



THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PROCESS OF REGIONALISATION FOR BUILDING STRONGER LOCAL GOVERNMENTS – TRADITIONS AND TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

In the recent years in the European Union and in the whole of Europe, a trend of strong regionalisation is observed. The changes in the economic environment, the emergence of a common market, the need of an improved planning and co-ordination administrative capacity to overcome regional disparities require the establishment of the second level of governance. The regional level is directly related to the development of the governance system and the increase of the efficiency of the governance actions related to the services provided to the citizens.

Key words: regionalisation, regional government, regionalism, decentralisation, subsidiarity.

The problems of the regionalisation in Central and Eastern Europe were placed on the agenda as early as the beginning of the 1990s. The establishment of the Committee of Regions in 1994 was an important moment in the process of institutionalisation of the regions and their recognition as an inseparable part of the structure of the European Union. The status of the Committee of Regions was profoundly regulated in the draft contract for the European constitution. The Council of Europe has established its consultative body – the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe, which has turned in one of the Council's three bodies, along with the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The Committee of Regions, which is seated in Brussels, ensures the representation of the regional authorities in the European Union and has a status of a consultative body. The European Commission holds mandatory consultations with the Committee of Regions on issues related to:

economic and social cohesion, regional policy, trans-European networks in transport, telecommunication and energy; public health, education, youth and culture, labour and social policy, environment, transport.

According to information of the European Commission, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the European legislation is implemented at local or regional level. The EU legislation – new and amended – has financial and administrative impact that is constantly growing, according to the Committee of regions¹.

The EU documents adopted after the Treaty of Amsterdam state that "... the radical changes in Europe and the great challenges our societies face at political, social and economic level require full acknowledgement of the regions as entities of stability and prosperity and as true vectors of the will of the European people"².

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¹ Committee of the Regions, Regional and Local Democracy in the European Union, 1999, p.11

² Declaration finale du Sommet des Regions d'Europe, XIV-eme Assemblee Generale des Regions d'Europe, Montpellier, les 4 et decembre, 1997

A document from the United Kingdom presented at the Conference of the European Ministers responsible for the local and regional authorities reads: “In the last two decades in Europe, steps have been undertaken toward increasing decentralisation and transfer of competences. This was imposed by economic and political reasons grounded not only on specific local and cultural conditions but also on the shared understanding that the economic growth, the sustainable renovation of urban areas and the efficient provision of quality public services may be made easier if the government institutions are not so strongly centralised. In many countries this trend has taken the form of an even stronger regional government including democratically elected regional authorities.”³

In various countries, along with the decentralisation process and the creation of a new reality, it is getting even more necessary to solve the problem with the establishment of intermediary bodies positioned between the central government and the local level. This is exactly how the process of regionalisation of the country begins, be it different and in various forms in the individual countries.

There is no common concept for region in the EU Member States, just as there is no a uniform definition of the term “region” in legal and political aspect.

Clarifying the essence of regionalisation as a process requires to specify the meaning of the concepts for “region”, “regionalism” and “regional policy”.

“Regionalism” is a term in the international relations which denotes the phenomenon in a given region pre-defining the establishment of the subjects of regional integration, which, in its turn, is a unification, merging or binding together countries that have common goals and issues to address.

Ernst Haas underlines the need of differentiating between the terms regional development, regional co-operation, regional organisation, regional integration and regionalism because they all have their meaning⁴.

G. Marcou views regionalisation as a process that builds capacity for independent targeted action of a specific region (sub-national but supra-local) through mobilisation of its economic resources and local and regional identity, through development of its potential. This process is implemented by existing institutions or it may originate the establishment of new territorial organisations that will be more appropriate to attain these objectives. The process is always backed by the efforts of political and state institutions that may be additionally influenced by other factors⁵.

G. Marcou defines five main types of regionalisation in the European countries: administrative, regionalisation through existing local government units, regional decentralisation, regional autonomy and regionalisation through existing federal structures.

- In the case of the administrative regionalisation no self-government is introduced at regional level. Administrative structures are established that implement the goals of state government and are directly subordinated to the central administration.
- With the regionalisation through existing local government units, most often collective bodies are established of representatives of the local self-governing units.
- Regional decentralisation is in place when at the intermediary level there exist government structures.
- Regionalisation through existing federal structures is present in the federal states where the intermediary management level is represented by the constituent entities of the federal state⁶.

The regionalisation process has various dimensions, including changes in the regional policy and development and changes from the political and administrative point of view. This means to implement a policy that effectively deals with the growing regional disparities, on one hand, and to successfully re-organise the public administration, on the other hand.

When analysing the regionalisation processes in the various countries, one can observe the different

³ Helsinki, June 2002

⁴ Haas.E. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2706149>

⁵ Marcou, G.2002, p.13

⁶ Marcou,G. 2002 p.15

treatment of the individual regions when providing regional autonomy.

The departments of France are historically and functionally the most developed self-government structure. France is the country that has given the lead during the last centuries not only in the administrative theory and practice but also in the process of regionalisation and decentralisation. The departments of France were created as back as the end of the 18th century when an electable General Council was introduced. In 1834, the departments acquire the status of individual legal entities and are given extended powers following the reform of Napoleon III in keeping his promise to “free the country from the excessive administrative centralisation”. In 1946, the French constitution for the first time declared the department as a territorial entity, similar to municipalities. The executive powers within the department were performed by the Chairperson of the General Council. The prefect preserved its role of a representative of the central authorities and in order to avoid rather close solidarity between the prefect and the local lobbies, every 3 years it is transferred to another department⁷.

In Bulgaria, there is no talk about regional decentralisation, yet, even less about introduction of regional government. The question of regional government is very topical for both Bulgaria and Europe. The regional policy in Bulgaria is mainly a priority of the central authorities. The mechanisms for formulation of a regional policy, as laid down in the Regional Development Act, attempt at involving the local authorities and the district administration in the process of developing strategies for balance and sustainable development of the regions, however, the decision-making is performed by the central authorities. The regional policy is entirely in the sphere of competence of the central authorities and their de-concentrated structures at district level. At the time being, regions have been formed for the purposes of planning, programming, governance, resource provisioning and monitoring of the regional development on the territory of the country. Pursuant to the Regional Development Act, Bulgaria is divided in 6 planning regions corresponding to the NUTS 2 level. The planning regions are formed based on the existing districts according to their geographic position, level of economic development, number of inhabitants and perspectives for development⁸. These six regions

are not administrative and territorial units but only serve for statistical purposes.

With a view to the perspectives in front of Bulgaria, it is of crucial importance to use the best practices from other countries in terms of regionalisation. Regionalism, in the governance aspect, refers to the intermediary levels of the government system, i.e. those situated between the national and the local level. The regional level is directly related mainly to the development of the government system and the increase of the efficiency of the governance actions related to the services provided to the citizens.

Finally, there exists a direct link between regionalisation and decentralisation. The implementation of an active regional policy needs to be institutionalised on regional level. The challenge of introducing regional self-government is to find the optimum balance of powers when assigning functions and tasks to the various governance levels.

Regionalisation is related to modernisation of the state administration and application of the subsidiarity principle, which provides greater freedom to the local and regional authorities to formulate policies and provide more efficient services to the citizens.

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⁸ The Regional Development Act

