

THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN REGIONS IN THE AREA OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN ROMANIA, POLAND AND BULGARIA

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Abstract: *At European level, regions represent a key political entity in order to pursue European policy objectives, especially those related to Cohesion Policy. However the structure, roles and performances of such entities remain diffuse and different in the European space. This study analyze the role of the regions in the area of Sustainable Development, as, this is the main paradigm for development in EU. The study is structured in two main parts. In the first one, from a theoretical perspective, we inquire if regions with their characteristics and dimensions represent a proper actor by which sustainable development can be implemented. The second part shifts the focus on empirical evidence to figure out what roles are attributed to regions by some Eastern European States, based on the analysis of the National Strategies for Sustainable Development of Romania, Poland and Bulgaria. The results of the comparative analysis show that regions are called to play different roles and are given different importance in these states according to the administrative-territorial division, experience, historical and cultural factors. But also the theoretical analysis suggests that for the aims and dimensions of Sustainable Development, regions may represent an important and effective actor. The implications of these findings provide an argument in favor of regionalization and institutional strengthening of the regions, and also provide Poland as a possible model for Romania and other Eastern European Countries whose basic goal is achievement of sustainable development.*

Keywords: regions; sustainable development; actors; National Strategy for Sustainable Development; Eastern European space

Introduction

There is a well-known fact that economic development in European Union (EU) puts a great emphasis on a regional approach. From this perspective, regions have become a key entity for European policies, their status as political actors being recognized with the establishment of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) in 1994 (Mathias, 2004, p. 1). For example, the Cohesion Policy, a

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major EU policy in terms of budgetary money spent on it, has the main beneficiaries the EU regions. Also the promotion of the concept of a "Europe of the Regions" by the European Commission, stands as evidence for this significant focus (Counsell and Haughton, 2004, p. 5).

If the notion of "Regional Development" gives us a clear insight concerning the recipients of development policy in EU, when we inquire how European Union intends to do this, in which manner and from which theoretical perspective, the answer seems to be also clear – in a sustainable development paradigm. Both these approaches define significantly the EU conception about economic development and they are crucial for studying and understanding the dynamics of development in Europe.

In this context, the main problem that this paper addresses is the intersection and interaction between these two perspectives on development issues, considered in EU. More specifically, we are interested to investigate the role of the regions in the area of sustainable development (SD), with a particular emphasis on the Eastern European space.

This problem primarily emerged after noticing that the theory of sustainable development, despite the universal permeability of the term in various fields and at all institutional levels, is still confronted with recognition issues, and theorization efforts (Jabareen, 2008), (Koroneos and Rokos, 2012). The complexity of the concept, integrating three different dimensions – economic, social and ecological, seems to be responsible for this difficulty (Bolis, Morioka and Sznelwar, 2014). Accordingly, the ways of actions, the actors involved and their roles and responsibilities have been diversified and changed. Starting with these observations, we wonder what can be the role of the regions in the area of sustainable development since the EU gives such a great attention to them.

Our work will focus further to answer a few questions related to the issue investigated:

1. Where can be placed and how important is the role of the regions in a sustainable development paradigm from a theoretical perspective?
2. The primarily European focus on regions has a correlative in the Eastern European countries, meaning that these countries recognize the importance of regional level of governance?
3. National states from Eastern Europe rely on regional level and regional actors in order to achieve sustainable development?

Before going further into analysis, we feel the need to make some remarks about the two most important notions that we are considering here – regions and sustainable development. That's because both concepts have been accused of ambiguity and are susceptible for different interpretations (Connelly, 2007), (Ambroziak, 2014, p. 22), but also because these clarifications are useful for our purposes.

Starting with the first one, the word "regions" can have a wide range of meanings and definitions according to the level of government considered and the specific functions or the area it covers (Ambroziak, 2014, 22), (Keating, 1998, p. 8). From a vertical perspective, regions can refer to a global dimension or a



supranational one (Miric, 2009, p. 16), here of course we are interested in sub-state regions and not geopolitical entities. But also at this sub-state level, regions can be interpreted as economic regions, historical or ethnic regions, administrative or political regions, etc. according to their function (Mathias, 2004, p. 14).

The concept of sustainable development was also subjected to many criticisms over time, being considered vaguely formulated (Gibson, 1991), oxymoronic in construction (Redclift, 2005), susceptible to manipulation (Jickling, 1992), even reaching the point where it was declared at his end (Vinuales, 2013). But it seems that these obstacles do not necessarily mean the weakening of the concept, but rather its reinforcement by fostering the dialogue which gives rise to more vigorous contributions from the other side (Drexhage and Murphy 2010).

Beyond these challenges, we will consider both concepts from an EU dimension, in accordance with our goals. Therefore, the term of regions is referring to the NUTS 2 level of the common classification of the territorial unit for statistic¹, adding that we will use the notion in general terms, so it can include regional bodies, authorities, and regional level of governance. Sustainable development includes a vision where economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection are strongly correlated and go hand in hand, as described in various EU documents².

In what follows the paper is structured in three main parts, beyond introduction and conclusions. The next section presents the materials and methods considered in the paper. The second section represents a theoretical approach which investigates the role of the regions in the sustainable development paradigm. In section three we shift the focus toward empirical evidence in order to see what role play the European regions from Eastern European states in achieving sustainable development.

1. Materials and methods

Given the nature and the goals of this paper, we will consider in this work predominantly qualitative research methods. For the first part, the analysis of scientific literature combined with conceptual analysis will help us understand the relationship between regions and sustainable development from a theoretical perspective.

The second part, as the title suggests, will attempt a comparative analysis between three European states, regarding their focus on regions when it comes to the pursuit of sustainable development. As data analysis technique considered here, we will use the document analysis, mentioning that our documents are represented by National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSSD) of each of the countries

¹ NUTS – Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics (fr. Nomenclature des Unites Territoriales Statistiques – NUTS) is a common classification of territorial unit for statistic at European Level. Level NUTS 2 corresponds to regional level.

² The current EU Sustainable development Strategy (2006): European Council DOC 10917/06, or 2009 Review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy COM (2009) 400, share this vision.

covered. Also, in this part, a table for synthesizing and interpreting data will be constructed and used as an instrument.

The focus on the Eastern European space and the choice of Romania, Poland and Bulgaria to be taken into consideration in our analysis is related to certain common features that these states presents, regarding their economic development and history³, but also the choice depends on the author's research interests.

In what concerns the use of NSDS as a tool for investigating the role of the regions, we have considered that the national governments have still the main responsibility in achieving the sustainable development (Ruotsalainen, 2006, 17). And starting from the responsibilities that central government assigns to various actors in a national strategic document, we can have a good representation of the roles of regions. Even if analyzes using the NSDS are complicated by the fact that there is a great variation between them among the individual states (Gjoksi, Sedlacko and Berger, 2010), (Meadowcroft, 2007), there are several works considering this method in the comparative literature, among which we can mention the recent contributions of Bass and Dalal-Clayton (2012), Gjoksi, Sedlacko and Berger (2010), Steurer and Hametner (2013), Casado-Asensio and Steurer (2014), etc.

2. Theoretical background – regions and sustainable development

In the introduction of the paper we made a few remarks about the notion of sustainable development and the sense of the term that we are considering. This tridimensional meaning, that implies the economic, social and environmental dimensions, is widely accepted and used in the scientific literature. In what concerns the participation and responsibility for this type of development, it was argued that this is a process where all societal actors should participate, given its implications (Pohoata, 2003, p. 29), (Vonkeman, 2013, p. 48). As well in the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, documents that lay the foundation for sustainable development, is highlighted the wide participation of stakeholders in development process as being a key principle for SD (Cherp *et al.*, 2004). But where regions fit in this multitude of actors and what importance it should be given to such level of governance?! Relying on contributions of different authors who were concerned about this topic, we will argue that the regions and regional level are important for sustainable development from at least three perspectives.

First of all, the very nature of SD issues, have their origin and finality at local and regional level. The quality of human life can be a concern and an idea of global resonance, but it can be addressed only at lower levels based on subsidiarity principle and close to the public (Ruotsalainen, 2006). Also, the problem of "unsustainability" generated by the conflict between economic growth and environment, most often has global implications but the origins are local, regional,

³ We refer to the fact that most regions of these countries have a GDP per capita below 75% of the EU27 average, and historically they have experienced the socialist regimes until the 1989-1990.



hence the solutions for these problems should be identified at the regional level (Vonkeman, 2013, p. 33).

Second, we agreed that sustainable development it's everyone's responsibility and this implies a process where various societal actors interact and participate – NGOs, companies, public bodies, mass media, etc. Or a process of networking and governance of such nature can be effectively organized and coordinated only at regional and local levels, preferably with institutional support and assistance from higher levels (Vonkeman, 2013, p. 48). Asking if the local level it's not capable alone for this task, we say that regions represent a place for coordination, conciliation and aggregation of various local conflicting interests and needs. Or as Borzel (2003) puts it: “subnational entities, such as regions, provinces, autonomous communities, and *Lander*, hold important resources that are necessary to develop and implement sustainable development. It is not only their capacity to make and impose collectively binding decisions. Regional governments play a crucial role as interface coordinators or arenas for policy coordination among local actors with the necessary resources to make regional policies work” (Borzel, 2003, 20).

Finally the sustainability in the SD paradigm, not only refers to the ecological dimension of the concept meaning just to pursue economic growth without damaging the environment. Rather, the concept refers as well to a social sustainability and economic durability, which are achieved and enhanced by processes such as social reproduction and economic agglomerations (Krueger and Savage, 2007), processes closely related to the regional level.

All these considerations represent arguments that place regions in the hearth of sustainable development, being an important and effective actor for coordinating various local interests horizontally and vertically between local institutions and the central government.

3. The role of the regions in three National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS)

The NSDS represent strategic documents of the national states that provide the framework for pursuing and implementing the principles of sustainable development within their borders. The idea was launched in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Earth Summit) and reinforced in 2002 at the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, urging states to elaborate and start implement the NSDS (Cherp, George & Kirkpatrick, 2004). By the end of '90s, many countries started to prepare these strategies, European Union launching herself in 2001 a sustainable development strategy that was revised in 2006. Member States were also asked to finalize their NSDS by 2007 based on the renewed EU SDS strategy (Gjoksi *et al.*, 2010). Regarding the actors involved and the role of the regions, the EU SDS strategy mentions in the section “Communication, mobilizing actors and multiplying success” that: “With regard to the important role of local and regional levels in delivering sustainable development and building up social capital, it is the overall aim to build sustainable

communities in urban and rural areas where citizens live and work and jointly create a high quality of life” (Review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, 10917/06). In contrast with this, in an analysis of NSDS of national states, Meadowcroft (2007) noted some areas which required attention in NSDS considered, one of them being “co-ordination with sub-national government” with a particular importance: “broad regions which cover an area large enough to permit integrated economic and environmental planning, allow synergies and trade-offs to be explored, and yet remain more homogeneous (with a tighter sense of identity, closer links to local political processes) than large national states.” (Meadowcroft, 2007). However, most European countries have started to revise their NSDS between 2006 and 2008.

Further we will proceed with the analysis of the NSDS of Romania, Poland and Bulgaria starting with some clarifications about each country and strategy considered.

a) Romania

Romania is structured in eight NUTS 2 regions that are not territorial administrative unites, but are represented by two institutions – Regional Development Council (RDC) and Regional Development Agencies (RDA). But these two bodies that are coordinating the regional level, have a fuzzy and questionable status and are dominated by local political influences. (Dobre, 2010).

Romania has a NSDS since 1999, the current strategy being approved in 2008 after a reviewing process to ensure the convergence of the strategy with the EU SDS objectives.

b) Poland

Unlike Romania, the NUTS 2 regions of Poland correspond to the territorial administrative division of country's voivodships. Since 1996 in Poland emerged an extensive network of 66 local and regional development agencies, indicating an active approach of local and regional actors (Brusis, 1999). In 1999 was set up the current administrative division which is based on three levels of subdivision, at the regional level the territory being divided in 16 voivodships. Poland is considered to be a major beneficiary of the European Cohesion Policy that can represent a “laboratory” for evaluation of interventions of regional development (Bienias and Gapski, 2014).

Poland adopted a NSDS in 2000 and like many other countries decided in 2007 that this strategy was outdated. In 2007 and 2008 efforts have been made to create a legislative and institutional framework in accordance with the EU SDS. The result was materialized in two strategies for development (mid-term 2020 and long term 2030), and nine integrated strategies, each of these coherent with the EU SDS. Even if these documents does not explicitly identify themselves as sustainable development strategies, the sustainable development approach constitutes their basis, Poland being from this perspective one of the few countries who managed to put the NSDS at the core of their national policy planning (Gjoksi, Sedlacko and Berger, 2010). For these reasons we will consider the National



Development Strategy 2020 as the primary document for our analysis, in the absence of a current expressly NSDS.

c) **Bulgaria**

Similar to the case of Romania, Bulgaria had to create six statistical planning regions for the NUTS 2 level, merging several provinces not necessarily linked historically or administratively. At the regional level there are constituted Councils of Regional Development, whose members are representatives of the ministries, national agencies, provinces and municipalities.

Bulgaria is one of the few countries where the process of developing and implementing a NSDS was delayed for a long period of time despite the European requests in this regard. Even now, Bulgaria is missing an approved integrated NSDS, but it has developed a draft for NSDS and a project for National Strategy for Environment (2008-2018), both available only in Bulgarian language. We will consider in our analysis the draft of the National Sustainable Development Strategy developed in 2007.

The data of our analysis were structured and included in a table illustrated below, which will facilitate the interpretation of the results.

Table 1. Issues regarding the role of the regions in NSDS of three countries

Country	Romania	Poland	Bulgaria
1. It's Regional development important according to the strategy?	<p>YES</p> <p>The National Objective Horizon 2013 is: "To support sustainable and territorially balanced economic and social development of the Romanian regions according to their specific needs and resources by concentrating on urban poles for growth; improving infrastructure and business environment so as to make Romanian regions, especially those lagging behind, more attractive places to live, visit, invest in and work." P.108 Point IV.3 – of the strategy is dedicated entirely to the regional development specifying: "Viewed from the angle of sustainable development principles and objectives, regional trends are of crucial importance. In Romania's specific circumstances this importance is even higher considering the growing territorial disparities in terms of economic and social development, rational use of</p>	<p>YES</p> <p>One of the main strategic area: "Social and territorial cohesion" which is in accordance with the Regional development objectives. Objective III.3 Strengthening the mechanisms for territorial development balancing and spatial integration in order to develop and make a full use of the regional potentials. – the strategy details the mechanisms, the activities to be taken and financial conditions for the implementation of these activities.</p>	<p>YES</p> <p>The 6th part of the strategy refers to demography and social inclusion of the country including principles coherent with the regional development – such as eliminating gradually disparities between regions, creating conditions for sustainable demographic development and others.</p>

	resources and the quality of environmental infrastructure”.		
2. The strategy explicitly stipulates the actors involved, and responsible for reaching the objectives?	<p>Partially Part V of the Strategy ”Implementation, Monitoring and Reporting” presents the most important actions to be taken, measures and actors involved for the implementation of the strategy. These measures and actors are described in general terms in two pages.</p>	<p>YES A special part of the strategy is dedicated to Implementation Framework, specifying the financial resources and the implementation system.</p>	<p>Partially The last part of the strategy is reserved to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the NSDS. Few lines that describe this part only mention that the responsible for the supervision and implementation of the strategy is the Ministry of Economy and Energy who can involve additional members from other groups if necessary.</p>
3. Are regions (regional bodies, institutions, authorities) considered as important actors for the purposes of sustainable development?	<p>NO The strategy does not mention any regional body when describes the actors involved for implementing strategy. Even when the strategy refers to various societal actors it omits the regions: ”active participation of all relevant actors: central and local authorities, political parties, business and professional associations, social partners, the educational and research systems, the civil society and the mass media.” P.92 In few of the mentions about regional authorities the strategy is not clear about what kind of authorities are considering : ”regional, county and local authorities” p. 108</p>	<p>YES When talking about implementation system, the strategy makes clear the role of the voivodeship: ”The voivodeship government plays an essential role in the programming, management and coordination of development measures at the regional level. Its most important include programming of development activities in the region (voivodeship development strategy), building cooperation networks at the regional level, coordinating the development activities implemented in the region and supervision of the regional policy implementation using appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.” P.136</p>	<p>NO Even if there are many references in the strategy to regional development, regional planning, and also to regional authorities (referring to cooperation with regional and municipal authorities), there is no an integrated approach on this issue.</p>
4. The strategy identifies the regional level of governance	<p>NO Even if the strategy mention in the beginning that one of the guiding principle is “Policy coherence and the quality of</p>	<p>YES Regional cooperation network is considered to be important for the implementation of the</p>	<p>NO At the beginning of the strategy are mentioned the key principles in order to achieve</p>



<p>as being important?</p>	<p>governance at local, regional, national and global levels” p.12, there are no other references throughout the strategy about this.</p>	<p>strategy: ”Its most important include programming of development activities in the region (voivodeship development strategy), building cooperation networks at the regional level (...) Local governments which are involved in the development policy implementation at the regional and local level at both the programming and implementation stages of development activities, constitute an important element of the regional cooperation network”.</p>	<p>sustainable development. One of them is related to connectivity policies and governance, increasing interconnection between EU policies and the local, regional and national level. But there are no other references in the text of strategy on this issue.</p>
<p>5. For the strategy as a whole, what level is emphasized and takes the biggest responsibility for sustainable development (central, regional, local)?</p>	<p>Central level For monitoring the implementation of the strategy, the document suggests to create two institutions at central level: to institute an Interagency Committee for Sustainable Development at executive level, under the direct authority of the Prime Minister and to institute a Consultative Council for Sustainable Development at national level with a Permanent Secretariat.</p>	<p>Local + Regional Even if strategy considers the central government and the state as being responsible for achieving the goals of the document, we must consider the fact that this is a national strategy, developed and addressed primarily to central government, and it's natural to be so. However in what concerns the sustainable development issues, the actions and measures are targeted at local and regional level, with a particular emphasis on local level.</p>	<p>Central level In the last part the document explicitly states that the central government and the Ministry of Economy and Energy is the institution responsible for implementation and coordination of the strategy, and only if requires can involve others groups or institutions.</p>

The first observation is that Romania and Bulgaria from one side, present striking similarities in contrast with Poland which seems to be at the opposite pole. If the two countries that joined the EU in 2007, put a great emphasis on central level in pursuing the sustainable development, Poland recognize the local and regional level as being of primary importance for this goal. Partially this is explained by the territorial division of these countries, Poland having the voivodeships as administrative units, wasn't forced to create fictional regions for NUTS 2 level, and obviously the focus is more prominent for this level of governance. But it's not only that, because the administrative division of Poland it's not necessarily linked to a historical component, the voivodeships were created in

1999, in Poland's efforts of Europeanization of administrative system (Jablonski, 2000). This implies that the overall vision of Poland regarding the importance of various levels of government is totally different from the highly centralized perspective of Romania and Bulgaria. More than that, Poland, as we already mentioned, managed to put the sustainable development at the core of its strategic planning system, not being concerned to develop and have a separate NSDS (Gjoksi *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand the case of Romania and Bulgaria who made efforts to build their NSDS in accordance with EU SDS, otherwise commendable, lack an integrated vision between the key principles assumed in the strategies (among which regional development and governance play an important role), and the methods, institutional framework to achieve the set goals where the focus is predominantly central.

Concluding remarks

This paper analyzed the role of the European regions in the area of sustainable development from a dual perspective – theoretical and empirical. If in theory, giving the complexity, the multitude of actors involved and implications of sustainable development, regions represent an important actor and level of governance; the empirical analysis of three Eastern European states has shown that states do not necessarily pay a great importance to such entities when it comes to the pursuit of sustainable development. This of course is valid for Romania and Bulgaria, two centralized states which seem to assume the sustainable development more in principle, than to be concerned with the means and actors involved for achieving it. On the other hand, Poland along with other states⁴, are putting a particular emphasis on regions, recognizing their important value in the complex dynamics of sustainable development. The difference can be explained in part by the administrative system of each state, but there are others important factors who contribute to this situation such as culture, historical experience, political will and the success of reforms implemented.

The implications of these findings are important for states like Romania and Bulgaria that set their long-term ultimate goal to be achievement of sustainable development. It can represent an argument in favor of regionalization or at least an urge for consolidation the regional structures and institutions in order to enhance the level of governance. But we must be clear that we do not suggest a mere transfer of powers and responsibilities on account of regional authorities or creation of new formal institutions. We rather propose a coordinated and monitored process from central level which aims to boost local and regional initiatives, to

⁴ Ruotsalainen (2006) analyzing the NSDS in Baltic Sea Region notes that: "The roles and responsibilities of the regional and local authorities' were discussed in almost every reviewed NSSD document. They were generally considered to play an important role in NSSD implementation as they manage substantial parts of specific environmental and spatial planning activities. They are also close to the public and thus have a good opportunity to involve their citizens in active debate on local planning." (Ruotsalainen, 2006, 17).



create new forms of cooperation and governance and that is integrated in approach with the institutional and strategic framework.

From the same perspective, our analysis provide the Poland as a good example for Romania and Bulgaria to follow in this direction, because all three states, although at different stages now, present similarities regarding their starting points and their path toward European integration.

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