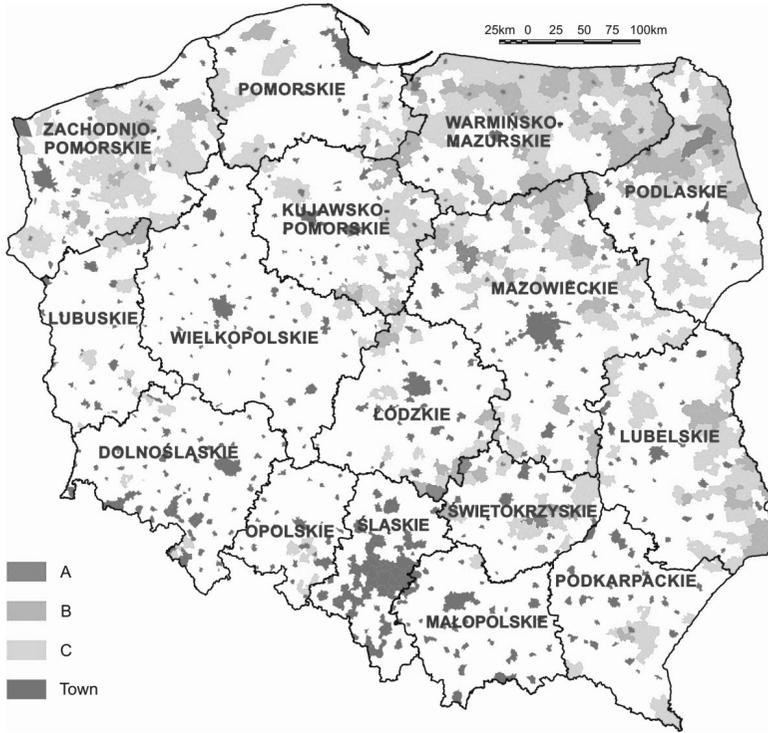


Fig. 2. Depressed rural areas in Poland (A – extremely depressed areas, B – depressed areas, C – transitional areas)¹
Source: Bański and Mazur (2009).

Arguments that rural areas are more vulnerable to economic changes were commonly known, as well as the ageing problem, or high employment in agriculture along with its decreasing GDP input (mainly due to specific agrarian structure). It is noteworthy that in Poland most of the strategic documents regarding development of rural areas were formulated as a result of a necessity for adaptation to the legal conditions of EU membership. For this reason, the majority of development measures on problem (including peripheral) areas are mainly focused on foreign aid programmes primarily related to the European regional policy.

Research on the evaluation of strategic documents (Gorzelać and Kozak 2012) gives evidence that activities are spread over too many objectives and priorities and consequently documents often lose the clarity and become a wish-list. Moreover, strategic documents often show methodological weaknesses and especially concerning the issue of rural areas their diagnosis and socio-economic analysis is in most cases poor or mediocre (Bański et al. 2009) (Table 1).

¹ Based on the following criteria: feminisation index <98, share of population 65+ above 16%, over 9 years of negative net migration and population outflow over 5% in years 1998-2007, unemployment rate over 10%, mean attendance at elections to the Parliament (2001, 2005, 2007) <40%.

Table 1. Existing policies on peripheral and rural areas in Poland

Document/Programme	Target Period
National Strategy for Regional Development	2001–2006
National Development Programme	2004–2006
"Voivodship" Strategies for the Development (16 documents)	Up to 2020
Strategy for Sustainable Rural, Agriculture and Fisheries Development 2012–2020	2012–2020
Strategy for the Socio-economic Development of Eastern Poland up to 2020	Up to 2020
Programme for the Development of Rural Areas 2007–2013	2007–2013
Mid-term Strategy for National Development 2020	Up to 2020
Strategy for Socio-economic Development of Eastern Poland 2020	Up to 2020
Long-term National Development Strategy. Poland 2030.	Up to 2030
National Development Strategy of Rural Areas: 2007–2013 and related Rural Areas Development Programme	2007–2013
National Development Strategy 2007–2015	2007–2015
National Strategy of Regional Development: Regions – Cities – Rural areas	2010–2020

Source: compiled by M. Konopski.

The evolution of policies regarding regional development in Poland

The first strategic document that is relevant from the perspective of rural areas is the National Strategy for Regional Development (NSRD) approved in 2000. The document aimed to create conditions to enhance regional competitiveness and counteract the marginalisation of remote areas in order to foster long-term development, including economic, social and territorial cohesion. The NSRD to some extent privileged the areas of economic backwardness and significant structural unemployment. Intervention aimed at endogenous development was highlighted as a key factor determining success. On the other hand, the *National Development Programme* (2004–2006) excessively focused on the European funds. This is a good example, which was common in Poland regarding policy making, where too many interventions relied on financing from external sources. The document concentrates merely on certain economic sectors and does not refer to instruments supporting entrepreneurship. Arrangements associated with Poland's accession to the EU resulted in the administrative reform of 1999. Each of the newly formed NUTS2 units (so called Voivodships) was obliged to formulate the *Voivodship Strategy for Development* up to 2020. These documents present an uneven level of methodological sophistication, in which the issue of rural areas is considered more or less specifically. However, in many cases due to the poor quality of statistical data, policy recommendations are not realistic. Many of the strategies lack scenarios for the development of rural areas as well as identification of rural peripheries or problem areas in general.

Another important document concerning rural areas was the *National Development Strategy of Rural Areas: 2007–2013* and the related *Rural Areas Development Programme*. Both the Strategy and the Programme paid attention to the development of a modern, competitive agriculture, forestry and food sector. Creating workplaces in non-agricultural sectors (healthcare, secondary education, the development of small firms, health resorts)

was the main aim of the Strategy on rural areas. The documents included mobilisation of local communities. The main area of intervention concerned the lack of opportunities for business due to a limited number of customers, while emphasising the possibility of competitive service prices. Despite positive evaluation of the Programme, it does not consider peripheral areas sufficiently. The *National Development Strategy 2007–2015* (with actualisation up to 2020) has the main objective to increase the internal as well as the external territorial accessibility of the entire country. The vision of Poland till 2015 (2020) was summed up by three slogans: an active society, a competitive economy and an efficient country. The document only vaguely considers peripheral areas, not distinguishing between peripheral urban and rural areas. Thus, remote areas are examined in a geographical, accessibility and economic context. The document assumes improving the availability of transport to the outermost regions and digitisation of peripheral areas. The main aim of the *National Strategy of Regional Development: Regions – Cities – Rural areas* can be described as effective use of specific regional and territorial potentials for achieving growth, employment and cohesion in the long-term. The state should focus on creating a knowledge based economy to raise the development level of human and social capital, improving access to public goods and services (IT infrastructure, education, energy, health, culture, selected municipal services, transport infrastructure) and to increase competitiveness. Objectives of the strategy focus on problem areas, including peripheral areas. The first aim is to improve the quality and accessibility to health services. It is crucial to implement prevention programmes in peripheral areas, to improve accessibility and quality of transport services, including accessibility to regional growth poles. Public transport and e-services at a local level are the next important aims included in the Strategy. The fulfilment of the main objectives would increase the capacity to generate growth applying endogenous factors and improving the quality of public services and better use of labour resources.

The *Mid-term Strategy for National Development 2020* focuses on reinforcement and application of economic, social and institutional potential providing faster and sustainable development of the country and improving the quality of life. This document concentrates on issues specific to peripheral areas. The strategy assumes that the degree of peripherality in border areas will be reduced by increasing their accessibility in domestic and international relations. As in the case of other documents, the concept of accessibility of peripheral rural areas is very important. The new idea is to support the local production of services and products for local markets.

The *Strategy for Sustainable Rural Development, Agriculture and Fisheries for the years 2012–2020* approaches rural areas comprehensively. The document differentiates rural areas according to their relation to major cities (i.e. under the influence of a big city or peripheral areas). Increasing employment of the rural population without changing their place of residence is envisaged in the Strategy "by integrating a rail transport system between urban centres and peripheral areas and strengthening bus transport". The service sector is presented as a stimulus for development; it is based on the endogenous potential of rural areas, including environmental and cultural assets. The main objective of the strategy is to improve the quality of life in rural areas and the efficient use of their resources and potential, including agriculture and fisheries to achieve sustainable development. The main objective of the *Long-term National Development Strategy – Poland 2030* is to improve the quality of life in Poland measured by the GDP growth and to increase

social cohesion and the reduction of territorial inequalities. The document stresses the need for balanced development of the country by equalising regional development potential. Thus, it recommends the development of broadband Internet access in peripheral areas. This objective confirms that politicians, on the one hand, support competitiveness over the entire country by investing in growth poles and economically strong areas, and on the other hand, they support peripheral areas seeking to equalize development opportunities. The strategy provides the possibility of applying the operators both in terms of competitiveness and convergence. This strategy, as one of few, highlights intervention directly linked to peripheral areas as it expects to "strengthen the development of rural and peripheral areas through investment in transport, telecommunications infrastructure and investment in education, culture, public services, local infrastructure, promotion of entrepreneurship and competitiveness of the agricultural and food sector".

The *Strategy for Innovation and Efficiency of the Economy* focuses on a competitive economy based on knowledge and collaboration. The Strategy recommends the utilization of the attributes within peripheral areas to develop entrepreneurship locally – benefiting from natural and cultural values in the regions. Recognizing the fact that often the only option for businesses in peripheral areas is tourism (agricultural tourism services) the document recommends producing ecological or traditional food, implementing environmental and forestry related programmes, e.g. the environmental rehabilitation of grasslands, focus on natural resources – like water, wind and investing in renewable energy sources. The *Strategy for Socio-economic Development of Eastern Poland 2020* is entirely dedicated to the peripheral regions of Poland (considered at NUTS2 level). The most important action is to break the barriers associated with peripheral location by strengthening transport accessibility of the entire region. The overriding objective of this strategic document is to increase the level of economic, social and territorial cohesion across Eastern Poland and within each of the regions it comprises. The document emphasises the necessity to support modernisation processes in problem and peripheral areas by enhancing their endogenous development potential in cooperation with domestic and foreign centres for research and innovation. Moreover, it is crucial to support the development of settlements and urban networks, providing conditions for the development of strong urban centres maintaining natural functional relationships with the surrounding agricultural areas and small towns.

Evaluation of policies with special attention on the development of peripheral (rural) areas in Poland

The experience of many countries suggests that more desired results can be achieved by activating endogenous potentials of peripheral areas, whereas the intervention of public authorities can only support the development of bottom-up initiatives stimulating their growth. This statement can also be applied in the Polish case. In general, regional policy can be based on two different concepts – either by promoting the strongest regions aiming at competitiveness or by supporting the weakest ones seeking to level out undesired polarisation. It seems that the Polish policy-makers have chosen convergence and balanced development of the whole country. However, analysis of strategic documents showed that a great deal of emphasis was put on the development of competitiveness at both state and regional level. Analysis of the existing policies proved that the spatial criterion (in terms of geographical location and links to core areas) is generally not con-

sidered while identifying peripheral areas. The most important criteria seem to include economic, administrative and functional factors. Most strategies do not consider peripheral rural areas adequately bearing in mind the scale of their problems. In the case of some documents the only remedy for peripheral areas seems to be the improvement of road accessibility or *ad hoc* solutions such as benefiting from EU funds by farmers. On the other hand, there is also a promising tendency as strategic documents tend to include more specific and realistic objectives that can be successfully implemented.

Czechia

The political discourse on the development of peripheral and rural areas in Czechia

The beginning of Czech regional policy could be traced back to the end of the 1990s, although there were some attempts to implement a broader concept of regional policy in 1991–1992 (see for example Pileček et al. 2011: 49–50). However, these attempts were stopped by the 1992 parliamentary elections which introduced neo-liberal approaches to the management of the economy and regional development (Sýkora 1999: 165). There were three main factors which made policymakers adopt some kind of regional measures at the end of the 1990s. Firstly, in the mid-1990s the unemployment rate started to grow significantly and in a regionally uneven way as the result of intensifying restructuring of the post-socialist Czech economy (Fig. 3). Secondly, the development of regional policy in Czechia was very much related to the preparation for the accession to the EU, where regional policy and respectively policy of economic and social cohesion received a high priority (Blažek 2000). Thirdly, in 1998 the new government of the Czech Social Democratic Party refused the neoliberal paradigm as the driving force of the economy which led to the preparation of the first conceptual documents of regional policy (Vozáb 2007).

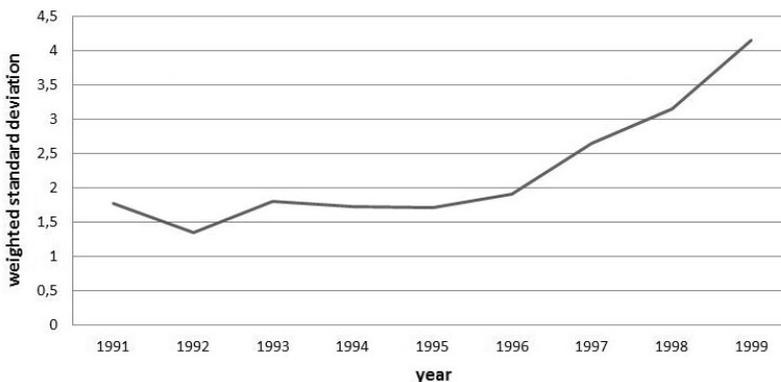


Fig. 3. The development of inter-regional disparities in the NUTS IV Czech regions measured by weighted standard deviation in unemployment rate and number of inhabitants (1991–1999)
Source: Blažek and Severa (1999).

At the end of the 1990s the most important steps that established a framework for regional development policy were done in Czechia. In 1999, the Act on Regional Development was adopted which was the first overall legal act to codify the goals, institutions and structures of regional policy (Vozáb 2007). In 2000 the first national Strategy of Regional

Development was introduced and kraje – self-governance NUTS III units – were established and started to work one year later. This relatively short history of regional policy and its instruments could be the reason why Czechia, as Vozáb (2007: 1) noted "*does not have any comprehensive regional policy but rather an evolving set of tools, measures and policies with more or less intentional regional impacts*".

Concerning a rural development policy – it is probably right to say that such a policy has never existed in Czechia (Table 2). But if we start at the beginning it can be said that the 1990s was characterized by a deepening crisis in agriculture. The productivist mode of agriculture installed by the socialist regime had been gradually dismantled as a result of sinking state financial support, privatization, restitution of agricultural property and transformation of state farms (sovkhozes) and agricultural cooperatives (kolkhozes). Subsequently, agricultural output and employment in agriculture decreased significantly. Pospěch (2014) argues that due to these processes rural areas lost their function in the 1990s and the decade can be characterized by a period of discursive no man's land as there was no symbolic anchoring of rural areas from which their function could have been derived.

Table 2. Summary of existing policies on peripheral and rural areas in Czechia

Document/Programme	Target Period	Purpose
Programme of Village Renewal Programme of Rural Renewal (since 1997)	since (1991) 1994	Rural development
Agricultural and rural development plan (SAPARD strategy)	2000–2003	Agricultural development in the pre-accession period
Horizontal Rural Development Plan	2004–2006	Agricultural development (financed from the EAGGF Guarantee section)
Operational Programme Rural Development and Multifunctional Agriculture	2004–2006	Agricultural development and LEADER+ initiative (financed from the EAGGF Guidance section and the FIGG)
National Strategic Plan of Rural Development (NSPRD)	2007–2013	Agricultural and rural development
Rural Development Programme	2007–2013	Agricultural and rural development (for municipalities with less than 500 inhabitants; including LEADER) – implementation document of the NSPRD
Rural Development Programme	2014–2020	Agricultural development and LEADER initiative
Strategy of Regional Development	2000–2006	Regional development
Joint Regional Operational Programme	2004–2006	Regional development
Strategy of Regional Development	2007–2013	Regional development
Regional Operational Programmes (8 programmes, each for one NUTS II region)	2007–2013	Regional development
Strategy of Regional Development	2014–2020	Regional development
Integrated Regional Operational Programme	2014–2020	Regional development

Source: compiled by V. Hruška.

On the other hand, the onset of the 1990s could be characterised as the beginning of the rural renewal movement rooted in the endeavour for a rehabilitation of the damages inflicted by the totalitarian regime (Pospěch 2014). In 1991, the Programme of Village Renewal was formally recognized by the Czechoslovak government. However, as a tool or a programme of financial support for rural areas it was launched three years later thanks to the lobbying of the newly established Association for Rural Renewal (*Spolek pro obnovu venkova*) (Pospěch 2014).

This rural renewal movement indicates that even in the highly urbanised Czechia, similarly to other developed countries, positive representations and notions of rural life – conviviality, community, coherence, simplicity and organic integrity – are vital (Lapping 2006: 104). Nevertheless, this representation is in political discourse much weaker than the representation of rural as a source of primary commodities. This kind of representation confirmed the central position of agriculture even in the crisis decade of the 1990s and has strengthened it especially since the beginning of the 2000s when the Czech agricultural sector started its preparation for the integration into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU. Since then, agriculture has dominated Czech planning instruments focused on rural development. This domination is reinforced by the fact, that Czechia has traditionally got strong sectoral ministries including the Ministry of Agriculture (Vozáb 2007).

Main objectives of the implemented policies

The *Programme of Village Renewal* was the first policy in Czechia purely focusing on rural development. Within this programme participatory planning of villages, reconstruction of local monuments or whole physical infrastructures, development of both agricultural and non-agricultural economies and landscape maintenance was supported. In 1997 the programme was renamed the Programme of Rural Renewal (PRR) as the support focused also on rural microregions in order to promote the cooperation among representatives of rural municipalities. Three years after the establishment of the new NUTS III regions the implementation was relegated from national to regional level.

Since the end of the 1990s, the planning of rural and agricultural development in Czechia has gone through a Europeanization process, due to the accession to the EU respectively to the CAP. Although the titles of all relevant planning documents contain the term *rural development* in most cases they were focused only on agriculture and landscape maintenance. However, there were also some exceptions. The *Operational Programme on Rural Development and Multifunctional Agriculture* (2004–2006) contained support for the LEADER+ initiative, similarly also following Rural Development Programmes (RDP). The development axis III of the RDP (2007–2013) aimed at diversifying the rural economy (based on the promotion of farmers), improving facilities and the appearance of villages and public areas and developing advisory services, training and ICT in rural municipalities (with population less than 500). This axis III and axis IV (LEADER) accounted for 22 per cent of the total funding (€822 million), the rest financed projects in agriculture and forestry and landscape maintenance. In the present RDP, the situation is similar to the period 2004–2006 – the RDP contains only one development priority with focus on non-agricultural issues – social inclusion, combatting poverty and economic growth is going to be implemented by LEADER's local action groups (5% of the total funding).

The paragraph above shows that rural development measures, paradoxically, seldom became a part of the RDP. They were included, apart from the PRR, in wider regional

operational programmes which focused on the development of both rural and urban areas. Consequently, rural development is dispersed among various regional and sectoral development programmes funded by the EU (e.g. in the period 2014–2020 local action groups can newly apply for financial support also in the Integrated Regional Operational Programme, OP Employment, OP Environment and OP Research, Development and Education). As a result, there is no coherent rural development policy in Czechia (Bednaříková 2009: 36).

Evaluation of Czech regional policies with special attention to the economic development of rural areas

The analysis of political discourse and development policies indicated some problems regarding the planning of regional and rural development in Czechia. In this section we briefly summarize the main problems.

- Missing rural development policy

First of all, an integrated and powerful rural policy is needed. On the one hand, there is a promotion of new jobs in rural areas funded by the EU, on the other hand state-driven optimization of various public services leading to new rounds of redundancies is continuing. Therefore a tool, which would prevent this mismatch, is urgently needed. Moreover, RDPs driven by EU requirements don't embrace all the problems of rural areas, instead, they strongly support farmers at the expense of other actors of rural development. As a result, the names of the Rural Development Programmes serve rather as a means for concealing an extensive agricultural support.

- Missing job-generating rural policies

The RDPs or Programmes of Rural Renewal strongly focus on infrastructural investments and cohesiveness of rural communities rather than on investments in changing economic milieu and institutions which contribute to the perception of rural areas as a place unsuitable for doing business (for Czechia see e.g. Chromý et al. 2011). Such investments could help to start the positive development in the number of jobs in rural areas which was registered also in other developed countries some years ago (see Hruška and Czapiewski 2015).

- A gap between regional/rural development policies and their implementation and missing regional targeting

Vozáb (2007) argues that there is a weak link between regional policies and implementing instruments. Since the year of the publication of his paper, there is no evidence that anything has changed significantly. As result of this misbalance, the mismatch between the policy objectives and the results of real spending of public funds can occur. The reason for this has already been mentioned – Czechia has traditionally got strong sectoral ministries which implement their own policies (Vozáb 2007). In circumstances like these, a strong role of a coordinating ministry is required, however the Ministry of Regional Development due to its short history, cannot be considered as a ministry in a powerful and respected position.

The regional focus of both rural and regional development policies is missing. Firstly, in the strategies of regional development lagging regions with special needs are mentioned, nevertheless their financial support is very poorly anchored in both regional and sectoral operational programmes. Secondly, rural areas are very often perceived as homogeneous (Hruška 2012) therefore both the PRR and RDP do not distinguish

between various rural localities with different needs and problems. If doing so, the differentiation is acknowledged (the RDP 2007–2013) but not reflected in a more regionally oriented support, or is based on the criterion of the population size of rural municipalities (very often in the regional Programmes of Rural Renewal). Therefore booming municipalities in terms of population development with an influx of wealthy middle class in-migrants are in the planning instruments, very often considered as identical to peripheral municipalities suffering from unemployment and growing poverty.

Slovakia

Changing conditions of rural areas in Slovakia

The period of socialist Czechoslovakia could be characterised by heavy industrialisation, industrial urbanisation and administrative integration of the territory of Slovakia. Eastern Slovakia was in a favourable situation due to the closeness to the boundaries of the Soviet Union. The construction of the gigantic East Slovak Steel Company was started in the 1960s, in addition many large companies were located in East Slovak cities where they became the sole employers which made the region later in the post-socialist period very vulnerable. Even though the socialist period brought about an increase in many indicators (rate of urbanisation, employment, birth rate, building process), many negative aspects went hand in hand with it (missing autonomy, selective processes of concentration of economic activities, deterioration of natural environment).

The independent Slovak Republic was established in 1993 through the split of the former Czechoslovak Federative Republic. The country underwent a myriad of transformation processes in political, economic and social fields. During the 1990s Slovakia suffered from consequences of privatisation, transformation and restitution that influenced both urban and rural areas (Spišiak et al. 2005). Unemployment reached almost 20 percent in 2001 while employment in the agricultural sector was gradually falling to the current 2.6 percent (2013). Rural areas did not manage to meet the flexibility in the market economy and agricultural sectors dramatically dropped. At the end of the 1990s, Visegrad countries started to prepare to join the European Union and adopted their new cohesion policies as did Slovakia.

Policies on rural areas in Slovakia after EU accession

Slovakia entered the EU in 2004 and became eligible for structural funds support. Agriculture and rural development were considered to be the major source of regional disparities. According to the urban-rural definition, almost 90 percent of the population of Slovakia live in rural areas that account for 95.8 percent of its territory. Slovakia is an unevenly developed country with strong north-west and south-east divide (Fig. 4). Regarding the regional GDP in PPS in the EU regions (2010), East Slovakia is far below the EU average and requires special attention (Michálek 2014).

Generally, rural development policies diffuse from EU level to national and local levels (Table 3). It is implemented through national and/or regional rural development policies which run for seven years. The European Rural Development Policy 2014–2020 aims to foster the transfer of knowledge and innovations in agriculture, forestry and rural areas, to promote social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas

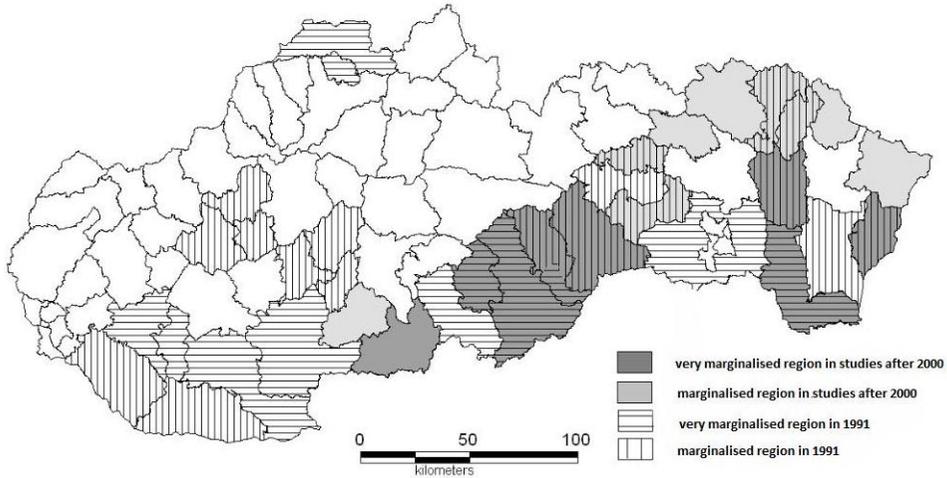


Fig. 4. Spatial distribution of marginalised regions in Slovakia most often designated in scholarly papers
Source: Poláčková and Potomová (2010); (legend translated to English by S. Csachová).

Table 3. Rural Development Policies in the Slovak Republic

Document/Programme	Period	Purpose
Programme of Community Renewal	1997	rural development
Conception of Territorial Development of Slovakia	2001	regional development
Act 503/2001 on Support of Regional Development	2001	Act proclaiming support of marginalised regions on the NUTS 2 level
SAPARD Plan of Rural Development	2004–2006	rural development
National Strategic Reference Framework	2007–2013	implementation of EU policy funding
National Strategic Reference Framework	2013–2020	implementation of EU policy funding
Rural Development Programme	2007–2013	implementation of EU policy funding, support of LFA
Rural Development Programme	2013–2020	implementation of EU policy funding, support of LFA
National Strategy of Regional Development of the SR	2010	regional development
Regional Operational Programmes	since 2007	EU policies implementation

Source: compiled by S. Csachová, after Michaeli et al. (2009).

as well as improving the quality of life in rural areas. At national level, the managing authority is the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic. The Rural Development Programme of the Slovak Republic for the years 2014–2020 (previously for period 2007–2013) is a nation-wide document to implement the EU funding to rural areas supporting mainly three pillars – (1) competitiveness of agriculture, food processing and forestry, (2) sustainable exploitation of natural sources and climate measures, and (3) balanced territorial development of rural economy. The integrated territorial

development encompasses the domains of social inclusion, poverty and local economic development. The so-called National Network of Rural Areas Development is the main body of networking among the actors in rural areas which enhances the exchange of information, experience and mutual communication. It operates in eight regional centres all across the country.

Self-governing regions (kraje) at NUTS III level are also participating in rural development. The key document for them is The Strategy of Economic and Social Development. They can establish other bodies to help implement the strategy. For example, the Košický self-governing region established the Agency to Support the Regional Development of Košice in 2004 and released the Strategy of Rural Development of the Košický self-governing region (2007).

Local representatives of Eastern Slovakia considered the attitude of the state towards less developed regions unsatisfactory, therefore in February 2015 they established the East Slovak Investment Agency as a non-governmental organisation in order to help the region reduce the unflattering economic and social situation. Members of the Agency are local and regional authorities, universities and business representatives. Their goal is to support activities that promote new investments in the region both domestic and foreign. It is also aimed at networking the activities of local governments, regional self-governments and agencies in both regions, and in relation to the EU, the activities are orientated towards the support of implementing EU funded projects.

There is neither a definition nor a designation of peripheral (or marginal) areas as targets of rural development policy in Slovakia. Even though they are not lucidly identified, on the basis of economic and social indicators we can consider Eastern and Central Slovakia to be the underdeveloped regions in the country. What makes them underdeveloped (marginal or peripheral) is the concentration of economic problems, social exclusion, high unemployment and the lack of transport infrastructure (Falťan et al. 1995). At lower levels, we can say that the most disadvantageous areas in Slovakia are (eastwards): the Poltár, Lučenec, Revúca, Rožňava, Vranov nad Topľou, Trebišov and Sobrance districts. The definition and delimitation of LFA in Slovakia is missing and their eligibility to EU funding needs reconsideration (Molčanová and Fitz 2012).

Geographers contribute to the identification and interpretation of peripheral areas as objects of their research. Džupinová et al. (2008) discusses peripherality and spatial polarisation using a wide range of indicators that provides evidence of the marginality of the Slovak regions mainly in its eastern and south-central part. These regions are affected by an unfavourable geographical location, a lack of infrastructure and highways, a lack of higher added-value investments and a low qualified labour force. Regional disparities, despite the EU cohesion policy, still remain solid and in this respect we can not expect a quick solution.

Hungary

The changing position of rural areas in policy discourse in Hungary after 1990

Rural settlements and rural areas in general were considered to be the losers of post-socialist transition in Hungary. Fuelled by a wave of foreign investments (FDI), the highly urbanised west of Hungary and the Budapest metropolitan area have been the fastest to restructure and take advantage of new economic opportunities (Horváth 2008). At the

same time rural economies were hit hard by the transition crisis. Rural unemployment became especially high generating mass outmigration of younger and better educated labour to other more urbanised and prosperous parts of the country. The presence of undeveloped rural regions has contributed, to a large extent, to the new geography of regional inequalities in Hungary. The growing East-West divide, new trends of metropolisation around major cities (i.e. suburban growth), and the exodus from rural areas have all contributed to growing territorial fragmentation since 1990.

The introduction of a market economy and the transformation of the public administrative system have fundamentally altered the aims, the institutional as well as regulatory framework of regional policy. The establishment of autonomous local self-governments and their new (normative) financing system created favourable conditions for local economic development even in rural areas. The changing political climate towards regional development and regional policy was signified by the establishment of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development after the first free elections in 1990. Also, the first policy attempts were implemented in the early 1990s (Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of existing policies on peripheral and rural areas in Hungary

Document/Programme	Period	Purpose
Regional Development Fund	1992	assistance of crisis regions
Government Decree 161/1993	1993	definition of peripheral rural settlements
Act on Regional Development and Physical Planning	1996 (amended in 1999)	legal foundation of regional development
Act on the Development of Agricultural Economy	1997	legal foundation of rural development
National Regional Development Concept	1998 (amended in 2005)	conceptual background of territorial development
SAPARD Programme pre-accession fund	since 1999	development of rural areas
National Development Plan	2004–2006	for the EU policy funding
New Hungary Development Plan	2007–2013	for the EU policy funding
New Hungary Rural Development Programme	2007–2013	for the EU policy funding, support for agriculture and rural areas

Source: compiled by Z. Kovács.

Policies on regional development and rural areas in Hungary after 1990

The establishment of the Regional Development Fund in 1992 was the first step towards balanced regional development. A small proportion of the resources of the Fund was decentralised, however the majority was devoted to highly centralised regional economic development programmes leaving hardly any room for rural areas. The first step regarding the legislation of regional policy after the change of regime was the *Government Decree 161/1993*, providing a new definition of the main tasks and means of regional policy. The principal goal of the decree was to enhance regional crisis management and the transformation of depressed regions, the implementation of selective infrastructure projects focusing mainly on backward regions. The decree defined four categories for assistance:

- Backward settlements defined on the basis of socio-economic criteria
- Settlements located in regions designated backward on the basis of socio-economic criteria
- Settlements of areas with high unemployment (1.5 times above national average)
- Settlements in particular need of modernisation (i.e. those combining all the previous three elements).

Peripheral rural settlements were clearly over-represented in all four distinct categories. Despite the formulation of these new legislative measures a proper regional policy in Hungary remained to be seen until the mid-1990s.

In 1996 the Hungarian Parliament adopted the *Act on Regional Development and Physical Planning* (amended in 1999) which became the key document of new regional policy. It aimed to achieve balanced regional development of the country and the socio-economic development of its regions in accordance with the content of the European Regional and Spatial Planning Charter and with the regional policy principles of the European Union (Horváth 1999). Simultaneously the territorial framework of the new regional development system was elaborated with the creation of seven new NUTS2 regions designated for the implementation of regional policy. This policy differed very much from the logic of socialist planning, in which sectoral objectives had taken precedence, and instead targeted problem areas with high unemployment where restructuring was causing major difficulties. The list of areas eligible for support was approved by the government in 1998, involved 34 percent of the population and was financed at the level of 0.3 to 0.5 percent of GDP. In addition, because of the improved compatibility with EU planning policies, Hungary became eligible for special project funding from the EU. At the beginning the new regions were considered to be partners of the central government in implementing regional policy, it was also thought they would become a full governmental level, between central and municipal levels, nevertheless the devolution of responsibilities from central to regional level remained limited and controversial, and after the 2010 elections when weak decentralization tendencies were replaced by clear re-centralization by the Orbán government the role of the regions became symbolic. In the dual system of regions and counties the latter became the dominant player in regional development and regional policy.

In addition to the *Act on Regional Development and Physical Planning* in 1997 the *Act on the Development of Agricultural Economy* served as a legal foundation for Hungarian rural development. The act approached the problems of rural areas from the perspective of agriculture. In 1998, the first Orbán government put rural development under the competence of the Ministry of Agriculture, subsequently the name of the ministry was changed to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. In January 1999 a Department of Rural Development Programmes was organised within the Ministry (Kovács 2001).

The *National Regional Development Concept* was adopted by the Hungarian Parliament in March 1998 (amended in 2005). It contained important perceptions concerning the scenario of the country's spatial structure applying the theory of growth poles based on major urban centres. The concept also encouraged cross-border cooperation between border regions, common planning and coordinated development on the basis of bilateral and multilateral agreements.

In 1997 the EU made a decision on the establishment of pre-accession funds for the candidate countries, one of them *SAPARD* (Special Accession Programme for Agricultural

Rural Development) directly targeted rural areas starting in 1999. This was a special programme of the EU's agrarian and rural policy for the ten candidate countries that joined the Union in 2004. The Department of Rural Development Programmes in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development called on micro-regional associations to prepare rural development strategic programmes. Application for funding could be submitted by groups of municipalities that declared their willingness to cooperate and who were members of such associations. The majority of the funds was directed towards the modernisation of agricultural production, only a small portion could be used for non-agricultural purposes e.g. modernisation of rural infrastructure (11–15%) or economic activities providing alternative income (15–17%) between 2000 and 2006 (Kovács 2001).

In 2003, on the eve of the EU Accession, Hungary's first *National Development Plan* was approved as a government decree for the period of 2004–06. This served as the basis for negotiations with the Commission on the use of the EU's Structural Funds in Hungary. The Ministry of the Economy and Transport was identified as the coordinator of the planning process, while the newly established National Development Office was in fact responsible for the planning. This sharing of responsibilities led to inevitable conflicts between economic policy and regional policy in the country. The ultimate goal of the plan was to improve the quality of life of the Hungarian people. This general goal was supported by several specific objectives:

- To increase the *competitiveness* of the country and its regions. Actions need to be taken that address low productivity, the scarcity of capital, low levels of technology, a weak SME sector, insufficient use of agricultural potential, the low use of modern IT applications, the weak use of opportunities presented by the information society, poor R&D activities, poor transport infrastructure and an under-utilized tourism potential.
- To increase *employment* and develop human potential. Problems to be addressed include low participation rates on the labour market, a high level of long-term unemployment, the social exclusion of marginalised groups (e.g. Roma), gender based discrimination in the labour market, low efficiency and flexibility of education and vocational training, weak educational infrastructure.
- To improve environmental quality, including the sustainable management of natural resources and a spatially more balanced development, in order to decrease *regional disparities* in quality of life across the country.

Out of the three main objectives, peripheral rural areas were mostly targeted by improving employment opportunities and levelling out regional disparities in the quality of life. The first point, focusing on increasing economic competitiveness could hardly have been interpreted in relation to rural areas, except for increasing the utilization of agricultural and tourism potentials. Between 2004 and 2006 Hungary received about €2.85 billion of EU funds (from the Structural and Cohesion funds). The share of funds allocated to sectoral programmes for Human Resources Development (28%), Economic Competitiveness (22%), Agriculture and Rural Development (16%) and Environmental Protection and Infrastructure Development (16%), clearly dominated Regional Development which received only 18 percent of the total funds allocated in Hungary.

Based on the lessons of the National Development Plan the so-called *New Hungary Development Plan* for 2007–2013 was adopted, which contained the objectives and framework of the use of a total of €33 billion EU funding, about 10 percent of this amount

derived from EU support for rural development from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). As a result of EU cohesion policy and rural development support, combined with domestic co-financing the resources available annually in the new programming period tripled compared to 2004–06 (Horváth 2008). The Plan focused more than ever before on the future economic competitiveness of the country and envisaged strengthening the role of a polycentric urban network with strong knowledge based economies in its nodal points. Under the umbrella of the *New Hungary Development Plan* the *New Hungary Rural Development Programme* was elaborated which set the regulatory framework of the use of agricultural and rural development resources of the EU. The four main objectives included: (I) the improvement of the competitiveness of agriculture, food production and forestry in rural areas, (II) the sustainable development and protection of natural values and biodiversity, (III) strengthening entrepreneurship and improving employment opportunities in rural areas outside of agriculture and (IV) the LEADER programme. This was the first national policy in Hungary that focused exclusively on the development of rural areas.

Regarding the rural economy the Programme stated: "*The employment situation of rural areas can be improved by the touristic usage of their favourable landscape, environmental and cultural amenities and values. A condition of this is to create authentic, high-quality touristic services and regional and local touristic products that represent the rural lifestyle and rural culture in an authentic way*". No other alternatives outside agriculture and tourism were perceived by the policy document.

Evaluation of Hungarian regional policies with special attention to the economic development of rural areas

In Hungary relatively soon after the political changes the new political and institutional framework of regional development was established. From the middle of the 1990s the legal background of pro-active regional policy gradually evolved. The main emphasis of regional policy remained the levelling out of regional disparities and a balanced territorial development of Hungary. At the end of the 1990s a shift of paradigm gradually took place in Hungary regarding regional policy mainly due to relevant EU policies. The philosophy of these EU documents was gradually adopted in Hungary in order to get access to the pre-accession funds. As opposed to the previous concept of balanced territorial development the main task of regional policy became to enhance economic development and to increase economic competitiveness of the country. Rural areas in this context remained subordinated and were perceived as areas with potentials for agricultural and tourism developments. Present regional development is characterised by the relatively strong role of local governments, the unclear and weakening role of regions, and a rather traditional and partly contradictory role of the national level (Horváth 2008).

Discussion and conclusion

The roots of modern regional development and regional planning in the Visegrad countries go back to the heydays of state-socialism. The over-arching goal of regional policy during state-socialism was to reduce regional disparities. It was thought this could be achieved by industrialisation and the forced industrial development of some strategic

regions. Regional development became an integral part of national economic policies and as such remained under the strict control of national planning authorities. However, despite the common political and ideological framework, distinct features regarding the goals and means of regional policy also evolved in these countries. Polish regional policy was engaged in the integration of "new territories". In Czechoslovakia the greatest challenge for regional policy was the disequilibrium between Czechia and Slovakia. In Hungary the supremacy of Budapest and disparities between the more industrialised North-western regions and the predominantly agricultural Eastern regions caused a problem. Despite some initial and experimental steps no coherent and conceptually well established regional policy developed during state-socialism. Equality was proclaimed by politicians not only at a personal but also at a regional level, however, socialist regional policy had a consistent urban bias with a very small proportion of central resources directed towards villages (Enyedi 1990).

The collapse of state-socialism in 1989–90 and the transition to a market economy led to profound spatial differentiation. The spatial pattern of economic transformation was very uneven due to globalisation, foreign investments, and different levels of adaptability of local economies and society to growing (global) competition. In all four countries the transition resulted in a steady increase of regional differences and an increasing marginalisation of rural areas. The new situation demanded the re-conceptualisation of regional development policy in the form of new concepts, strategies, laws and institutions (Momsen 2000). From the mid-1990s anticipated EU integration brought about the growing influence of the European Union also in terms of national regional policies. As a precondition of accession the new member states had to prepare and implement an efficient regional policy aimed at decreasing regional differences and increasing territorial cohesion (Horváth 2010).

As our comparative policy analysis showed in the early 1990s there was a lack of coherent regional policy that would efficiently mitigate growing regional disparities or foster regional competitiveness. The conceptual, legal and institutional foundation of the new regional policy took place in the second half of the 1990s, with some time lag among the countries. Hungary played a pioneering role among Visegrad countries in establishing the political instruments and institutions of regional policy (Horváth 2008). The first act on regional development in Central and Eastern Europe was approved by the Hungarian Parliament in 1996, which was followed by the first national development concept in 1998. Regarding regionalization and decentralization of state power Poland was the most successful country among the Visegrad with strong competences and decision making power at the regional level. Regionalization in the other three countries had a lot of twists and turns, Hungary being the negative case, where hesitant decentralisation was turned back to complete re-centralisation after the 2010 elections.

In the formulation of strategic documents regarding regional policy, anticipated EU accession played a very important role. The adoption of EU norms was the precondition to receive pre-accession EU funds. The preparation of national development plans were based on the EU's standardized development handbooks, therefore a considerable similarity among the new member states' regional policy documents can be observed. To our main research question we can say that earlier differences in regional development priorities were gradually eliminated by European integration among the new member states. The contents of regional development documents also gradually changed. The concepts

of territorial justice, regional cohesion, or the levelling out of socio-economic disparities became secondary in the political discourse after 2000 at the same time sectoral and macro-political goals targeting economic growth and growing competitiveness became the leitmotifs of regional policy. Innovation, business services, modern industries and their concentration in growth poles became the new engines of regional development concepts. Rural areas were considered in regional economic development policies only in the context of agriculture and tourism development. In addition to local infrastructural development, the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and job creation, only agriculture and tourism were defined for EU and national subsidies.

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