

Nataša Drvenkar

J. J. Strossmayer University in Osijek
Faculty of Economics in Osijek, Croatia
E-mail: natasa.drvenkar@efos.hr

Ilija Cota

Vukovar-Srijem County Development Agency, Croatia
E-mail: icota@ra-vs.hr

Ivana Unukić

J. J. Strossmayer University in Osijek
Faculty of Economics in Osijek, Croatia
E-mail: ivana.unukic@efos.hr

TERRITORY, NETWORKING AND REGIONAL POLICIES: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES OF THE POST-TRANSITION EU MEMBER STATES

Review paper

UDK: 332.14(4-67 EU)

JEL classification: H70, O17, O18, R11, R58

DOI: 10.17818/DIEM/2024/1.12

Accepted for publishing: July 7, 2023

Abstract

RDAs - regional development agencies have a long development path in Europe since the early 1960s until today. RDAs are directed to the regions of the countries that implement it, but it also applies to the national level as well as to the level of the EU (which comes to the fore with the country's accession to full membership). In addition to the significant differences in the level of development of the regions of the EU Member States, there are also significant differences in the development of the regions of 11 post-transition EU Member States (Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Croatia). Because they all belonged to the former "socialist bloc of countries" and broke their state alliances with the former states in the early 1990s, as well as because they did not have the same historical circumstances or the same timing for joining the EU, all this had and still has an important role on the uneven development of their regions. But, RDAs do not play the same role and importance in all post-transition countries, which reflects the specificity of their regional development management systems and makes it necessary to examine the role and importance of RDAs' work. This paper will analyze: 1) the role and development of RDAs in post-transition EU member states, and 2) the institutional framework of RDAs with an attempt to find innovative transformations of the role of RDAs that respect the framework of EU regional policies.

Keywords: *institutional framework of regional policies and development, coordinators for the regional development, post-transition EU member states*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to imagine regional development of the EU member states without the role of all development actors, including regional development agencies (hereinafter: RDAs). The management of regional development is left to each EU Member State, which independently shapes

it according to its own specificities and needs. From the appearance of the first RDAs to the modern era, when the role of RDAs in regional development is quite well defined, there was a long path of development in the Republic of Croatia. This path is characterised by different legal forms (commercial companies and public institutions), the absence of a legal definition of roles and tasks, up to the legally defined legal form, the public institution, i.e. the regional coordinators.

At the same time, research shows that the role of RDAs in regional development in some of the 11 post-transition EU member states is extremely significant and determined by a law with a "bottom-up" approach, while some of them do not have RDAs at all, or if they do, they are almost insignificant. Now their role is taken over by government organizations or the relevant ministries, and it is a "top-down" approach. Thus, it is a centralized approach to regional development. The motivation for this work is reflected in the study of the role and importance of RDAs in eleven post-transition countries that are now full members of the European Union, in terms of their "communist past" and "post-communist present," the establishment of the first RDAs in these countries after the separation from the "post-communist" system, and the present role in these countries as free democratic states. Since there is no single system for managing regional development (it is left to each member state to establish and develop it according to its specifics) and all eleven post-transition countries "in the former "socio-political centralist system" followed a "bottom-up" approach and the RDAs represent and develop a "bottom-up" system, this paper examines which models of approach to regional development ("bottom-up" or "top-down") have been developed by the role and importance of RDAs in each member state. Based on the role and importance of RDAs at the regional level, the model of the approach to regional development of each member state can be identified. The eleven Central and Eastern European countries that are members of the EU (hereinafter referred to as CEEC) differ in terms of the size of their land area (from the smallest Slovenia to the largest Poland), the number of inhabitants (the smallest country is Estonia, the largest Poland), the date of EU accession, the administrative-territorial organization, the development of their regions, the role and importance of regional authorities in the regional development of the country and, consequently, the approach to the use of resources from EU funds. RDAs should move away from "writing "projects" for "anything and everything" and place their role and importance in regional development in their districts at a strategic level. However, the RDAs cannot be the only actor in regional development that is expected to produce results that can "boost" regional development. Rather, it should be a synergy of all development actors in the county (county, local self-government units, local development agencies, local action groups, county administrative departments, higher educational institutions, and others).

2. TERRITORY, REGIONAL POLICIES AND REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE EU CONTEXT

Regional development aspects are increasingly essential elements of overall national development (and industrial) policy (and strategy). Regional development policy should aim to overcome the existing market failure and guide the development (and financing) of some kind of budget, technology, innovation and human capital gaps. It should be a kind of bridge between national (supranational) and local development policies (Figure 1). According to Baletić (1999), the basic principles of the "bottom-up" approach to regional development are: 1) region is not only an economic concept, but also a socio-cultural and political one, 2) human resources are the fundamental factor for regional development, 3) decentralization is an essential condition for regional development, 4) the principle of subsidiarity should be applied to regions as well, 5) cooperation between the private and public sectors is essential, and 6) the state should apply non-selective measures of horizontal industrial policy. Indeed, the regional dimension of development (industrial) policy makes it possible to design incentive programs that favor regional locations with poor economic structure (predominantly agrarian structure), high unemployment, negative out-migration, and similar negative trends. In this way, the development of even the most

underdeveloped regions is made possible. The regional policy of the EU is based on such priorities (of course, while promoting "being better"). This results in different opportunities for personal and collective achievement, different levels of development, and very different patterns of quality of life. Territorial asymmetries therefore pose additional challenges, particularly in terms of economics, equity, environmental and social measures, and models of territorial governance, noted Chamusca, Marques, Moreno Pires & Teles (2022) but also Nilsen, Grillitsch, & Hauge (2023). So, constructing regional advantage is a well-known theoretical concept that has a great impact on regional policy in countries whose development is strongly influenced by the processes of the knowledge economy. Especially after 2004, the year of the enlargement of the European Union to 25-member states, the concept of economic and social cohesion, as well as the notion of regional competitiveness, has become a key factor.



Figure 1 Regional policy: an institutional perspective

Source: update of Halkier, 2006 in Halkier, 2012

Quite logically, therefore, regional development policy is reflected not only at the local and regional level, but also at the national level and with the expansion of regional economic integration, the EU on and at the EU level. The fundamental basis of economic existence and social belonging is the territory under the influence of some kind of government. The fact that it is not that simple is also explained by Pavić, who emphasizes that the development of the territory and the government are parallel and mutually dependent. An empty territory strives for power, and power increases territorialization (Pavić, 2001). Jewtuchowicz (2005 in Bogdanski, 2012) notes that post-World War II models of regional development assumed that large firms played a key role as a source of regional demand and innovation, while growing economies of scale enabled them to compete successfully in international markets. At the same time, it was assumed that a large network of regional suppliers would enable the achievement of convergence at the regional and international levels. As Benko (1993) notes, this policy was implemented through decisions at the central level, so that investors were "forced" to establish new businesses in less developed regions. Regarding contemporary trends in regional economics, it is important to point out that current research is largely based on the analysis of EU regional policy, the short- and long-term problems of EU regional policy and, of course, its financial framework (Bachtler, Mendez & Wislade, 2018), with less analysis of the link between institutional capacities and the system of management of regional policy funds (Casula, 2022; Boijmans, 2014; Farole, Rodriguez-Pose & Storper, 2011). Moulart & Sekia (2003) with their "territorial innovation model", Morgan (1997) and Rutten & Boekema (2007) with the "learning regions" and Braczyk, Cooke & Heidenreich (2004) emphasize the importance of the regional level for practical policy making, but also with the foundations of "regional innovation systems", which provide academic support for the proactivity of regions in developing their specific knowledge. The implementation of EU regional policy operational programs, as noted Casula (2020), requires constant interaction between the EU, national and regional (local) actors at all stages of program preparation, funding, management, monitoring and evaluation. Although one could assume that the formal area of EU regional policy is fully harmonized (especially in terms of strategic approach, multi-annual financial planning, instruments, implementation and evaluation), as Savić, Drvenkar & Drezgić (2023) note, there is no legal basis obliging member states to harmonize their regional policies. The EU regional policy is there to complement and support the regional policy of individual member states. The way the policy is designed may be different in each Member State and its regions, depending on the choice of national policy. This led to different implementation dynamics with different multi-level and multi-stakeholder arrangements.

3. THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF REGIONAL POLICIES IN THE EU MEMBER STATES AFTER TRANSITION: WHY RDAs MATTER?

RDAs play a key role in the democratic process because they involve people in decision making. Regional development is undoubtedly the path to national growth, and regional organizations usually deal with local issues. In order to achieve national development, regional development must be built, and regional development agencies are the new actors that are crucial to the foundations of regional development (Koçak, 2010; Eroglu et al, 2014). There is no accepted single definition of RDA in the scholarly literature (Mawson, 1998). For example, Halkier & Danson (1997) introduced the term "RDAs model," and Halkier (2011) defines RDAs as organizations of a regional nature that are publicly funded and consider the so-called soft law instruments to promote and improve regional development goals (Akšamović & Mlinarević, 2012). In contrast to the practice of other countries, where regional policy and the institutional structure built for regional policy served as a support for the implementation of the concept of development "from below", the application of participatory mechanisms and relatively new instruments of the "newer approach" to regional development, within which regional and local agencies are a common instrument in Croatia, as Maleković (Maleković, 2002) noted, was literally backward. In the conditions of lack of the mentioned and insufficiently developed awareness of the importance and role of regional development and policies and their mechanisms, lack of necessary knowledge for the implementation of regional development programs, undeveloped public-private partnership, undeveloped awareness of the interdisciplinarity of the development process, etc., opportunities have arisen for the first local economic development agencies, which were established with foreign technical support. RDAs, which are independent of the central government, work to stimulate the region's main development dynamics to promote regional development and ensure cooperation between all private and public companies, local governments, and nongovernmental organizations (Kocberber, 2006, in Eroglu et al., 2014). Harrison (2021) argues in his paper that the state-and the analysis of the state-obscures important issues related to the broader political-economic level, planning, and governance of cities and regions. In order to identify regional sectoral and general development problems and make plans to solve them, RDAs were established in the 1950s in most Western countries (Koçak, 2010) after World War II (Savaş-Yavuzçehre, 2016). They coordinate short-term development activities that also finance local investors. They also serve as key entities for formulating development strategies and help prepare annual development plans, while they are responsible for distributing local funds in the medium term (Eroglu et al., 2014). The aforementioned RDAs promote business zones or attract local and/or foreign investors, help start businesses, advise businesses and train their managers, support technology transfer and partnerships between businesses, create and manage business incubators, provide venture capital, conduct studies and spatial planning initiatives, and rehabilitate areas destroyed by industrial desertification. The preparation of a regional development strategy for their region is their most important task (Çuhadar, 2009).

As Willi, Pütz & Jongerden (2023) noted, although the numerous advantages of RDAs are highlighted in terms of their importance for the coordination of (regional) development policies and their impact on the economy, there is still too little knowledge about their (real) problems (legal and formal requirements, funding, powers) and so one. Until the appearance of the first Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Croatia in 2009 (Official Gazette 153/2009), one cannot speak of a more serious approach to regional development of the Republic of Croatia and the role and importance of development actors, i.e. RDAs involved in regional development. Besides the major war suffering, the occupation of the territory, the Republic of Croatia did not have the opportunity to establish effective regional development in a functioning environment for many years and had a longer way to full EU membership compared to other countries that peacefully separated from the former "socialist state entities". As Pickles (2008 but also Savić, Drvenkar & Drezgić, 2023) notes, the transition processes had a significant impact on social and economic development, as did the specifics of conversion and privatization carried out during (and after) the aggression against the Republic of Croatia. Vranjican (2005) emphasizes that from a developmental perspective, the

economy of the Republic of Croatia was in decline for several decades, making this literally the "tragic record" of Croatian independence. At the same time, Đulabić (2010) & Burić Pejčinović (2010) point out that the establishment of the regional development management model lasted practically until the peaceful reintegration of the occupied territories, but the establishment of a functioning regional development management model is not yet a completed process. The inclusion of the following factors, such as 1) territorial (administrative-administrative) division of the country, 2) legal framework, 3) institutional framework, 4) absorptive capacity, and 5) quality of government and public administration, would constitute parts of the "ideal model" for regional development management, which is often unattainable given the Croatian experience, given the time, place, and actors of regional development. The perspectives and levels of regional policy, i.e., RDA within regional policy, can be seen in the following Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of the main characteristics of regional policy at the national and RDA levels

| Features | National level policy | RDA |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Organization | national state; ministry | regional semi-autonomous body |
| Economic goals | interregional equality national growth; redistributed growth | regional competitiveness; regional growth domestic/ import growth |
| Political instruments | bureaucratic regulation; international promotion; support/ subsidies; advanced production | venture capital; advisory services technical infrastructure; training/ education; |
| Operation | Separate; indiscriminate automatic/discretionary; reactive | Integrated; selective; discretionary proactive |

Source: Halkier i Danson, 1997.

It can be concluded that in promoting regional development and implementing their policies with limited resources, regional authorities decide independently on objectives and methods, act in three analytical contexts: economic, administrative and political. But, as Harrison (2021) warns, an unintended consequence of efforts to bring back the state is that we fall into a state-territorial trap.

3.1. The Architectures' of Regional Economic Institutions in the EU Member States after transition

RDAs can be categorized in different ways depending on their goals and objectives. RDAs were established in many Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) during the process of candidacy for EU membership. The EU emphasizes that candidate countries should align their local and regional governance structures by creating regional organizations with decentralized power in order to strengthen regional capacities (Drvenkar, Marošević, & Unukić, 2023; Blažek, & Kveton, 2022; Casula, 2020; Koçak, 2010; Sobaci, 2009). In order to justify the creation and existence of RDAs, the main components of the profile of the "RDAs model" are summarized in Table 1 and reflect the different schools of thought that have gathered around the concept of RDAs. They emphasize: the need for a regionally focused organization that can address specific problems, the greater emphasis on local growth and competitiveness as indicators of success, and the diminishing importance of policy instruments associated with central government (Halkier & Danson, 1997).

The eleven post-transition EU member states had different timing and conditions for detachment from the socialist state entities to which they belonged, as well as different timing and conditions for entry into full EU membership (Table 2). The process of detachment from the socialist state entities to which they belonged began in the 1990s and ended with their independence as independent and sovereign states. Their intention was to join the EU and "catch up" with the developed EU member states. The establishment of market-oriented economies in the early 1990s and the institutional, economic, and social linkages of these countries to the developed EU members were almost most important for their economic growth and development (Savić, Drvenkar & Drezgić,

2023; Drvenkar, Marošević & Unukić, 2023; Chamusca, Marques, Moreno Pires & Teles, 2022; Blažek, & Kveton, 2022; Casula, 2020; Stough, 2019; Lakshmann & Button, 2009 in: Capello & Nijkamp, 2019; Voigt, 2019; Constantin, Goschin & Dragan, 2011; Berend, 2011). Also, geographical location of underdeveloped regions should not be ignored (Rodríguez-Pose & Wilkie 2019), because often underdeveloped regions are located far from developed regions, i.e., on the periphery of the home country (Nilsen, Grillitsch & Hauge (2023).

Table 2 Main RDA features of the post-transition EU member states

| | Detachment from socialist construction | EU accession | Population | km ² | Regional government | RDAs legally | RDAs optional |
|----------------|--|--------------|------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Croatia | 1991 (1995-1998) | 2013 | 3.879.074 | 56.594 | yes | 21 | / |
| Romania | 1990 | 2007 | 19.038.098 | 238.390 | yes | 8 | / |
| Bulgaria | 1990 | 2007 | 6.838.937 | 110.370 | no | / | 5 |
| Slovenia | 1991 | 2004 | 2.107.180 | 20.273 | no | 12 | / |
| Hungary | 1990 | 2004 | 9.689.010 | 93.011 | yes | / | 20 |
| Slovakia | 1993 | 2004 | 5.434.712 | 49.035 | yes | 34 | 61 |
| Czech Republic | 1993 | 2004 | 10.516.707 | 78.868 | yes | 8 | 16 |
| Estonia | 1991 | 2004 | 1.331.796 | 45.227 | no | 15 | / |
| Lithuania | 1990 | 2004 | 2.805.998 | 65.286 | yes | / | / |
| Latvia | 1991 | 2004 | 1.875.757 | 64.573 | yes | / | / |
| Poland | 1989 | 2004 | 37.654.247 | 312.679 | yes | / | 60 |

Source: authors

There are two approaches to the distribution of activities in regional development, the so-called top-down and bottom-up approaches, i.e., the first "top-down" approach, which refers to decision-making at higher levels of government, i.e., a tendency toward centralism that often ignores actors at lower levels of decision-making, and the second "bottom-up" approach, which refers to proposals and activities and decision-making at the lowest levels of government (Thierstein & Walser, 1999; Pissourios, 2014). Halkier (2001) states that the first period of the creation of RDA in Europe was from the 1960s to the 1980s, when the creation of regional policy was "top down", which was the centralized management of regional development policy, and that the second period, "top down", which began in the 1980s and continues (Toktas, et al., 2013). Since the 1980s, the inadequacies of the centralized approach to regional development have been slowly recognized and the introduction of the "bottom up" system, i.e., the decentralized approach to regional development, has begun. This gives local and regional authorities a stronger role in shaping and implementing regional development policy. Akšamović & Mlinarević (2012) discuss the previous periods, in particular four periods (1962-1972, 1972-1978, 1978-1992, and from 1992). As Danson & Lloyd (2012) point out, RDAs were created at precisely a time when development was becoming increasingly uneven.

From a policy-making perspective, whether as a concept or as an individual (asymmetric) establishment of RDAs, according to Willi, Pütz & Jongerden (2023), it is warranted to question the formal status, functioning, and decision-making of RDAs, as well as the challenges that may arise when RDAs involve regional (local) governments and nongovernmental institutions with the goal of ensuring legitimate processes. The eleven post-transition European Union member states each have their own arrangements (or none) for regional development agencies (Table 3), but the EU requirements for adopting the administrative policy acquis and its proper implementation have institutional implications for local development and governance, and therefore it is important to examine the RDA status of each of these eleven countries, which follow different institutional forms (Koçak, 2010).

Table 3 RDAs legal characteristics of the post-transition EU member states

| | Features of the RDAs financing | Legal form of the RDAs | Founders and owners of RDAs |
|----------------|---|---|--|
| Croatia | Projects/founders | Public institutions | County, City of Zagreb ¹ |
| Romania | State budget/Regional Development Fund; | Non- state, non-profit, public-municipal organizations | Public institutions of the regions |
| Bulgaria | Projects/founders | Associations/Cooperative subjects | Public institutions of the regions/ Private individuals/Universities |
| Slovenia | Projects/founders | Public institutions/ LTD | Public institutions of the regions/ Private individuals/Other legal entities |
| Hungary | Projects/founders | Public institutions/ LTD/ Associations/Cooperative subjects | Public institutions of the regions/ Other legal entities |
| Slovakia | Public budget/ Projects/founders | Non-state, non-profit, public-municipal organizations/ Associations/Cooperative subjects | Public institutions of the regions/ Private individuals/ Other legal entities |
| Czech Republic | Public budget/ Projects | Public institutions/ LTD/ Associations/Cooperative subjects | Ministry/Public institutions/ combined state & non-state subjects |
| Estonia | Public budget/ Projects/founders | Associations | Alliance (unions) of the regions |
| Lithuania | - | - | - |
| Latvia | - | - | - |
| Poland | Projects/founders | Public institutions of the regions/Voivodeship Private individuals/ Other legal entities | Legal (mostly private) entities |

Source: author

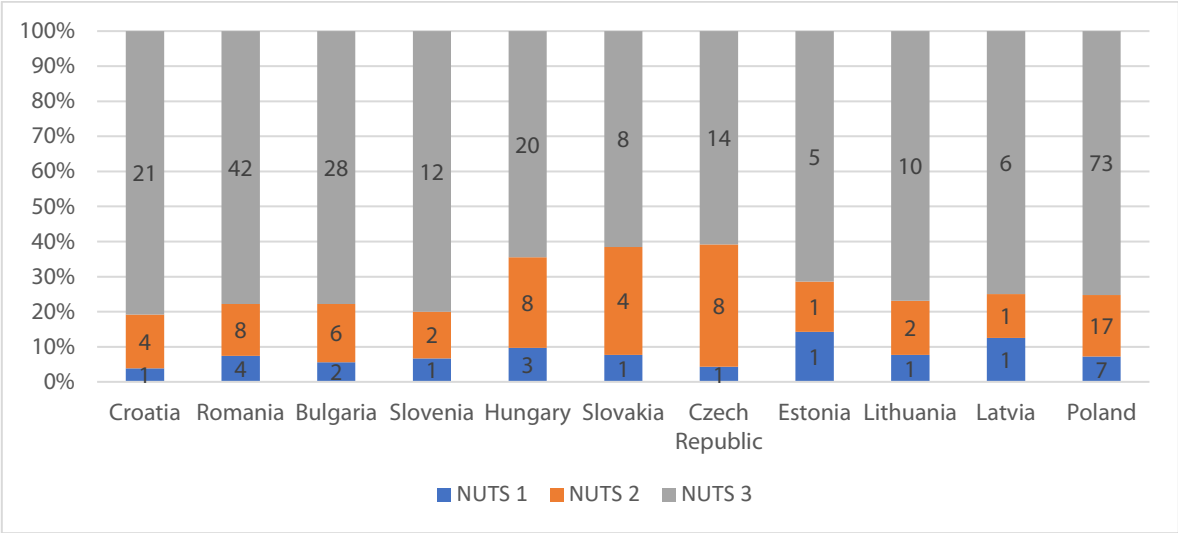
Hooghe (1996), Bachtler (1997), and Halkier (2007) write about the emergence of new governance patterns at multiple levels, both "from above" through the increased involvement of EU structural funds across Europe and "from below" through the increased involvement of cities and local authorities in economic development issues (Figure 2).

These patterns of multilevel management through the role and importance of RDAs in each of the eleven post-transition EU member states within their planning and statistics departments clearly represent the model of regional development management. This indicates whether it is a "top-down" approach or a "bottom-up" approach. In Croatia, for example, there are 21 RDAs, as many as NUTS3 units (150,000-800,000 inhabitants). In Zagreb, the RDAs operate at the county and city levels, and it is evident that this is a decentralized regional development management system, i.e., a "bottom-up" approach. In Romania, the RDAs also operate on a statutory basis, but unlike Croatia, they operate at the NUTS2 level, i.e. there are 8 of them. over" by the RDAs, but the RDAs in Romania have a much greater importance and role if considered only from the point of view of territorial jurisdiction, i.e. the number of inhabitants they provide services to (NUTS3 (800,000-3,000,000 inhabitants). In Slovenia, there is no regional division of administration, but there are 12 RDAs operating at the NUTS3 level. Thus, it is clear that this is a "top-down" approach, but one in which RDAs play an important role. In Hungary, although there is a regional division of responsibilities, there are no legally established RDAs (optionally they can be established in different legal forms, there are over 20), which used to play an extremely important role in regional development, but lost it in 2014. In Slovakia, there is a regional division of tasks and a law requiring the establishment of

¹ The City of Zagreb is not mentioned to highlight the City of Zagreb as a city, but in the context of a legal obligation, because the "Law on Regional Development of the Republic of Croatia" (NN 147/14, 123/17, 118/18) states in Article 24, paragraph 2: "For the purpose of effective coordination and promotion of regional development, regional (regional) self-government units shall establish a regional development agency as a public body (hereinafter: regional coordinator)". Since the paper describes only regional development agencies (RDAs) in eleven post-transition countries (not local development agencies (LDAs), whose founders are local self-government units - municipalities and cities), and the City of Zagreb has the status of a county, it was placed in this context (as the founder and owner of the Regional Development Agency of the City of Zagreb - Public Institution "Zagreb Development Agency for Coordination and Promotion of Regional Development" (Razvojna agencija Zagreb, 2023). In the Republic of Croatia there are 21 regional development agencies with the status of regional coordinator (20 counties and 1 City of Zagreb). The City of Dubrovnik does not have a Regional Development Agency (RDA), but a Local Development Agency (LDA) - Dubrovnik Development Agency (DURA, 2023), which is a commercial entity in its legal form, while according to the above-mentioned law, the regional development agencies must be exclusively public entities in their legal form.

RDA, but they do not play as important a role in regional development as RDAs in Croatia and Romania. As a rule, they operate at NUTS3 (over 60 RDAs). In the Czech Republic, there are no statutory RDAs, but there is a state center for regional development with eight branches at the NUTS2 level, with optional RDAs (there are 16 of them). A centralized approach to regional development is evident here. In Estonia, there is no regional division of responsibilities or RDAs, but 15 county development centers connected to the MAK network, which is managed by the state MAK network foundation. There are also no optional RDAs. In Lithuania, Latvia and Poland there is a regional division of responsibilities, but in Lithuania and Latvia there are no statutory RDAs (not even optional), while in Poland the establishment of RDAs is required by law (there are more than 60 of them). In Poland they played an important role until 1999, when they lost their importance for regional development. As you can see from the above, there is neither a single model for regional development nor a model for the establishment and role of RDAs in the 11 post-transition countries of the current EU members. What they have in common, where they exist and where their establishment and importance for regional development is prescribed by law, is that they are an irreplaceable actor in regional development and that they promote and develop the system of regional development "from the bottom up".

Figure 2 Number of NUTS1, NUTS2 and NUTS3 regions in post-transition EU member states



Source: authors

However, as Deas and Ward (2000) or Healy (2009) point out, these approaches are complex and complicate the role and importance of the RDA as the only "responsible" actor that can withstand the challenges of regional development. Indeed, political influences significantly complicate the coordination of development from the national to the regional level, leading to the question of responsibility for regional economic growth. In particular, Hooghe (1996), Bachtler (1997), and Halkier (2007) emphasize the need for greater autonomy at work (compared to the founder) and the introduction of new management models at multiple levels. Also, RDAs have common governance characteristics: they consist of and dependent on state and non-state actors, they are weakly institutionalized, but what is particularly interesting, they have no legislative power (Willi, Pütz & Jongerden, 2023). It is interesting to note that despite its importance in European politics and spatial planning, the concept of territorial cohesion is still contested, encountering ambiguous, contextual and difficult to define facts, thus affirming cohesion as a process rather than a goal in itself. Chamusca, Marques, Moreno Pires & Teles (2022) point out that there are still problems with theoretical and methodological coherence in operationalizing the concept, especially at the intraregional level.

4. INSTEAD CONCLUSION

In order to discuss successful regional development, certain conditions must be created: 1) territorial division (Grčić, 2007: 37), 2) the existence of a legal framework as a legal basis for regional development (Savić, 2020; 2021; Puljiz, 2009), 3) the existence of an institutional framework from which it is evident whether regional development is approached "from the bottom up" (Bellini, Danson & Halkier, 2012; Bogdanski, 2012; Halikier, 2011; Heller & Bogdanski, 2005), i. e.h. from the local and regional level to the central level, or the same "top-down" approach, i.e. from the central level of government to the local and regional level (Moulaert & Sekia, 2003; Morgan, 1997), 4) absorptive capacity at all levels and especially at the local and regional level, 5) the quality of government and public administration (Đulabić, 2015: 141), but also 6) the reach of regional institutions that are "learning regions" (Rutten & Boekema, 2007) and/or regional innovation systems (Braczyk, Cooke & Heidenreich, 2004). The combination of all factors such as: territorial (administrative-administrative) division of the country, legal framework, institutional framework, absorptive capacity and the quality of government and public administration represents an "ideal model" for regional development management, which is often unattainable. As Harrison (2021) shows that the purity of "business-oriented regionalism," which makes it intellectually and conceptually easy to distinguish from state-organized regionalism, is in practice a much more complex spatial phenomenon that can only be understood as a form of tactical regionalism. The intellectual challenge, then, is not what and where these spaces emerge, but questions of agency (who the actors are), process (how they mobilize), and interest (why they engage).

Lack of strategic vision (but also lack of knowledge) at the regional level, "copying the experience of others", focus "only on EU projects", predominance of short-term interests over long-term ones, lack of strategic management, mistrust and tendency to hypocritical criticism, albeit a tendency to "non-cooperation", are just some of the obstacles that determine regional development, but also affect the adequacy of RDAs themselves. The research confirms that most of the post-transition EU member states have adopted a similar formal framework on which RDAs are based, but the role of RDAs themselves is very different. It is important to understand how RDAs are (and can be) regional development coordinators, identifying regional development challenges "on the ground," developing strategic approaches to management and multidisciplinary collaboration, and being an excellent support institution for regional (local) governments. They should be viewed as actors that unite government and private interests and bring their interests to bear on overarching, long-term sustainable regional development. Although often understood as "just one in a series" of institutions, they are neither "ends in themselves" nor (just) a tool or instrument. Their actions can actually have a multiplier effect on the regional economy. Since Casula's 2020 study covers Italy and Spain, it would certainly be a challenge to analyze the role of four different factors: 1) the degree of decentralization in policy administration, 2) the role of regional policy factors, 3) organizational and implementation policies at the regional (as well as national) level, and 4) the degree and nature of stakeholder participation-their influence on the effectiveness of decentralized regional development policy administration.

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