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Conference Paper

On-going European integration will affect the position of the regions: An analysis of the process and some possible scenarios for the future

38th Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "Europe Quo Vadis? - Regional Questions at the Turn of the Century", 28 August - 1 September 1998, Vienna, Austria

Provided in Cooperation with:

European Regional Science Association (ERSA)

Suggested Citation: Vos, Hendrik (1998) : On-going European integration will affect the position of the regions: An analysis of the process and some possible scenarios for the future, 38th Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "Europe Quo Vadis? - Regional Questions at the Turn of the Century", 28 August - 1 September 1998, Vienna, Austria, European Regional Science Association (ERSA), Louvain-la-Neuve

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ON-GOING EUROPEAN INTEGRATION WILL AFFECT THE POSITION OF THE REGIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESS AND SOME POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

ABSTRACT

Centrifugal pressures and the 'technical needs of the modern state' (Keating) resulted in demands for decentralization from the seventies on. Nowadays, regional self-government exists in many EU member states. This has strengthened the position of the regions, not only within the member states, but even within the EU itself. Some of the elements that play a role are: [1] The dynamics of European integration resulted in a significant increase in competences for the

EC (in the meanwhile EU). However, it appears that most of the integration at the European level occurred in those domains which had already been transferred to a regional authority in several member states. As a result, regions play an increasingly important role in the implementation of EU regulations which makes them want to have a say in how these are formed. [2] The EMU will enhance cross-border cooperation between regions. Regions will propose their policies more on their own, apart from the traditional states. [3] The European regional policy has become increasingly important, with the structural funds as main instruments. Attention is paid to this policy, especially in the light of the expansion of the EU to the east and the reforms that come with this (cfr. Agenda 2000). Regions will claim a more decisive participation in the regional policy making. [4] Regions found their claims for an increased influence upon the EU-treaty which stipulates that 'decisions should be taken as closely as possible to the citizen'. This paper stresses the regions use of the principle as an argument for increased influence.

As integration advances, regions will gradually become more autonomous partners in the European project. This paper focuses on the determinants of this process and the challenges that will come together with future developments. One argument that will be developed is the unlikelihood that this evolution will lead to a *Europe of the regions*, in which regions will totally replace the traditional states. However, new institutional settings will be needed to formalize the role of the regions.

ON-GOING EUROPEAN INTEGRATION WILL AFFECT THE POSITION OF THE REGIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESS AND SOME POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

HENDRIK VOS

The European Union is facing a number of very important challenges, of which the enlargement and the establishment of an economic and monetary union seem to be the most important ones in the near future. However, these challenges are in no case the only ones. Every step towards further integration has implications on several levels. The position of the regions, which sometimes are labelled as the 'basic units' of the Union, will be affected by this integration process. Even more: the position of the regions can not be evaluated without taking the European integration into consideration. Their meaning and their future will depend highly on this integration process.

This point of view leads us to some important questions. Are regions just geographical defined areas, useful for an efficient allocation of structural funds to the most deprived areas, but without any real political or economical meaning other than a statistical meaning? Or are the regions (becoming) real basic units of this European Union, the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle of which the Union is composed? Do they have power and, if so, how? And above all: in which direction is the position of the regions moving?

To answer these questions systematically, I will proceed as follows:

First I will take a short look at the dynamics in which the regions have been trapped during the last couple of years and decades in part 1. Then I will transfer the main conclusions of these dynamics to future steps in the integration process in part 2. This approach makes it possible to gain a medium term understanding of the perspectives of the European regions: not only their capacities and opportunities but even the problems and the obstacles they will have to face. In the conclusion, I will deal with the crucial problem of institutional settings that will be needed to formalize the role of the regions.

1 THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGIONS SO FAR

The preamble of the Treaty of Rome already brings up the regions: problems of uneven regional development and the backwardness of the less favoured regions are mentioned. However, no concrete proposals to reduce the differences have been suggested and no specific reference was made to the establishment of a common regional policy. Initially, it was assumed that the combination of economical integration and the *hidden hand* of the free market would lead to an economical convergence between the regions.

This proved to be wrong: integration did not seem to have the intended equalizing effect. It became clear that a lot of the problems that arised out of the restructuration and dismantlement of e.g. coal and steel industry, had a strong regional dimension. Despite the economic boom of the sixties, backwarded regions had no prospects without extensive economic support, even in the more prosperous states.

Besides, the monetary union became an important theme in the debate about Europe's future in the seventies. It was clear that significant geographical variations in the level of development would seriously complicate this project, if not make it unfeasible. As a consequence some specifically region-oriented structures and bodies have been added to the European construction. In 1967 a *Directorate-Generale XVI* — the department of the European Commission responsible for Community action to reduce the gaps in socio-economic development between the various regions of the Union — was established. The *European Fund for Regional Development*¹, founded in 1975, was another important pillar. The *Single European Act* (1986) mentioned for the first time the importance of an effective regional economic policy. From then on the regional policy competences of the European Commission will extend gradually. However, the development of a real *common* regional policy remained problematic as the member states were not willing to give up their control over this policy (especially over the financing of it).

During the eighties, the Commission (and the European Parliament) realized that a greater involvement of the regions became inevitable, a.o. because of the fact that the regional projects had to be implemented in the regions themselves and even by the regions themselves. Hence the Commission established a *Consultative Council of Regional and Local Authorities* in 1988. For the first time, regions were formally introduced in the Union's decision making process, albeit with very restricted competences. Simultaneously the regions assertiveness grew and they began to organize themselves. This regional mobilization (Pongy, Saez 1994: 11) resulted in the creation of pressure groups for defending the general regional interests. These agitated a.o. for the regions having more of a say in the allocation of the

structural funds². Furthermore a number of regional cooperations were established between adjacent regions that have specific problems and interests³ and between non-adjacent regions with similar (mostly economic) interests⁴. Many regional authorities have set up a so-called 'regional information office' (a euphemism for a pressure group) in Brussels as an attempt to influence the European decision making process (Greenwood 1997: 218-241; Smets 1997: 206-208). Michael Keating (1995: 14) stipulates that by 1989, representation in Brussels included all ten West German *Länder* and West Berlin; four Spanish regions, six French regions and two departments; and four British local authorities. This number has undoubtedly grown since: Justin Greenwood (1997: 227-228) distinguished in April 1996 135 different regions with a direct representation in Brussels.

It is important to stress that the word 'region' originally was used for depressed and needy areas, but that these areas have become more assertive. Now, they stand up for themselves and recently even became involved in the regional economic policy, though still in a very restricted way.

From the seventies on, a second and new dynamics can be detected: some form of regionalism has been introduced in a many member states. Within this paper it is not possible to examine this matter in detail, but two main elements must however be pointed out:

To begin with, there is the rise of the regionalist theme with a strongly mobilizing power all over Europe. Regionalist feelings can be observed in the cultural life (a *renaissance* of regional languages, a revival of regional cultural movements, increasing interest in the old culture and its traditional expressions, ...) and in the political field (the rise or rebirth of regionalist parties, segregation movements, ...). Popular demand for decentralization is not confined to any specific type of region (e.g. only the poor ones, or the rich ones, or the ones with ethnical minorities, etc.). A second element that favours regionalism is to be found in what Keating (1985: 2) calls the "technical needs of the modern state". As early as in 1972, Rupert B. Vance (1972: 379) stated in the prestigious *International encyclopedia of the social sciences*, that "[i]f territorial groups did not exist, political organization would have to call them into being in order to function.". Recently, others expressed similar views in the discussion about the subsidiarity principle⁵. For reasons of efficiency, it seems to be appropriate to give some authority to territorial units at a lower level under the central government. Especially central governments of larger countries lack the information for effective policy making (or implementation of this policy) in regional matters. In an article on devolution in Scotland, *The Economist* (20 sept. 1997: 37) was very clear: "If there is a turn-of-the-century message in Europe, it may be 'devolve or die'."

Whatever caused this process a decentralization process can be detected in most of the member states of the European Union. Whether this is called devolution, regionalization or federalization is less important because these terms only describe different stages of the same process. In many of the member states regions have gained executive competences and often legislative competences as well.

At the same time European integration accelerated: the 'field of activity' of the Community (in the meanwhile Union) has been extended substantially, because of the *Single European Act* and the *Maastricht* and *Amsterdam Treaties*. These new competences, however, had in a number of member states already been transferred to the regions (transport, education, environment, culture, labour, public health, vocational training, ...). This leads to a paradox: on the one hand, one can get the impression that the regions have to give back almost immediately what they just had achieved (boldly said: the heads of state are 'selling out' to Europe what they already handed over to their regions). Especially the German *Länder* experienced this as a major problem after Maastricht, and this protest contributed to Germany's reserved attitude towards the integration process in Amsterdam. On the other hand, it is precisely this Europeanization of regional matters which leads to a more intense involvement of the regions in the European integration. Nowadays they are responsible for the implementation of European rules which leads them to claim a bigger involvement in the construction of these rules and regulations. Marc Cogen (1990: 36) stipulates that when regions do not have a say in the accomplishment of European rules, they will carry out these rules tardily or deficiently.

In other words: as regions (even those with only executive powers) are becoming responsible for the implementation of European decisions, they have a power which should not be underestimated. This situation can only lead to a more intense involvement of the regions in European decision making. In a resolution on the common regional policy and the role of the regions and in a charter, the European parliament in 1988 already pleaded for a more decisive role for the regions and for an institutionalization of the democratic representation of the regions at the European level.

Summarizing, one can say that over the past few years an important change has occurred: regions are no longer merely treated in terms of economic backwardness. This understanding resulted in the establishment of a Committee of the Regions in the Maastricht Treaty. The tasks of this Committee are not limited to regional economic policy, but to all matters which could possibly concern the regions. Some aspects of this Committee will be analysed further on.

The combination of the two outlined processes — [1] an increasingly important regional policy that is aimed at reducing economic gaps and [2] regions becoming directly involved in European decision making process due to a combination of the regionalization in the member states and an extension of the ‘field of activity’ of the Union — results in the fact that regions have become important during the last decades, that they have organized themselves and that they became more assertive. Such is the situation today. The next question is about the sort of challenges the Union is facing at the moment and how these will affect the regions.

2 THE CHALLENGES FOR THE UNION AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE REGIONS

Regions have gained importance throughout a substantial number of European states. In some states (e.g. the United Kingdom) the power of the regions is still increasing, elsewhere the new relations will at least be consolidated. A tendency to deprive the regions of their competences is nowhere to be detected. When discussing the position of the regions in Europe, it is important to remember that within the traditional states their positions seem to hold.

Below, I will discuss some short term challenges to the European Union with repercussions on the regions. Following topics will be dealt with: a further extension of the ‘field of activity’ of the Union (or at least the further realization of the decisions taken in Maastricht and Amsterdam), the establishment of a single European currency, the expansion of the Union to the east and the call for more democracy.

2.1 EXTENSION OF THE ‘FIELD OF ACTIVITY’ OF THE UNION

As a consequence of the dynamics of European integration the competences of the European Community (now European Union) increased significantly. As I stated above, it seems that most of the integration occurred in those domains which had already been transferred to a regional authority in several member states⁶. Even if integration does not advance anymore and remains limited to the implementation of Maastricht and Amsterdam decisions, it is clear that European bodies (such as Council or Commission) will increasingly enter on the regional domains. However, even without a blind faith in the functionalist spill-over mechanism it can be assumed that their competences will continue to increase.

As stated above, regions will claim influence over how the decisions are taken, because they are responsible for the implementation of important aspects of the new decisions, rules and

regulations. Christian Engel and Jef Van Ginderachter (1993: 55) refer to studies on the increasing readiness of accepting and administering of laws if there are possibilities to participate in the decision making process. Whoever can influence this process will not be confronted with decisions which are perceived as unilaterally imposed. Whether or not the existing institutional settings will be able to deal with these demands remains uncertain. For the moment, regions do have two formal instruments for direct influence on the European policy⁷: first, there is the Committee of the Regions and, second, there is article 146 EC which allows the possibility for a regional minister to be a member of the Council. These facilities became part of the Treaty in Maastricht.

Let me start with the Committee of the Regions. This Committee is in fact only a consultative body but the Council or the Commission can ignore an opinion of the Committee without having to justify this. In some tricky matters (e.g. the common agriculture policy) the Committee's opinion is not even mandatory. At the Amsterdam Summit, the Committee was lobbying for more powers by trying to increase the regional participation. These attempts failed: the advisory powers have been extended but the real political scope remained low (Vos 1997). Jones (1995: 295) warns that "[f]or many critics the Committee of the Regions could degenerate into yet another European talking shop". Even the fact that the Committee consists of regional and local authorities is seen as problematic. This will be discussed further on.

Then there is article 146 EC: due to the awareness that some matters primarily affect regions instead of states, the heads of states and governments decided in Maastricht to create a procedure which makes it possible for a regional minister to be a member of the Council (instead of a national minister). However, some states would not accept a restriction of their powers in favour of their regions. This resulted in a compromise text which states that the Council shall consist of a representative of each member state at ministerial level, authorized to commit the government of that member state (and not only of that region). In other words: a Flemish minister has to defend the Belgian point of view in the Council and the five Belgian votes in the Council can in no way be divided (e.g. 2 Flemish votes, 2 Walloon votes and 1 Brussels vote). The regional ministers may have a moral satisfaction from being with the happy few around the negotiation table but one cannot speak of a real regional representation as they are not entitled to voice their region's opinion. Moreover, the decision to allow the use of this facility is taken by the member states themselves.

One has to conclude that regions are more involved in the implementation of European Union rules and (due to this fact) are asking for influence over the European decision making process, but that the existing opportunities for participation are experienced as insufficient.

2.2 A SINGLE EUROPEAN CURRENCY

The realization of the monetary union will have major consequences for the regions. In this article, I will not take up the economical aspects of the EMU (Will the introduction of the single currency reduce regional disparities in GDP? Is a single monetary policy likely to lead to an increasing specialization of regions? ...). Opinions of experts are divided on these issues.

The EMU will affect the regions on the political level as well. First, there is a more general point: the traditional state will have less substance as monetary policy will not be the business of these traditional states anymore (in reality, many states already transferred their monetary policy making to the German Central Bank). In its wake, certain aspects, such as the fiscal policy, could follow.

Secondly, it can be assumed that the euro will present new opportunities for the regions as the (already existing) cross-border and interregional cooperation presumably will intensify. Fixed rates will reduce exchange and transaction costs. In border regions especially, this, in combination with consumer advantages such as more transparent price-setting, will have significant implications. Neighbouring regions from different states will be integrated in one market and cross-border agreements will have to be arranged.

In fact, the establishment of the EMU will mainly break down barriers. The introduction of a single currency will make it more easy to a number of regions (in particular the border regions) to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy and define their economical and political priorities in function of those of their neighbours. Indirectly, this can lead to a more independent position in relation to the central states and certainly to a more assertive attitude of the regions.

2.3 EXPANSION OF THE UNION TO THE EAST

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Union will probably be extended. The consequences of this extension will be huge and already today plenty of preparations are made. In Agenda 2000, the European Commission outlines the broad outlook for the development of the European Union and its policies beyond the turn-of-the-century. Special attention is given to the impact of the enlargement on the Union as a whole and to the financial aspects of this operation. As the immense impact on the regions is already obvious today, the Committee of the Regions tries to follow the debate and the negotiations with special attention. I will discuss three aspects:

First, there are the structural funds which were intended to eliminate regional disparities. The financial provisions for this policy have been growing (cfr. supra) and the Commission urges

for more effectiveness and a simplification of the structural measures. According to the Commission, the priority policy goal remains economic and social cohesion by reducing uneven development, as set out explicitly in Article 130a of the Treaty. The prospect of enlargement with new countries that have widely diverging levels of development, makes this even more necessary than before. However, the activities of the structural funds will be reorganized entirely. All resources would go to the east when no radical adjustments are made. After all, the entry into the Union of relatively poor countries and regions will have two effects: more regions will claim support (the German unification was a clear example) and the GDP/capita of the Union as a whole will decrease. This will influence the distribution of the means from the *Cohesion Fund*: currently support from this fund can be claimed by states with a GDP/capita that is less than 90% of the European average. A substantial decrease in the Union's GDP/capita could cut off the access to (some of) the four countries, which are benefiting from this fund up till now. In short, a common regional policy with the present criteria and philosophy will be an enormous financial resource for the regions from the new member states, while regions which are already belonging to the Union will almost certainly be eliminated from support. Such will undoubtedly be refused by the present member states and by their regions as well. As a consequence regions are trying to influence the revision of the (very lucrative) structural policy, in a formal way (Committee of the Regions) and in an informal way (the regional pressure groups). Furthermore, they will try to seize this opportunity to gain more influence over the further management of the structural funds. Even the Commission is arguing for decentralization in the implementation of the common regional policy and for a clear division of responsibilities.

Secondly, the new member states will have to be divided into regions. Most of them have done this already a.o. for statistical purposes, but an exact division can still be a matter of discussion. Many Eastern European states have problems with ethnical minorities and even the splitting of Czechoslovakia as well as the disintegration of Yugoslavia have shattered the illusion of stable borders. Tracing borders almost never satisfies all parties and can easily result in abuses: in order to be a rightful claimant for European structural support, it may be sufficient for a relatively prosperous region to extend the frontier and incorporate a backward area so the average GDP/capita will go under the defined limits. The lack of a clear method to divide an area into regions, keeps this kind of *gerrymandering* possible. Until today, the European institutions did not propose criteria for defining the regions. The exact delineation of the regions can thus lead to controversies. This does not have to take place in a virulent atmosphere, but still some Eastern European regions will insist on their border and plead for more autonomy (Anderson 1996: 56-74; Brubaker 1996; Cuthbertson, Leibowitz

(eds.) 1993; Wilson 1994: 408-410). In that case the whole issue may end up on the European negotiation tables, where European decision makers will enter into a very complex debate with not only the national authorities but with the regional authorities as well. This debate will centre on the question of criteria to be used for the division of an area into regions.

Finally there is a third, more indirect, consequence of the enlargement for the regions. It needs no explaining — and the Agenda 2000 takes away any doubt — that intergovernmental decision making with 20 or more member states is unrealistic. The Commission is arguing for an extension of the qualified majority vote in the Council, which means that the member states' veto will be curtailed. This is another restriction of the power of the traditional states, while the powers of the regions remain as they are. The indirect effect is that there is a *relative* increase in importance for the regions as the weight of states decreases.

2.4 THE CALL FOR MORE DEMOCRACY

These days, there is a growing awareness that the democratic image of Europe has to be boosted. The European Parliament, a democratically elected institution, is gradually gaining authority, although several opinion polls still point out that there is a gap between the citizens and Europe. The regions want to play their part in reducing this gap. The Committee of the Regions refers quite often to article A of the Treaty which stipulates that “decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen.” This article is often combined with the principle of subsidiarity (mentioned in article B of the Treaty). However, there is no unambiguous interpretation of this principle. Whenever the subsidiarity principle appears in the Treaty, the regions are not mentioned. Article 3b EC just states that “in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Community shall take action, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the member states and can therefore, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved by the Community.” Moreover, subsidiarity as a primarily federal principle is not accepted by every signing party. On the contrary, a number of states (not just the United Kingdom!) interpret this principle as a consolidation of the traditional state level. The vague terminology made it possible indeed for the principle to obtain a prominent place in the Treaty, but it remains a principle without any substance. So far, regions did not succeed to gain a more prominent place in the European construction on account of this principle.

Besides this there is an even more fundamental problem: regions tend to interpret the widely accepted principle that decisions are to be taken as closely as possible to the citizen in a mere geographical way. The Committee of the Regions did not hesitate to conclude hastily that

“local and regional governments, by their closeness to the citizens, enhance the democratization process of Europe.” (Committee of the Regions 1996: 7)⁸. It should however be obvious that ‘closely to the citizen’ can not equal to an authority on every corner of the street. The organization of governance on a lower level (e.g. local councils and authorities) does *not* imply a smaller gap, a more substantial involvement of the citizens, more possibilities for real participation or a closer tie between the ruled and the ruler. Neither are forms of local government in any case more democratic than governance on a larger scale (nor, for the sake of the argument, less democratic). It should be reminded that richer regions justify regionalization with arguments of ‘democratization’ and ‘responsabilization’ while the reason for their actions actually is getting rid of the responsibilities they have for a weaker region.

Finally, for a refinement of my argument, two more points have to be made: the hesitation I have to accept a narrow geographical interpretation of ‘closely to the citizen’ does not necessarily mean that regionalization never offers opportunities for more democracy. It is conceivable that more participation in cultural or educational policy is possible if these are not centrally organized. It could be worth to quote Robert Dahl (1970: 101) here: “We need associations of different dimensions, for different puposes”.

The second point deals with the fact that the democracy argument is nowadays very popular for asking more power. It can be questioned as the regions real motives often are less noble, but nevertheless, the regions *use* the argument for claiming more competences. This can push the higher authorities towards more attention for the regions.

3 CONCLUSION

The situation at this point is as follows: regions want to have more of a say within the European construction and they are effectively gathering power. Taking all of the above into consideration, these conclusions can be made:

- [1] Regions are increasingly involved in the integration process and they are responsible for the implementation of European Union rules;
- [2] The common regional policy, aimed at reducing economical gaps between the regions, will continue to extend and will be thoroughly restructured. Regions are fully aware of the fact that their interests are at stake. They are following these restructuration talks very closely and they try to influence them formally and informally;

[3] The opportunities for cross-border cooperation are increasing. The establishment of a single currency will even more facilitate a more or less autonomous regional policy in these matters;

[4] The traditional states are losing power: due to the establishment of the euro and (indirectly) to the enlargement, competences will be transferred to Europe. Conversely there is no loss of power for the regions. On the contrary: regions are consolidating their competences within the member states or are even trying to extend them.

It is obvious to conclude that regions have become important partners in the European Union and that there is no opposite tendency. Accordingly, they will seek for more formal participation in the European decision making process. This situation leads to the idea in some minds of a *Europe of the regions*. Its exact meaning, however, remains often unclear and is rarely explicated. Nevertheless, it is often about the idea of a new political and administrative organization in which the regions will gradually replace the traditional states at the negotiation tables. Since the eighties, the notion has become a very popular theme in political speeches and in academic writings. However, this kind of Europe will not be realized immediately because practical and fundamental obstacles arise between today's reality and this picture of the future.

One obstacle is persistence on the use of the intergovernmental principle of decision making in a number of essential matters. When taking only practical reasons into consideration, it is obviously impossible to maintain this procedure with dozens of regions around the table. Too many veto rights would make the system impossible to work. A Europe of the regions would as a consequence imply an acceleration of the integration process as never before. With the coming enlargement the intergovernmental approach *is* already under pressure and in some matters this approach will have to be dropped. It is however very unlikely that a sudden turnover towards a truly federal system (a *conditio sine qua non* for an operational Europe of the regions) will occur.

Even other obstacles exist. The fact that the Committee of the Regions did not succeed in gaining more substantial powers at the Amsterdam Summit (16/17th of June, 1997) can be considered as an omen. With the European Parliament as an example, the Committee keeps on hoping to gradually gain more powers in order to become at last a real and powerful institution. But this Committee finds itself in an impasse: it is impossible to provide a more influential position to an arbitrarily composed body, in which it is highly unclear who is who (Vos 1997). The profound confusion about the question what constitutes a region is really problematic.

To begin with, Europe can be divided into regions in a lot of ways. The NUTS-classification, used by Eurostat (the Union's statistical office) and the Commission, is only one of the alternatives⁹. Moreover, the regions can never be considered as equal partners. Whatever criterium is used to mark out the regions, there will always be substantial variations in size of the population, scale, economical capacity, ... Theoretically, this should not be a problem (e.g. Luxemburg and Germany are, at least formally, partners with an equal status in the European Union), but there will nevertheless be very drastical differences between the regions in their competences, in their financial resources, in the ways in which they execute their powers, in the possibilities they have to enforce their laws, in their relationships with the central state, ... This problem of definition is also mentioned by Michael Newman: "Such differences between the size and power of regions do not constitute a serious problem for the EU in current circumstances. While the Committee of the Regions is purely advisory the arbitrary nature of its representation can be tolerated. Similarly, other governments can accept Belgian or German regional representatives in the Council of Ministers as long as these simply act as substitutes for ministers from central government. However, if the Committee of the Regions were to allocate resources, or if regional governments secured decision making powers within the EU that were *additional* to those exercised by central government, the definition of a region would become a very significant problem." (Newman 1997: 128-129; italics in orig.)

As long as it is not sufficiently clear which requirements and criteria have to be met by an area to be called a 'region', it remains extremely vague who is representing or committing whom in the Committee. These days, the Committee is an extraordinarily varied group of people with members (from the local as well as from the regional level) that are nominated by the member states: Belgium has delegated only regional representatives, Luxemburg has nominated merely local delegates, some states have sent mayors of their big cities (Copenhagen, Helsinki, Barcelona, ...), while France opted a.o. for those of small and medium sized cities¹⁰.

No matter which regional umbrella is established, it will always be composed very asymmetrically even if local representatives are excluded: what kind of delegation could be sent by Greece or the Netherlands to meet the strong German *Länder* or the Belgian delegation (with *regions* and so-called *communities*)? Providing such a diverse body with important competences will never be tolerated by those countries without any real regional structures.

Moreover, the reality is that the Union is still very tightly controlled and dominated by the traditional states. The more centralistically organized amongst them will only be willing to

grant the regions those powers which are necessary to guarantee the well-functioning of the Union, but nothing more. Regionalists should not have high expectations: the member states, such as France, the United Kingdom or even Germany will never accept the kind of regionalism where their fate is determined by Bretons, Catalans, Scots or Flemings. In a study about the Committee of the Regions, Christian Mestre (1997: 83; own translation) does not harbour any illusions. He finishes his article as follows: "A full recognition of the Committee of the Regions, is lifting the regions and the localities on the European scene. This situation is unthinkable to those states which are strongly controlling the Union so far."

In the discussion on the place of the regions in the European construction there will be the quite naive picture of a new political order based on a mythical Europe of the regions on the one hand, and a (meanwhile outdated) total negation of the regional fact on the other hand.

If ever the Europe of the regions becomes reality, it will be close to the definition of Andrew Heywood (1997: 98), course director for politics at Orpington College, "meaning that regional institutions and groups [are] increasingly [seeking] direct access to EU bodies, thereby bypassing national governments."

A major challenge for the next couple of years will be the search for an adequate institutional setting in which regions will have opportunities for participation and competences required for an efficient functioning of the Union. This challenge cannot be postponed indefinitely under the pretext of other developments that have to be faced first, as these challenges and other developments are interwoven, as pointed out above.

As they are responsible for the implementation of Union rules, regions must be given the opportunity to participate in the creation of (some aspects of) those rules. But so far, there are no appropriate structures for this. The power of the regions has increased drastically in the past decades, but the institutional settings did not follow: there was the establishment of a fuzzily composed Committee, but it received very limited and only consultative competences. In the Agenda 2000, the Commission argues that well before the year 2000 (before the first enlargement) institutional reforms have to be completed. Some knots have to be cut, such as the weighting of votes in the Council and the reduction in the number of members of the Commission. This may prove to be a good opportunity to give the regions an appropriate place in the European construction. In order to avoid parallel, complex and obscure politics, it is probably right to define their place, weight, influence and competences formally.

NOTES

¹ The establishment of this Fund did not arise from merely regional motives. It must be seen as an attempt (spurred on by the United Kingdom, the new member state) to bring about a rearrangement of the financial benefits. Since the United Kingdom would be an important netto-contributor, it insisted on some kind of refunding of the invested resources. It has been argued (not without reasons) that the establishment of the European Fund for Regional Development must not be seen as an attempt to diminish the regional economical and structural disparities, but as a project to refund the central governments of some member states. See a.o. Engel, Van Ginderachter 1993: 36.

² Typical examples are the *Council of Communes and Regions of Europe* (closely associated with the Council of Europe) and (since 1985) the *Council (later Assembly) of European Regions* (Keating 1995: 15; Greenwood 1997: 225).

³ E.g. the Alpine groups, some coastal regions, ...

⁴ A well known example are the so called *Four Motors*.

⁵ See a.o. Newman 1997; Négrier 1997. It has even been argued that decentralization is nothing but a defensive reflex of the central state to protect its most important prerogatives: difficult tasks have to be carried out by regional governments, whereby [1] the central state will not be questioned and [2] this central state can focus on what it considers its most fundamental tasks (fiscal policy, foreign policy, ...) (Keating 1995: 9-10; Castells 1997: 271-272).

⁶ See also: Berx 1995: 659.

⁷ Some regions do have the possibility to influence the European decision making in a formal but indirect way, by their official involvement (consultation procedures and structures) in the preparation of the position of their central state in the Council. See also Berx 1995: 663.

⁸ The Committee of the Regions (1996: 7-8) also states that “[i]ncreased decentralization of decisions to regional and local authorities will increase the democratization process and offer more influence to the individual citizen. [...] a decentralized system of government provides a better welfare for the citizens by ensuring the best possible adaptation to local wishes and needs.”

⁹ Moreover, in the Committee of the Regions, NUTS 2 regions are represented as well as regions from the NUTS 1 level.

¹⁰ See also Jones 1995: 295.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am greatly indebted to Jeroen Kleijisen, who provided useful research assistance.

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