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Competing discourses of territorial development: tensions between cities and regions as a result of the new regionalism

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ABSTRACT

Competition between metropolitan areas and old regions is one of the most visible results of the ‘new regionalism’ policy in the EU. The aim of this paper is to explain the newly emerged tensions between the regions and the cities within the EU in the context of the ‘new regionalism’. The newly introduced ‘Integrated Territorial Investments’ (ITI), a potentially powerful instrument of the cohesion policy of the EU was presented as ‘a flexible mechanism for formulating integrated responses to diverse territorial needs’. However, this flexibility produced a competitive relationship between cities and regions in their chase for money. Based on interviews with sub-state officials, the study focuses on two countries: Czechia and Slovakia. They are both major recipients of EU structural funds and the ITI tool is being implemented in both of them, however with different outcomes. Three variables have been identified as major factors causing the tensions: insufficient administrative capacity, political challenges and lack of shared understanding of priorities of regional development among sub-state actors.

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Introduction

One¹ of the aspects of European integration in recent decades has been described as the Europeanisation of territoriality. The list of actors to which nation states gradually cede some of the powers they originally had continues to grow at an accelerating pace. These are not just transfers of powers to the levels of the EU, regions or cities. The creation of regional or supra-regional structures whose borders do not correspond to those of the traditional administrative units of nation states provides a new challenge. These ‘non-standard regional spaces’ (Deas & Lord, 2006) are usually discussed in the context of what has been called the ‘new regionalism’ (Keating, 1998) – whether these are city-regions, metropolitan regions or macro-regions.

The European Commission is an important initiator and supporter of these new territorial forms (e.g. Allmendinger, Chilla, & Sielker, 2014; Luukkonen, 2015). However, nation states differ in their readiness to accept these new forms of governance. Whereas some states acknowledge the new entities – typically those supported by EU funds, such as the metropolitan regions – without major issues, others resist their implementation. Thus tensions between old and new regions sometimes arise (Wheeler, 2002; Ziafati

Bafarasat, 2016), with traditional actors recalcitrant when asked to cede powers to the 'new regions'. As this paper will show, this is due to the varying readiness and experience of local actors. It is evident that the European Commission has not been addressing the issue sufficiently and has unwittingly become a source of such tensions.

The new regionalism is introduced into a stable nation-state environment, where the relationships between the various actors involved have long been established and are often considered beyond question. In some cases these relationships are severely tested by the challenge. However, not all countries necessarily experience the stress involved in breaking the mould. There might be a consensus among the actors on the character of the new regionalism and conflict is thus avoided; or a country might largely avoid implementing a new regionalism, for instance, by failing to create the metropolitan regions. The key question, therefore, is the following: Why do the relationships among the actors of governance become tense in some countries but not in others?

Czechia and Slovakia are neighbouring countries that until 1992 were part of a single state, Czechoslovakia. After partition in 1993 they naturally continued to be similar in many respects. They had a shared history of administration; around the year 2000 they created similar regional administrations, calling the new units regions (14 in Czechia and 8 in Slovakia). Thus, neither country has much experience of decentralization in its modern history, the central government playing a substantial role in implementing regional policy. Furthermore, the two countries cooperate closely and often provide inspiration to each other. One would expect, then, that they would choose similar ways of implementing EU regional policy. However, since 2014 there has been an important difference in their implementation of the integrated approach as promoted by the European Commission. Whereas Czechia chose to create entirely new administrative units, Slovakia tends to implement the integrated approach much more within the boundaries of its existing administrative units.

The aim of this paper is twofold. It seeks firstly to describe a new type of dispute between old and new regions and to identify in the literature potential sources of tension and variables that may influence the different degrees of tension occurring across EU member states. Secondly, it aims to compare two similar cases: Czechia and Slovakia, two countries that, despite having very similar traditions and administrative set-ups, have reached substantially different outcomes in terms of the new regionalism. The disputes between the old and new regions described here are concerned with the distribution of EU structural funds, and CEE countries as the main recipients of these funds seem to provide suitable cases for a comparison. Why do these disputes arise? Both countries have only a very short tradition of decentralization (see above) and the recently created (and weak) regions, which implemented some of the structural funds in the 2007–2013 period, in Czechia came into conflict with the new regions (metropolitan areas) during negotiations for the 2014–2020 period, with the new regions seeking to assume the place of the older ones. Whereas in Czechia the urban agglomerations were able to attract a substantial allocation of structural funds originally intended for the regions, in Slovakia the regions were more successful. This paper seeks to understand these different evolutions.

The paper seeks to stimulate discussion about the different forms in which new regionalism is implemented. Specifically, it aims to make a contribution by identifying several variables that influence this process.

New regionalism as a source of tension among regional actors

The discussion about new regionalism (Deas & Lord, 2006; Keating, 1998) is not new, but is one that is ongoing in the field of the Europeanisation of territoriality. The focus of the literature is on how new regional units come to be – units that are often inconsistent with a state's traditional units of administration – in other words, the 'old regions'. In literature these new units have been described as 'new regions' (Wheeler, 2002), 'non-standard regional spaces' (Deas & Lord, 2006), 'soft spaces' (Allmendinger et al., 2014), 'soft territories' (Luukkonen, 2015), an 'intermediate category of regions' (Mendez, 2013) and 'new territorial governance arenas' (Gualini, 2006). These works have largely examined new regions within nation-state borders, especially the city regions and metropolitan areas (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016), but more recently also the macro-regions (Allmendinger et al., 2014).

Although there are forms of new regionalism that are nation-state based (such as the establishment of various metropolitan regions), these are a phenomenon largely directed by the European Commission. In considering what motivates Brussels, one needs to bear in mind that EU territorial cohesion objectives are not entirely compatible with nation-state territoriality (Allmendinger et al., 2014, p. 2704). The European Commission has long sought to improve competitiveness across the EU as a whole by supporting the establishment of new territories of international significance (Deas & Lord, 2006, p. 1848; see also Luukkonen, 2015 etc.). Unlike in the past, however, the weakening of nation states is not done today under the banner of regionalization. The steps taken by the European Commission only push for the redistribution of such powers held by regional actors that the nation states have not held for some time anyway. Thus, they are not so much a redistribution of powers 'upwards, downwards or outwards' as 'sideways' (Deas & Lord, 2006, p. 1863). In the debates about multi-level governance, the notion of 'hollowing out the nation state' (e.g. Jessop, 2013) is a classic one, describing a situation where powers are gradually taken away from the nation state and granted to either the supra-national or the regional level. The phenomenon described in this paper is entirely different, however. Within the new regionalism, the state is a coordinating actor; but, in negotiations between regional and local actors, as described in this paper, the state has nothing to lose. It was clear from the outset that, in the process of allocating European subsidies, some of them would be reserved for the sub-state level, as indeed they had been in the 2007–2013 period. Thus, the state did not hope for the situation to be different after 2014. Hence, this is not a 'hollowing out of the state', but, at most, a 'hollowing out of the region'.

The competitiveness that the European Commission hopes will appear thanks to new regionalism can have negative externalities, however. The question is whether the creation of 'new regions' may lead to conflicts with 'old regions'. Deas and Lord (2006, p. 1862) contend that

it might be expected, then, that conflict would be a feature of relations with established, conventionally-configured territories that relate to standard administrative regions or the more narrowly-drawn city regions. There is little evidence to suggest that this is the case.

Nonetheless, as metropolitan regions come into favour, there is no lack of specific cases of dispute (e.g. in the UK – see Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016; Czechia – Havlík & Kuchyňková, 2017; Italy – Crivello & Staricco, 2017 and also Portugal and Slovenia – Nosek, 2017).

But there is a lacuna in our present knowledge in that we do not know the exact reasons that have led and continue to lead to disputes between old and new regions, and more specifically between the various regional and local actors involved. Although general reasons have been identified, such as globalization (Sykes & Shaw, 2008, p. 58) and unwillingness on the part of old regions to share money from EU funds with new regions (Havlík & Kuchyňková, 2017), it has not yet been explained why such conflicts arise in some countries but not in others. The European Commission's vague formulation of its integrated approach make it likely that disputes will arise in any country that implements it (which itself is typical of new regionalism), but in practice there are substantial differences between countries that need explaining.

The literature does not offer many variables that could unambiguously explain the disputes between regional and local actors. Carlo Mendez (2013, p. 651) noted that the EU's territorial dimension draws on pre-existing experiences, by which he probably means general experiences of EU institutions from the past. However, member states exhibit significant differences in the way they implement structural funds, and one may assume that there would be differences in implementing the integrated approach precisely on the basis of their varying experience (Van Der Zwet, Miller, & Gross, 2014). Van der Zwet et al. have put together a catalogue of variables entitled 'Key challenges for implementing territorial approaches'. One of the challenges they noted was the field of governance, where 'tensions' may arise 'between central departments and local administrations' (Van Der Zwet et al., 2014, p. 35). Here it needs to be noted that the authors do not explain why these disputes should necessarily involve central departments as counterparts of local administrations, as such disputes might, in theory, also appear at other levels of governance.

From the broad range of possible factors that could influence the integrated approach, it makes sense to select only those factors that might become involved in conflicts between regional and local actors. The authors (Van Der Zwet et al., 2014) do not specifically denominate the factors connected with tensions between central government/regions and local authorities, though these can be deduced from the nature of the challenges as described by van der Zwet et al. The problem may derive from:

- (1) insufficient administrative capacity, including, according to the authors, a 'lack of experience in the project context' or a 'limited ability to draw from past lessons';
- (2) political challenges, where 'political changes may lead to an alteration of strategic direction' (also supported e.g. by Keating, 2017; and by Havlík & Kuchyňková, 2017);² or
- (3) a situation where stakeholders fail to 'reach a shared understanding of challenges', i.e. a situation where the key actors of a country's regional policy have not reached at least a minimal consensus as to the priorities of development. Such a consensus does not come as a matter of course (also supported e.g. by Nosek, 2017; and by Havlík & Kuchyňková, 2017).

As Štěpán Nosek's (2017, p. 3) research has shown, territorial cohesion storylines may crucially influence the outcome, and these storylines 'differ according to the type of regions supported through regional policy (lagging regions, growth poles and rural regions)'. Havlík and Kuchyňková's study (2017) has demonstrated that the different storylines of

cities and regions played a crucial role in setting the agenda for the 2014–2020 programming period in Czechia. Whereas regions argued that their aim was to achieve territorial cohesion through support for less developed regions – among other measures – cities largely sought to improve competitiveness through support for poles of growth. This shows that negotiations about the character of the programming period can be fundamentally impacted by the lack of a basic consensus among key actors concerning the paradigms of development (see also e.g. Begg, 2010, etc.).

Of course, theoretically the question suggests itself: which actors besides the European Commission influence the national discussion about the priorities of regional development in a given country? One may ask what role has been played in this debate in both examined countries by the metropolitan areas as actors possibly mobilizing different or even competing ideologies and preferences about how to manage territorial development. The two cases investigated in this paper are largely specific, in that ‘soft spaces’ such as metropolitan areas existed in neither country before 2014. Hence, the paper does not consider metropolitan areas as active, negotiating actors which set the agenda, but rather as dependent actors, the emergence of which was due to negotiations among cities, regions and the central government. These negotiations, then, were influenced by various variables studied in this paper. The relative newness of the discussion about ITIs places certain limitations on this paper. The durability of the new regions, or ‘soft spaces’, is a specific issue in the study of changing territoriality. According to Allmendinger et al. (2014, p. 2705), ‘Some soft spaces might be very limited in time; others “harden” towards strongly institutionalized forms; and others remain “soft” over a long time.’ Selecting cases from new EU member states is appropriate because these countries tend to receive large amounts of EU funding and the phenomena under study are easily identified and described. Yet on the other hand these phenomena can be highly unstable and observations may lack long-term validity. This paper does not address the issue of new region longevity and focuses purely on the point where disputes arise between old and new regions.

A study of disagreements between regional and local actors cannot omit the central authorities (the relevant ministries). As Deas and Lord (2006) have demonstrated, nation states are not ‘robbed’ of powers in these disputes; yet it would be naive to assume that they would stand aside. The ministries responsible continue to be crucial coordinating actors which lead negotiations about the subsequent programming period and ultimately sign the partnership agreement with the European Commission. A study of these disputes must, therefore, also include the key ministries. In terms of the specific role which ministries may play, one might largely expect the activities described under points (b) and (c) (see proposed variables above). In other words, it is possible that the government – as a coordinating and mediating actor – has certain political preferences that imply support for concrete actors of regional development. Likewise, it is likely that the government has a certain set of normative expectations as to how regional development should proceed and what its priorities are. The government might then seek to inject these expectations into the debate and into the negotiations with regions and cities.

Last, the character of the ‘disputes’ or ‘tensions’ between regional actors needs noting. These are naturally vague notions, which often tend to be employed rather intuitively in the literature, without precisely describing the exact character of the disputes or the

timeframe of their occurrence. When the two words are used in this article, it is always in the context of describing a disagreement between local- and regional-level actors, at a moment when the distribution of money from structural funds is being discussed. Thus, this is a ‘conflict’ situation (Begg, 2010, p. 92) between actors of regional politics as to the policy aims for the next period – i.e. which of the actors ought to play a more substantial role in implementing the EU funds? This situation arises during the negotiation phase, before the beginning of a seven-year programming period.

Integrated approach during the period 2014–2020 and the question of Czech and Slovak readiness for the new regionalism

The tension described in the preceding section is probably due to a combination of two phenomena, one European, the other national. On the one hand, the European Commission creates a structure of incentives, though this is very broadly formulated and rather vague. As I shall show, the Commission’s incentives are so vague that they offer nation states a practically unlimited range of possibilities in terms of implementation. On the other hand, some nation states are very ingenious in interpreting EU legislation and have widely differing notions of implementation. As Joanna Krukowska and Marta Lackowska (2017, p. 278) noted, ‘the member states react to this top-down influence by painting these recommendations in their national colour of specific rules of implementation’. Crucially, from the point of view of the European Commission, these ‘national colours’ are partially expected and partially unexpected.

In 2014, the European Commission unveiled its Integrated territorial investment (ITI) instrument for the period 2014–2020, the primary purpose of which was to provide ‘a flexible mechanism for formulating integrated responses to diverse territorial needs, without losing the thematic focus through which cohesion policy is linked to the Europe 2020 Strategy’. Since the beginning the Commission has emphasized that this was a ‘flexible tool’. At a glance, the territorial applicability of ITI instruments is rather vague:

Any geographical area with particular territorial features can be the subject of an ITI, ranging from specific urban neighbourhoods with multiple deprivations to the urban, metropolitan, urban-rural, sub-regional, or inter-regional levels. An ITI can also deliver integrated actions in detached geographical units with similar characteristics within a region (e.g. a network of small or medium-sized cities). It is not compulsory for an ITI to cover the whole territory of an administrative unit. (European Commission, 2014)

A broader space for ‘national colouring’ could hardly be imagined. Those member states that decided to implement an ITI (it is not obligatory) were given the practical option of spreading the implementation of the new instrument across a territory of any size. Still, one can read in the Commission’s detailed manual (2015, p. 22) that among the considered (yet non-binding) scenarios offered to member states, a metropolis, a sub-region, a district or twin cities are cited as options of areas where an ITI could be implemented. The Commission (2014), therefore, seems to view this instrument as a sub-regional or local one: ‘The possible delegation of the management of ITIs empowers sub-regional actors (local/urban stakeholders) by ensuring their involvement and ownership of programme preparation and implementation.’

This, however, contradicts the wording used in defining territory, where the sentence ‘It is not compulsory for an ITI to cover the whole territory of an administrative unit’ allows

the nation state, when planning an ITI, to include, for example, an entire existing region in its present boundaries. This did occur – in pre-2014 negotiations, existing Czech regions sought to be allowed to implement the integrated approach/ITI – and the question naturally arises as to what degree one is still dealing with an integrated approach in a ‘geographical area’ as defined by the Commission (as per above), if that area is a whole region. Another issue arises when not one but all regions in a country decide to implement ITIs, thus making no regions where the integrated approach is not implemented. In such a situation we might well ask whether this is, in terms of development, still a ‘place-based approach’ (Barca, 2009; EC, 2015), which is the key aim of EU regional policy for 2014–2020. Thus, the European Commission has placed in the hands of regional and local actors an instrument whose implementation is very much dependent on the specific experiences of their country and on the variables described above (see theoretical section about the new regionalism).

The question of the readiness of regional and sub-regional actors might have posed a crucial difficulty. From the outset in both countries, regions have been considered important actors in regional development, but their options for influencing the set-up of regional policy has been very limited. This is largely due to the fact that the regions were created through a process of de-concentration rather than devolution. Although Czech and Slovak regions have certain executive powers (the administration of regional roads, schools, hospitals, culture and suchlike, and these powers are very similar in the two countries), many other responsibilities are simply delegated to them from higher up. Further, it needs noting that the process of decentralization was somewhat hurriedly undertaken in the two countries around 2000, with the aim of fulfilling the expectations of the EU (Yoder 2007, p. 427). Thus, in both Czechia and Slovakia, the regions are still relatively recent actors; their institutional culture is insufficient, their negotiating skills are underdeveloped, etc. Although the regions have existed in both countries for nearly two decades, they have not been able to create a unified representation for themselves in Brussels. Only some of them have representatives there; some were withdrawn over the last ten years for lack of interest. This shows that the regions’ institutional embeddedness and governance culture are lagging relatively and are far from reaching their true potential, as measured against the paradiplomatic activities of western European regions.

Czech (e.g. Baun & Marek, 2007) as well as Slovak regions met with some success when they negotiated the so-called ROPs (regional operational programmes) for the 2007–2013 period, thus achieving a higher degree of decentralization *de facto* in the distribution of EU structural funds. Of key importance, however, is the fact that, due to their comparatively small populations, the Czech and Slovak regions have not achieved NUTSII status since the EU accession of their countries (most of them are NUTSIII units). Thus, in both countries, artificial NUTSII-type units had to be created, typically involving two regions each. These newly created institutions were, understandably, remote from their citizens, and have not supported their identification with the European project. What is more, scandals were gradually uncovered at the NUTSII level, especially in Czechia (Havlík, 2015). In conclusion, I note that in both countries decentralization has been weakened by the fact that regional policy was largely implemented at the level of the artificial NUTSII units, and actual regions have remained comparatively weak actors. Thus, after 2014, the new regionalism was implemented into an arena with relatively weak regional players.

Methodology

As stated above, this paper has two aims: a theoretical one and a practical one. As for the former: with reference to the existing extensive literature, it aims to provide a better understanding of the disputes between regional and local actors that arise in the context of integrated instruments vaguely formulated by the European Commission. As for the latter: using a most-similar-cases design (MSSD, Della Porta, 2008), the paper will test several variables that might create competitive tensions between regional and local actors in the cases of Czechia and Slovakia. The two countries chosen are very similar in many respects but different in terms of the dependent variable. The choice of cases according to a dependent variable is sometimes criticized, but is justified here because the selection of 'positive cases' (Della Porta, 2008, p. 216–217) intends to uncover and describe different pathways leading to an outcome (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006). As described by Della Porta (2008, p. 215) a certain problem occurs when a situation arises 'where many variables may intervene, and we cannot control for their influence'. This paper, therefore, seeks to describe in depth only two ideal³ and very similar cases, thus seeking to avoid the influence of intervening variables. Naturally, the very act of selecting only two cases limits to certain extent the possibility of generalizing the results.

In comparing these two cases, this paper focuses on the potential roles of some of the variables that were identified in the literature (Havlík & Kuchyňková, 2017; Nosek, 2017; Van Der Zwet et al., 2014; etc.), p. 1) administrative capacity – the variable here is understood as past experience with similar integrated projects and, resulting from that, the ability to adapt to new challenges; 2) political challenges, where I assess to what extent the distribution of EU funds was seen as a political topic and whether this fact played a role in the final set-up for implementing regional policy; and 3) shared understanding of challenges, where I assess whether there is in the countries studied a long-term consensus among the key stakeholders concerning the priorities of regional development, or whether, by contrast, strong competing discourses can be identified.

The paper proceeds from strategic regional policy documents that describe the set-up of regional policy for the period 2014–2020 in both countries. In order to obtain a more detailed insight into the two countries, in-depth interviews with Czech and Slovak officials at the local and regional levels were carried out in 2014–2017. These officials were involved in the negotiations for the set-up in the current period, 2014–2020. Seven Czech and four Slovak officials were asked in semi-structured interviews about the process that led to the ITIs as currently implemented.⁴

Disputes between cities and regions: a comparison of the Czech and Slovak cases

As suggested above, the literature offers a limited number of variables that might lead to a clash between sub-regional and regional actors. Drawing on existing literature and the interviews that have been conducted, I chose three key variables that are likely to be at the root of these disputes. These are: insufficient administrative capacity, political challenges and lack of shared understanding of challenges. The method used does not allow for measuring the weight of the individual variables, and the analysis is

therefore limited to a description of their occurrence and the circumstances of the variables' influence.

A) Insufficient administrative capacity

The criterion of administrative capacity is understood here more broadly than just an actor's ability to manage the influx of the agenda with appropriate personnel and the technical provision of their office. It also includes such aspects as a possible lack of experience in the project context and the general experience the actor obtains in the complicated negotiations over EU funds allocation. In other words, I am also interested in the positions of the various regional and sub-regional actors in the system and their ability to respond to challenges encountered in implementing EU regional policy.

A glance at the 2007–2013 programming period reveals that Czech cities obtained more experience with the integrated approach than their Slovak counterparts. This is confirmed by some respondents (e.g. an interview at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Slovakia, 30 June 2017) and comparative studies (e.g. Ministry of Regional Development, 2010, p. 78). Although Slovakia applied the integrated approach, the focus was not on the development of whole cities but of some districts only. The priorities were the revitalization of public spaces and the refurbishment of apartment blocks (Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, 2012). During the same period, Czechia chose to follow Integrated Urban Development Plans, which covered larger territories. Some Czech cities, including Brno, had previously gained experience with the integrated approach towards urban development thanks to such programmes as URBACT II (Joining Forces project), and thus were better prepared when entering the new programming period (Urbact, 2016). In terms of their overall experience with the integrated approach, Czech cities were ahead of their Slovak counterparts (Euractiv.cz, 2009).

There are noticeable differences in the approaches chosen by large Czech and Slovak cities. This might be due to the fact that Czechia has six cities with populations larger than 100,000, whereas Slovakia has only two. Interviews conducted revealed that there are in both countries strong organizations acting as umbrellas for municipalities (both called Associations of Towns and Cities: SMO CR in Czechia and ZMOS in Slovakia) that traditionally have negotiated with governments. However, large Czech cities have in the past circumvented their SMO several times, as they felt under-represented in negotiations (based on the interviews, City Hall of Brno, 22 July 2014 or City Hall of Ostrava, 8 July 2014).

This may be due to the fact that the areas covered by these associations is heterogeneous, ranging from large cities to villages with populations in the hundreds. Because of this, the umbrella organization cannot push for the best interests of only some of their members, especially if that were to the detriment of other members. These associations cannot promote only the growth poles, because that would go against the interests of their other members (small municipalities) that often find themselves in economically less developed regions. Large Czech cities were aware of this and acted independently in negotiations with the relevant ministry; whereas large Slovak cities continued to negotiate through their ZMOS. But the Czech cities went even further and started to play an interesting game, engaging intermediaries to lobby in the European Commission on their behalf and against the interests of regions. They argued that growth poles needed support in order to be able to act as economic powerhouses, and also pointed to corruption

that previously occurred in regions during EU funds disbursement. The cities were so discreet in their lobbying that regional negotiators were often unaware of it (based on the interviews, i.e. City Hall of Brno, 22 July 2014 or City Hall of Ostrava, 8 July 2014).

Thus, a comparison shows that, unlike their Slovak counterparts, large Czech cities embraced ITIs as their own projects and, in order to facilitate implementation, stood apart from smaller municipalities and acted largely on their own account. They would not be able to do this had they not had substantial previous experience of integrated programmes and participation in international urban development projects.

B) Political challenges

Political challenges are difficult to measure and we can only speculate about the overall influence of this variable. However, they do need to be considered in order to obtain an understanding of the key processes unfolding in the negotiation arena. In interviews with representatives of Czech regions and cities, respondents agreed that party-political fighting played a role in defining ITIs. According to these sources, there were, on the one side, Czech regions almost entirely controlled by the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and, on the other side, the crucial Ministry of Regional Development, controlled at key points of the negotiation process by ČSSD's political rivals. Some respondents indicated that the ANO party was unwilling to hand over the allocation of substantial sums to ČSSD regional governors.⁵ The importance of political lobbying during negotiations in Czechia is also confirmed by a multi-country study on ITI implementation which includes as one important variable 'the ability of political lobbyists to intervene in setting the parameters (weights and limits) – i.e. various actors express their wish to be included in order to be eligible for funding' (Binek et al., 2015, p. 66).⁶ In this respect the situation in Slovakia was substantially different. The respondents there witnessed no political fighting, which is probably due to the fact that the relevant ministry and regions were controlled by the same party, SMER (during the crucial negotiation period, i.e. 2012–2014). Furthermore, the debate about ITI implementation in Slovakia was from the outset drew strongly on the preceding period, when regions had played an important role. Additionally, the government asked both regions and cities to implement ITIs.

The political fighting was also affected by corruption that affected regional operational programmes in the past. Although most Central European countries have problems with corruption, the Czech cases attracted particular media attention. The European Commission repeatedly criticized the Czechs and pointed out their dysfunctional monitoring system (Đurda, 2013). At the peak of the scandal, the governor of the Central Bohemia region, David Rath, was arrested in 2012 and charged with misuse of EU subsidies. During the 2007–2013 programming period several leading officials of multiple regional operational programmes were prosecuted. With regions controlled by ČSSD, the opposition ANO 2011 (later ANO), which subsequently received the crucial Ministry of Regional Development as part of a national government coalition deal, made a point of criticizing corruption within the various regional operational programmes (ANO, 2013).

C) Lack of shared understanding of challenges

The discussion about ITI implementation was different in the two countries from the very beginning. Whereas in Slovakia the necessity of continuity was highlighted – it was felt

that support for regions granted in 2007–2013 should continue (Binek et al., 2015, p. 27) – in Czechia the key actors involved in negotiations did not hesitate to attack each other once the negotiation process started in earnest (ca. 2012–2013). The necessity for continuity in Slovakia was caused by many variables; at the forefront was the fact that, according to a report by the European Commission (2012a), the country faced a substantial regional disparity, even at the end of the 2007–2013 period. Specifically, the Commission said: ‘Regional disparities in socio-economic development remain very important in Slovakia, showing a significant West–East and North–South division, with economic activity being concentrated in the capital city region’. Of key importance was the Commission’s criticism of how the Slovaks handled the various instruments of regional policy:

Slovakia should critically evaluate the experience and lessons learnt from the 2007–2013 programming period, including the architecture of the implementation system, the concept of growth poles, and the impact of the approach taken in relation to decreasing territorial disparities, both in sectoral, regional and rural development programmes. (European Commission, 2012a, p. 18)

This was a largely ironic reference to the fact that during the period under review (2007–2013) Slovakia had defined for itself 82 innovation growth poles and 891 cohesion growth poles (Ibid.) The criticism voiced by the Commission allows one to infer that Slovakia in fact ignored the discourse of growth poles as promoted by the European Commission; more specifically the country had translated these concepts into its own language in such a way that virtually anything could be described as a ‘growth pole’. It is symptomatic of Slovakia at the end of the 2007–2013 period, then, that in its ITI recommendations the Commission did not clearly specify the level at which they ought to be implemented. First, Slovakia was not in a position where it would have defined a small group of growth poles; second, any recommendation made by the Commission in this respect could create the false impression that an urgent decrease of regional disparities was not the main priority.

The Commission’s communication with Czechia was carried out in an entirely different spirit. Somewhat critically, the Commission first noted in its recommendations that ‘Any proposal for the future system of the management of the Structural Funds in the Czech Republic needs to be critically reviewed in view of the experience gained to date from the functioning and problems of the current system.’ (European Commission, 2012b, p. 18) Foremost among the recommendations was an invitation to show greater interest in metropolitan areas:

Given the structure and size of the towns and cities, the urban dimension should, in the Czech context, be better perceived in a broader sense, i.e. in terms of urban agglomerations as a functional area for socio-economic development or in terms of cities and their socio-economic hinterland, including urban-rural links (Ibid.).

The recommendations do not provide entirely concrete guidelines on ITI implementation for either Czechia or Slovakia; they do however, set some boundaries. The recommendations can be read as suggesting that Slovakia should do something with its significant regional disparity, whereas Czechia should focus on urban agglomeration growth poles. According to the interviews conducted, the discussion in Slovakia about the relative positions of regions and cities was calm, as is indeed shown by the result of the negotiations, with both regions and cities implementing ITIs. In Czechia, by contrast, the cities, encouraged by the Commission, took the initiative and sought to set the terms of discussions as a

dichotomy between growth poles and economically less developed regions. Of course, it cannot be claimed unambiguously that the Commission alone played a key role in the two countries' understanding of the development challenges. Rather, a broad spectrum of actors – including the government, regions and municipalities – participated in the 'shared understanding of challenges'. Thus, this variable understandably overlaps with the other two variables. The factors that matter in setting up priorities for regional development include the previous experience of the actors, their administrative capacities and their negotiating power overall, as well as the degree to which regional development has become a political issue in the country. Of the two cases studied here, Czechia and Slovakia, the Czech cities had sufficient experience and administrative capacity, as well as a powerful political ally, and these circumstances probably led to their successful push for change in the priorities of regional development.

Conclusion

The introduction of metropolitan areas in both Czechia and Slovakia did not lead to a disruption of hierarchical arrangements or a change of power relationships. However, one can observe indirect effects, in the form of the relative weakening of regions (especially in Czechia), which obtain less money from structural funds to distribute. What happened, then, is that the actual manoeuvring space available to the 'old' regions has shrunk. In other words, it can be noted that the new regionalism was in this case simply co-opted by the system and formal power relations have remained intact: the regions continue to be actors in regional policy, but their real position has been weakened by the lower-than-expected allocation of EU funds.

The aims of a paper examining variables that might cause clashes between sub-regional and regional actors are naturally limited. Although three important variables have been identified, it is evident that if other countries were investigated some further factors might be uncovered. The paper does not measure the influence of the factors examined (indeed, that is not really possible), but it offers an interesting shift in the discussion concerned with the relationships among actors involved in multi-level governance.

The paper's main aim is to stimulate the discussion of the various forms that new regionalism takes and especially the reasons for them. My comparative study has shown that the most important variable is most likely the administrative capacity of new regions. However, this must be understood to encompass not just the current administrative ability to manage tasks, but also past experience with similar projects. If a new region crosses the notional threshold of 'sufficient capacity', it stands a chance of becoming a competitor for the old regions. This conclusion of my empirical comparison is in agreement with findings in the literature, though previous studies have only examined disputes between central and local bodies.

The two further variables tested proved of importance. It has been shown that the overall understanding of a country's development priorities is crucial for potential disputes between sub-regional and regional actors. The notion of such priorities can be understood as a discourse formed and maintained by several actors. National government is certainly one of them; through its strategic documents it sets the long-term priorities of regional policy, which may be convenient to some actors and not to others. However, the European Commission also plays a substantial role, in that its evaluating reports may significantly

affect the distribution of power and empower certain actors at the expense of others, as shown in the cases studied. Whereas when discussing Czechia the Commission tended to dedicate more attention to metropolitan areas acting as growth poles (thus these metropolitan areas are new regions *de facto*), in Slovakia it emphasized the need to remove regional disparities. Though the countries concerned could object to such recommendations and establish different priorities (as indeed Czech regions attempted), the recommendations clearly did play a role.

Crucially, the clashes between new and old regions should also be understood as a political challenge. In view of the other two factors (administrative capacity and shared understanding of challenges), this is the most speculative variable, as it appeared only in the verbal utterances of my respondents. There is nevertheless an interesting finding: whereas in Slovakia, controlled throughout the period studied (ca. 2012–2014) at the crucial levels of governance by one party, there was no politically-motivated dispute between old and new regions, several respondents in Czechia agreed independently of each other that the crucial ministry (the Ministry of Regional Development) preferred to support cities' metropolitan areas rather than to grant substantial financial allocation to regions controlled by their main political competitor. It is important to note that all the factors examined acted concurrently, as a cocktail. The success of Czech cities was undoubtedly based on their previous experience with the integrated approach and their strong lobbying capacity, yet these would not necessarily be so efficient had the Regional Development Ministry and the European Commission not sided with them; this then created an overall shift in the understanding of development priorities. In examining clashes between old and new regions, the various independent variables should therefore not be discussed separately.

Further case or comparative studies, by examining new data, will make our knowledge of the factors influencing conflicts among actors at the lowest levels of multi-level governance more precise, thus making a welcome contribution to the continuing debate. Specifically, the opportunity presents itself to include in the comparison other countries where there has been a dispute over the distribution of EU funds (first of all, Italy). Likewise, it might be fruitful to update the study of Czechia and Slovakia in a few years, with the aim of ascertaining whether the initial disagreements have altered the long-term relationships among the regional and sub-regional actors involved in the process of governance.

Notes

1. This work was supported by the Grant Agency of the Masaryk University under the project Europe in Changing International Environment IV (MUNI/A/0834/2017).
2. Although this factor has been described for the example of Greece, it may also arise in other contexts, wherever any new political team brings new emphases into policy making, thus changing existing approaches to regional policy.
3. Ideal in the sense that they are new member states that receive a high allocation of finance per capita from EU funds and the phenomenon under discussion (a dispute among actors concerned with the set-up for a future period) might therefore resonate much more strongly than in 'old' member countries.
4. The interviews were based on the following set of questions, which were specified further: 1) To what extent was ITI implementation in your country a conflict issue? 2) Have you noticed a dispute between regional and local actors concerning ITI implementation? 3) What role did the government/ministries play in the discussion of ITI? 4) Have you noticed an attempt on

the part of cities or regions to circumvent the nation state and negotiate a better position for themselves in Brussels?

5. The rivalry between ČSSD and ANO continues despite the fact that in 2014–2017 the parties have been coalition partners in the Czech national government.
6. This was also shown in early 2014, when a caretaker government (one not enjoying parliament's confidence) led by Jiří Rusnok approved Olomouc urban agglomeration's participation in an ITI only at its last meeting.

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