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**TEN COUNTRIES – TWENTY YEARS
ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS IN TEN NEW EU-MEMBERS
TWO DECADES AFTER REVOLUTION**

1. INTRODUCTION

In May, 2004, ten republics entered the European Union; eight of them being located in East-Central Europe: the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia. In January, 2007, two Southeast European countries joined, too: Romania and Bulgaria. All these countries faced for a couple of decades a centrally-planned economy based on socialist principles, with a single-party political system and a strong control of this party over public administration at all levels, also in connection to economic and development policy. As this is different from the situation in Malta and Cyprus, and these two countries are small states without extensive subdivisions, they are left out in this discussion.

In the year 2009 it is exactly two decades since the Revolution started in most of these countries, ending finally the socialist era in all of them. An interesting moment to see what has changed in public administration and to what extent these countries can be compared. Since all of them are now members of the EU, it is also a good opportunity to take a look at the institutional design in relation to regional development policy; especially the influence on this institutional design and public administration of the European Union, as well as the Council of Europe. Both organisations set up documents – such as the Charters on Local and Regional Self-Governance (Council of Europe) – and programmes – such as

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Phare (EU) – for reform, offering assistance and also financial support for changing the structures in the new candidate countries of the Union.

So far, for older members of the EU extensive studies and descriptions are available on the administrative divisions. For the new member states, these descriptions are in most cases very short, or already (partially) outdated,¹ since a lot has changed during the last decade. A discussion of this issue by the author of this paper, especially in connection to statistics (Kemkers, 2005b), is not up to date anymore, either. Therefore, this article tries to provide an overview of the developments, including the most up to date information available on the number of local, district, provincial and regional sub-national institutions. Since for the EU regional development policy the regional level becomes more and more important, special attention is paid to the division according to the NUTS-structure.² Most data show the situation in early or mid-2009; where not available, the state and figures for 2008 are presented.

Let us take a short look at the ten countries under study to see the changes that were made in their administrative systems during the years prior to their entry into the EU. The aim is not to offer a very detailed overview, but just to focus on the most striking adjustments, especially at the local and regional levels. By means of these descriptions (1–2 pages per country), they can be more easily compared when a short introduction or overview of a certain state is required, for example for other research. For a quick comparison, table 1 provides, in table form, the most important data relating to the statistical divisions.

Before the political and economic revolutions in the late 1980s and early 1990s in these countries, all of them faced a rather strong centralisation of policy and a strong integration and hierarchy of institutions at the different administrative levels. During the years of re-orientation, the countries achieved different outcomes. Almost all of them started with the restructuring of local self-government systems. In some countries, such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the outcome was that almost all settlements received the status of municipality. Of course, this outcome was also connected to the structure in the previous period, but not always. Other countries, such as Poland, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Romania, grouped villages together to form a commune or larger municipality, with self-government seated in a central settlement. In some cases, there exist local boards with some authority in each settlement, which can also advise the council of the municipality. In general, municipalities in such countries with a more ‘integrated’, ‘structured’ or ‘small-regional structure’ have more authority and local power than in countries where the system is more ‘fragmented’, but this is not always the case (Kemkers, 2005a).

¹ See e.g. the interesting works of Kandeva (2001) and Horváth (2000).

² The statistical division of all regions in the EU: *Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques*; for more information and a comparison between the divisions in the member states of the EU, see Kemkers (2005b).

After dealing with the local level, there were discussions in most countries concerning the proposed reform of the higher sub-national levels, especially the ‘regional’ one, the highest level below the central administration. It is not surprising that this discussion started to play a role during the accession negotiations, as the European integration opened a window of opportunity for regionalisation or at least a greater degree of decentralisation. The creation of the NUTS-structure also played a role and finally all new member states, together with the candidate countries, implemented a new division for statistical purposes.

The outcome differs between the states, as we will see. Not all modifications are directly or exclusively linked to the preparation for entering the Union, but in all cases this did play a (minor or major) role. In many countries, different government levels and institutions are responsible for different tasks, and there is also a strong difference between regional or local deconcentrated state organs and directly elected regional or local bodies. Bíró and Kovács (2001) refer to this as a difference between *fused systems* – such as in most West-European countries, in which all institutions and their employees work together to manage problems and to elaborate joint policy – and *dual systems* – such as in the UK and Ireland and most new member states, in which there is a rather strict division of tasks and responsibilities, especially between the deconcentrated state organs and the regional or local self-governments. It is explained as a reaction to the high level of integration of institutions in the previous regime, just as the high level of centralisation during the socialist era resulted in a strong wish for independence and fragmentation of local – and county – self-governments in countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia, in the years following the Revolution of 1989.

First of all, the modifications made in the last two decades in administration – especially at the regional level – in the ten member states are discussed by providing a description and outlining the most important data and divisions. Afterwards, some general regularities will be discussed in order to see if external influences, especially by the EU and the Council of Europe, can be detected in the member states.

2. TEN COUNTRIES, TEN ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

2.1. Estonia

Estonia is a relatively small republic, the smallest of the three Baltic States. With a territory of approximately 45,100 km², it is a relatively small country, and its population of nearly 1.31 million makes it one of the most sparsely populated countries in Europe, with a very low population density.

Before the gaining of independence in 1991, its system of public administration resembled that of most other federal parts of the Soviet Union. In 1989, a new Act on Local Self-Government was adopted, which was in force until 1992. It shaped two levels of decentralised government: counties and municipalities. However, soon it was considered that for a relatively small country such as Estonia, this was probably too much. A new Constitution was passed on June 28th, 1992 and a new Act on Local Governments followed on June 2nd, 1993 (EU Commission 2000), introducing a new structure.

The new structure, still in use until present, comprises one level of self-government with a wide range of responsibilities: the local self-government. At present, there are 227 so-called communities (*omavalitsus*), consisting of 194 rural municipalities (*vald*) and 33 towns (*linn*). In practise, almost all villages form a separate municipality, although they can comprise some hamlets and neighbourhoods; larger towns and cities can be divided into districts. Around 85% of the municipalities have populations below 5,000, the average being around 5,700; but when the capital city of Tallinn (around 400,000 inhabitants) is left out, the average is just slightly above 4,000 (Mäeltsemees, 2000). This situation resembles the structure in other countries having a fragmented local government structure, with almost each village and town forming a local self-government unit, though the total number of municipalities in the country is considerably lower, which is due to the very low population density and limited number of settlements, especially villages, in the country.

Before 1993, there existed a county level, too, sometimes also referred to as 'region': *maakond*. Its name resembles the Finnish *maakunnat*, which represents the NUTS level 3; however, the Estonian equivalent at present is considered to be a Local Administrative Unit (LAU 1) within the NUTS structure. The *maakond* still exists, though their borders were changed. It could be described as a district, without directly elected self-governmental bodies; it is the representation of the central government at a lower level, headed by a governor, thus a kind of deconcentration. There are 15 of them in Estonia. Since their population would be too small for the NUTS criteria, only for statistical purposes they are grouped into five NUTS 3 regions.

For most of the regional development policy and programmes by the EU, Estonia is considered to be one country, without a further sub-division; in some cases, the five groups of *maakonds* are used. Due to their small size – the smallest community has a population around just 60 (Mäeltsemees, 2000) – municipalities, especially the *vald*, play only a small role in development policy, most of it being centralized or sometimes deconcentrated. They can decide to cooperate for the provision of services.

Apart from the statistical grouping of the 'counties/districts', there have not been made other modifications due to EU policy or discussions. Until present, the structure as designed soon after gaining independence has been continued, so there has been no strong pressure for change from the Union.

2.2. Latvia

Latvia, located between Estonia and Lithuania, forms the middle of the three Baltic States. This republic has an area of around 64,600 km². With a population of around only 2.26 million, it also is a small nation and the country's population is relatively not much greater than in Estonia, which accounts for its being sparsely populated, too.

Just as in Estonia, before the gaining of independence, Latvia's administrative structure resembled that of most other Soviet federal republics. Since 1991, new acts on (local) government have been created and amended (EU Commission 2000). At present, the Act on Local Governments of May 19th, 1994 is still in use.

It partially resembles the Estonian model, with one local level of full self-government and a second tier without a directly elected body, and mainly administrative tasks. The lowest level is formed by the municipalities. In 1999, there were 563 of them, which until recently did not change much. Out of these, there were 491 rural communities (*pagasts*), over the years around 60–70 towns and 7 so-called independent towns or 'republican cities' (*pilsetas*); these were the largest municipalities in the country, which are not form part of a district, but formed a district by themselves (Vanags and Vilka, 2000); they could be compared with for example the Hungarian 'towns of county rank' (*megyei jogú város*), or the German *kreisfreie Stadt*. Unlike in Estonia, not all settlements formed a municipality; however, Latvian communities were still very small and only the smallest villages and hamlets were joined with a larger neighbour, thus creating some kind of structure, but still the outcome was rather fragmented: on average, they had a population of around 4,400; for the rural *pagasts*, it was only 1,700 (Vanags and Vilka, 2000). In July 1st, 2009, a new division was set up, creating larger municipalities by merging villages and towns. The new division shows 9 republican cities (*pilsetas*) and 109 *novads*, amalgamations of villages and sometimes also a town. The new division is therefore more structured, though with an average population of around 20,000 Latvian municipalities are larger than in most other EU countries.

The second level, comparable with the *maakond* in Estonia, is the Latvian *rajon*, comparable with 'district' in most EU countries; in the NUTS system, they form the LAU 1 level and they are mainly for administrative purposes and part of the central government, thus representing a kind of deconcentration. At present, there are 26 such *rajons*, plus the 9 *pilsetas* (Vanags and Vilka, 2000).

To meet the NUTS criteria, a new level was set up – the *region*. These are just statistical and planning regions. At present, there are six of them, which represent the NUTS level 3; this is one level lower than statistical and planning

regions in most other countries, such as Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, which is due to the small population sizes. For the NUTS level 2, Latvia, with its small population, is considered to be one region by itself. The planning regions are used for development policy, both at the national level and for the programmes co-financed by the EU. They do not have other tasks so far.

Just as in Estonia, most reforms in public administration were made far before negotiations with the EU about accession were started and they were a reaction to the gaining of independence and the wish to 'break with the past'. On the local level, there has not been much influence from the EU; however, the creation of a new planning region – despite the fact that something like this also existed under the previous system – seems to have been at least partially influenced and inspired by the entry into the EU and the need to have at least a statistical unit at this level.

2.3. Lithuania

Lithuania is the most southern of the three Baltic States and has the largest population: around 3.35 million, almost as much as Estonia and Latvia together, though its territory measures around 65,300 km², roughly the same as Latvia.

Already on February 12th, 1990, when still being part of the Soviet Union, a new system of public administration was set up by the Law on the Foundation of Local Self-Government. It replaced the Soviet structure, but its division into two tiers – regions and local government units – largely followed the previous system. Due to dissatisfaction with the system, already on December 20th, 1993 a new reform was adopted, coming into force from 1995 (Beksta and Petkevicius, 2000).

This new division is different from that in Estonia and Latvia. In principle, it is still a two tier system, with 10 counties at the highest sub-national level – so-called *apskritis*. Below, at the local level, there are the local governments, the *savivaldybės*. They comprise rural local governments and towns. During their creation, there were 44 rural and 12 urban local governments. There have been proposals for reform, to increase this number to a total of around 93 (Beksta and Petkevicius, 2000), since there was dissatisfaction with the small number of local governments and their huge sizes and therefore long physical and psychological distances to the citizens. However, the new division introduced in 2000 only slightly increased the number of municipalities (up to 60), of which 8 were towns. The sizes of Lithuanian local government units are very big, among the biggest in the EU and the biggest in the new member states. Almost all rural

local governments have an area over 1,000 km², the largest – 2,412. The average population size is now over 56,000, ranging from 2,600 to nearly 550,000. After further reform in the future the average size will be decreased. In the European perspective, such a division of local government is highly structured and well comparable with those in the United Kingdom and Ireland. As well as on the British Isles, also in Lithuania, most municipalities are further divided – on a voluntary basis – into *seniūnijos*, ‘elderates’, comparable with ‘wards’ or ‘neighbourhoods’. At present there are over 500 of them throughout the country. In most cases, these are the former municipalities or local governments. They can have some local tasks and advise the council of the municipality, but they are no full self-governmental institutions. Summarised, it can be stated that the local governments have replaced the former ‘district level’. Due to their large size, they have more responsibilities than their counterparts in the other Baltic States, but still less than the large Northwest European municipalities; in general, the system can still be described as pretty centralised.

In contrast to Estonia and Latvia, there also is self-government at the county level. These *apskritis* are at the NUTS level 3 and have tasks not just in development policy, but also in other areas. At the same time, there also exist several deconcentrated administrative units at this level, which form a part of the central government, comparable with the situation in most centralised systems, especially in the other new member states. As we can see, the Lithuanian counties are at the same NUTS level as their counterparts in most other East-Central European countries and lower than the provinces or counties in the Northwest European member states. This is due to their small population sizes – ranging between 130,000 to around 900,000, with an average of 370,000 (Beksta and Petkevicius, 2000) – and as we can see, they encompass only a limited number of local governments. There are no other regional divisions; the country is considered to be too small for that and at the NUTS levels 1 and 2 (the latter being the most important for the division of the EU Structural Funds) Lithuania is considered to be one single unit.

Just as in the two other Baltic States, most reforms relating to public administration and especially to the administrative division were made in the years following the independence of Lithuania. Several regulations were modified due to the EU accession, but the administrative structure was continued, as it had already been reformed when the country started serious negotiations with the EU and it was considered to be satisfactory. Of course, in all discussions in connection to the reform the hope to enter the EU was present and this might have indirectly influenced the proposals, but no direct external influence to change the administrative division has been detected in this member state.

2.4. Poland

With a size of 312,685 km² Poland is by far the largest of the new member states; considering its population – officially around 38.1 million, though this number is probably less due to the fact that it is estimated that over 1 million Poles temporarily stay in West European countries for work – it has more inhabitants than all the other new member states in 2004.

Before 1990, the administrative division of Poland consisted of two sub-national levels: 49 so-called voivod(e)ships (*województwa*, s.g.: -o) and the municipalities (*gminy*). The voivodships were created in 1975, replacing the existing two tiers of larger voivodships and the districts. In March, 1990 a new Act on Local Self-Government abolished this system. The municipalities did not change, but received more authority and additionally, so-called *rejons* were created, a kind of district-level units with purely administrative and executive tasks. In the following years, long discussions started on a further reform, especially in connection to the voivodships. The contemporary division was considered not to be democratic, as the distance between the municipalities and the voivodships was said to be too big (Kowalczyk, 2000). Therefore, it was proposed to reduce the number of voivodships and to re-introduce an intermediate tier at the district level. In general, this can be considered to be a return to the pre-1975 situation. However, due to differing interests, there was strong opposition from several voivodships and municipalities (foreseeing a decrease of their newly achieved powers with the introduction of an additional governmental level) as well as lack of agreement between changing governmental coalitions, and it took over half a decade before a final structure was introduced in 1998, becoming effective from January, 1999. The outcome was partially a compromise in order to get enough support and therefore the final number of voivodships and lower levels of government was larger than in original plans.

In this new structure, there were, apart from the municipalities, 16 new-style voivodships and 373 *powiaty* (singular: *powiat*) (Kowalczyk, 2000), which could be translated as ‘counties’, but are more comparable probably with ‘districts’; they are at the LAU level 1 in the NUTS system and thus considered to be local governmental units. During the following years, some reforms were made, increasing the number of counties to 379 by 2009.³ 65 of them are so-called urban districts (*powiat grodzki*), being town/city and district at the same time. The counties replaced the former 268 *rejons* and, in contrast, these *powiaty* are directly elected and have a full range of tasks. Their number and borders coincide with the division before 1975, although larger counties were split, especially around larger towns and cities.

³ http://www.gugik.gov.pl/komisja/pliki/podzial_administracyjny_polski_2008.pdf

At the local level, the situation did not change. In Poland, municipalities in most cases consist of several settlements. There are over 42,000 settlements – including hamlets and neighbourhoods, over 90% with a population below 1,000 – and just 2,478 *gminy* (singular: *gmina*) in Poland (2009). None of them have less than 1,000 inhabitants, and there are hardly municipalities with a population below 2,000. Actually, most of them have at least 5,000 people (Kowalczyk, 2000). With an average population of around 15,500 per municipality this division can be considered to be rather ‘structured’. The municipalities comprise 1,586 *gmina wiejska* (rural), 306 *gmina miejska* (urban, also referred to as towns: *miasta*) and 586 *gmina miejsko-wiejska*, consisting of a town and surrounding villages.⁴

As mentioned before, most discussions concerned the highest sub-national level of the 16 voivodships. Apart from their borders, sometimes it could not be decided on their capitals, finally leading to the situation that in some of them there are two capital seats: one for the representative of the elected voivodship government, the marshal (*marszałek*), and one for the representative of the central government, the voivod(e) (*wojewoda*), responsible for the implementation at this level of deconcentrated national policy. As had been predicted (see e.g. Kieres, 1997), this led to conflicts, especially during the first years, between both representatives, each having their own administration. After a decade, things are more clear, but still there is the duality in the government structure. Other objections to the new system include the complaint that the delegation of many responsibilities and new policy has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the resources or shifts from the central to the regional level (Emilewicz and Wolek, 2002).

The voivodships are at the NUTS level 2. Since there are 16 of them, they have recently been grouped, for purely statistical purposes, into 6 larger regions for the NUTS 1 structure by EUROSTAT. However, this level does not have other significance than just statistical; perhaps in future it will also play a role in development policy.

This new system did not include regulations on regional policy and planning (Kowalczyk, 2000) and was a purely administrative reform. Only in the years prior to the entry into the EU, regional programmes and regulations in this field were set up, as a reaction to the requirements for participating in the regional development programmes. This did not lead to new administrative divisions. Therefore it can be concluded that the administrative reform in Poland was mainly inspired and initiated by national concerns and problem solving, and only much later, after 2000, regional policy was adapted to and influenced by EU regulations, but this did not lead to a new structure of public administration, only to some additional statistical divisions.

⁴ Ibid.

2.5. Czech Republic

The Czech Republic, or Czechia, covers 78,866 km² – around 60% of the former Czechoslovakia – and its population of 10.3 million constitutes around 2/3 of the former Czech-Slovak federation.

Just as in most of the neighbouring socialist countries, before 1990 the party councils ruled territorial administration, at three levels within the Czech-Moravian part of the federal Czechoslovakian Republic: regional, district and local.

This system was abolished by the Municipalities Act of September 4th, 1990. Local governments received autonomy without a hierarchic structure. As in the previous system, almost all settlements form a single municipality, leading to the fact that currently there are no less than 6,249 municipalities in the Czech Republic, an increase of around 50% since 1989 (Gerritse, 2007). Most of them (5,733) are villages (*obce*), but there also are over 500 towns (*města*). Due to their sizes and for historic reasons, around 20 so-called statutory towns⁵ received some additional rights. Since some of the communities have a population below 50 and 80% have a population below 1,000 – actually, 27% below 200 – they can join tasks with neighbouring municipalities and set up a joint notary office (Lacina and Vajdova, 2000), comparable with the system in other countries, such as Hungary, for example. Due to the relatively dense settlement network in the Czech Republic, the high number of municipalities makes the structure highly fragmented. The autonomy of Slovakia in 1993 did not change the system within the Czech-Moravian part.

Just as in the past, also today there are districts (*okresy*) in the Czech Republic; at present there are 77 of them – a number that has slightly increased since 1990. There are no elected bodies, but territorial-administrative institutions; in statutory towns, the towns and cities take over the tasks of the district. In 2003, most of their tasks were abolished, as were the districts themselves, but there is an extensive deconcentrated structure of several governmental institutions at the district level, using its division, but also at the local and regional tiers. The division differs between ministries and sectors, just as in Hungary, for example. There are no counties in the Czech Republic.

Most discussions in the field of public administration involved the regional level. It took over a decade of political debates, planning and proposals, until finally a new system was set up, becoming effective from January 1st, 2000 (Lacina and Vajdova, 2000). Before, political parties could simply not agree and there was much criticism concerning the proposed divisions, which were said to

⁵ Somehow comparable with the system of 'towns of county rank' in Hungary, the *pilsetas* in Latvia or perhaps even better: the *kreisfreie Städte* in Germany.

neglect historical, cultural and ethnical concerns (Pálné Kovács, 2005). Even after the divisions were finally established, discussions and disagreement continued (Halász, 2000) with proposals for new boundaries (Blázek, 2001); however, the division was not changed. 13 regions (*kraje*) were set up plus one special region, the capital district of Prague. They were all given the same historic name 'kraje' ('province' or 'region') as in the past, but the particular regions did not get historical names, but were named after their capitals. They are, unlike in some other neighbouring states with newly created regions, self-government units with tasks in several fields, such as administration, education, health care, culture and environmental protection. The reform was directly inspired by the entry into the EU, as it offered a chance for more decentralisation and regional interests (*Die Regionen der Tschechischen...*, 2001). Nevertheless, the EU considered these 14 regions to be too small, since they did not meet the criteria for NUTS 2 regions, as their population sizes were too small. Therefore, for regional development policy and statistical purposes, the regions were grouped into eight 'groups of kraje' at the NUTS level 2, having partially geographic, partially historic names, such as 'South-East' and 'Moravia and Silesia'. This introduced discrepancy and also uncertainty and confusion between the newly set up Czech regions and the 'European regions', without a separate administration, based on cooperation between the regions. It took time and practise to understand this arrangement, but slowly everyone is getting used to it and the EU does not require a special administrative division for economic and planning regions in connection to its development policy. It should be noted that for the NUTS 1 level, the EU does not divide the Czech Republic in additional regions; it considers the country as a whole.

In conclusion, we can see that the first reforms of the local level followed the Revolution of 1989 and the split of the country in 1993 did not change this. However, the discussions concerning the setting up of the regional level were definitely influenced by the EU membership, despite the fact that the final outcome did not meet the criteria of the EU and therefore required the introduction of another higher level of statistical-planning regions in connection to development policy.

2.6. Slovakia

Slovakia, or the Slovak Republic, borders on the Czech Republic, Austria, Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary – the country of which it was a part for about a millennium, until 1920, when it joined together with Moravia and Bohemia ('Čechy') to form Czechoslovakia. In the 1960s, a federal structure was set up giving Slovakia some autonomy and a federal parliament. After the Revolution

of 1989, strong independence tendencies in Slovakia led to a demand for full autonomy, finally leading to a 'friendly' split in 1993 and fully independent, for the first time in history, Slovak Republic, covering about 40% of the area of the former Czechoslovakia and around 30% of its population. Its area is 49,034 km² and its population around 5.38 million, including the Hungarian minority (over 10%) living mainly in the south, near the Hungarian border.

The administrative development of the country until 1993 was the same as described before, for the Czech Republic. Actually, after gaining independence, the structure at the local and district level did not change, although a larger number of districts were set up in the following years. At present there are 2,891 municipalities (*obec*), around 68% with a population below 1,000 and just two with over 100,000, making it a strongly fragmented system, comparable with some of its neighbours, Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The smallest municipality has less than 10 people (Nemec *et al.*, 2000). The municipalities include 138 towns. Additionally, there are at present 79 *okrešy*, districts comparable with their Czech counterparts, though smaller in size and population.

Just as in the Czech Republic, the highest level of sub-national government is made up by the *kraje*; in 1996, eight of them were set up, named after their capitals. Originally, they were not self-government units but territorial-administrative divisions. In 2002, they received some autonomy and have a self-governmental body. A reform to transform them into elected bodies with full autonomy has for many years been hindered by political disagreement and ethnic conflicts (Pálné Kovács, 2005), mainly with the Hungarian minority, despite the fact that recent Slovak governments supported decentralisation (Mezei and Hardi, 2003), probably also partially under some pressure from the EU and the Council of Europe. In future, *kraje* might be transformed into self-governments with more powers.

Just as in the Czech Republic, the new Slovakian *kraje* did not meet the standards of the NUTS 2 structure, and therefore they are at the NUTS level 3; for development policy and statistical purposes, they are grouped into four 'economic regions'; at the NUTS level 1, Slovakia is considered as a whole.

Concluding, we can see many parallels with the Czech neighbour. The reform of local governments and districts does not seem to have been directly influenced by the EU. The setting up of regions was not much influenced by 'Europe', either, as it happened just after the independence of the country and before the Czech reforms, at a time (1996) when the government of Slovakia was not really 'heading to Europe'. The setting up of economic regions as a grouping of the smaller regions has been a direct result of entry to the EU, just as the setting up and regionalising of the development policy.

2.7. Hungary

Hungary is a republic, situated in the centre of Europe, bordering on no less than seven other countries: Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. It covers 93,030 km², which makes it a mid-sized country for European conditions. Its population is just around 10 million, though it is decreasing and in the nearby future is expected to drop below this symbolic figure. 98.5% of the population is of Hungarian ethnicity, making the country a rather monolingual homogenous state, whereas on the other hand many ethnic Hungarians live outside the country; around 3 million in the neighbouring states, most notably in Romanian Transylvania, South Slovakia, Serbian Vojvodina and the most western part of Ukraine, in the Trans-Carpathians.

The present administrative division of this country is based on the Act on Local Governments of 1990. It abolished the previous system, in use during the socialist era, with party councils at the local, district and county levels. As there was a strong lobby for creating self-government at the lowest levels, a new division was established in which almost all settlements received self-government, forming a municipality. The settlements which were merged in the previous decades could now obtain independence, and during the following years, many applied for it and were granted it. New municipalities are created all the time, increasing the number slowly – a situation that is contrary to most other (West-)European countries, where scales are increasing, with larger municipalities (Kemkers, 2005b). However, we can see this also in countries such as Slovakia and Slovenia, for example. At the same time, the districts were abolished as administrative bodies, while the counties remained, but lost a lot of their power and tasks. A new Act on Regional Development and Spatial Planning, of March 19th, 1996, which was modified a few times ever since, created the possibility of setting up administrative institutions at the regional level.

Just as in countries such as the Czech and Slovak Republics, virtually all settlements in Hungary are local self-government units. With the exception of the 23 districts of Budapest – functioning as semi-autonomous municipalities – there are no further divisions of local governments in Hungary, though they are free to set up joint administrative offices, so-called notaries. In 2001, there were 580 such shared offices, in which 1,554 municipalities were participating, slightly less than 50% of the total number. In most cases, the notary manages 2–4 settlements, the highest number is 12 (Szigeti, 2002). At present, there are 3,152 municipalities in Hungary (*helyi önkormányzatok*), of which there are 2,846 villages – 2,706 ‘normal villages’ (*községek*) and 140 so-called ‘large villages’ (*nagyközségek*), in size and importance between a village and a town. The total number of towns is 330, which includes one capital, 23 ‘towns of

county rank' (*megyei jogú városok*)⁶ and 306 other towns (*városok*). At present, a settlement can only apply for the town status if it meets certain requirements concerning its infrastructure and services. It should perform some regional functions and it is also required to have reached the status of a *nagyközség* before. In order to become a large village, a population of 5,000 is a minimum. However, many settlements received the status of large village or town before, without a minimum population and therefore we can find quite a lot of 'decorative towns', sometimes as small as just 1,200 inhabitants. All settlements with populations of at least 50,000 can apply for the county status; county capitals receive it automatically, regardless of their size. Apart from these special towns, there generally is not much difference between towns and villages as regards their tasks and powers. The sizes of Hungarian municipalities differ considerably: from Budapest, with a population over 1.7 million and around 2.5 million in its agglomeration, to the smallest villages with hardly over a dozen of people. There are in total 9 towns with populations over 100,000, but around 55% of all municipalities has less than 1,000 inhabitants, one-third less than 500 and around 10% do not even reach 200 residents (Szigeti, 2002). The average population size of Hungarian municipalities is still 3,170, which places them among the smallest and most fragmented divisions in Europe. However, the average is larger than in some other countries with such a division, which is caused by the fact that there are quite a lot of large villages, especially in the eastern Great Plain area. The strong feeling of pride from gaining autonomy makes that this division not likely to change in the near future. The result is that municipalities have relatively little power and their financial resources are small.

There are no administrative bodies at the district level anymore, but 174 so-called *kistérségek*: micro-regions created originally for statistical purposes. They were introduced in 1994 and their number has been increased since that time by splitting such micro-regions. More recently, they received tasks in the field of development policy. They are obligatory and are formed by meetings of local governments; they do not have an elected self-government and can not be compared to the counterparts in the neighbouring countries, where they perform tasks set by the central government. In Hungary, that is partially done by means of deconcentration at all levels, as well as by the *megyék*: 'comitates', or 'counties', although due to their size 'province' would be a better denomination. There are 19 of them in Hungary, plus the capital city of Budapest, having the same status. Despite the fact the boundaries have changed, they can be seen as continuation of the millennium-old Hungarian comitates, which makes them belong to the oldest divisions in Europe. They are elected self-governments, not carrying out administrative tasks on behalf of the central government, but only

⁶ Not part of a province/county, comparable with e.g. the *kreisfreie Städte* in Germany, the 'statutory towns' in the Czech Republic or the *pilsetas* in Latvia.

dealing with their own tasks. What is characteristic is that there does not exist a hierarchy between the levels of government in Hungary, they are just responsible for different tasks. The reform of 1990, giving more power to local self-governments, has diminished the powers and tasks of the comitates and in an international perspective, they are relatively weak considering their size; they form the NUTS level 3 in the EU.

At the NUTS level 2, there are seven regions in Hungary: *tervezési-statisztikai régiók*. They were introduced in 1996 for statistical purposes, while at the same time the *megyék* could form, on a voluntary basis, planning regions for regional development policy. Later amendments to the Act on Regional Development and Spatial Planning made these regions obligatory and their boundaries should coincide with those of the statistical divisions, based on the NUTS criteria. There have been long debates, for one and a half decade now, to make these regions also administrative bodies, but so far it has not been carried out and at present these regions only perform tasks in development policy and planning. Recent years have seen a further deconcentration of the central government into several state bodies, using the same division as the planning regions, but many divisions show other structures, too. At the NUTS level 1, Hungary was recently divided into three larger regions (*statisztikai nagy régiók*) by combining seven smaller units, but these three regions (Transdanubia, Central-Hungary, Great Plain and North) are purely statistical divisions.

Summarising, we can state that the present division in Hungary is mainly a continuation of the situation that existed before 1990, although the local self-governments increased in power and the counties or provinces decreased. After all, there is more centralisation and little decentralisation, which is partially compensated by means of deconcentration. The influence of the EU can be seen in the setting up of a regional subdivision, creating statistical planning regions according to the NUTS criteria, which might be changed into governmental bodies. Regional development policy is aimed at following this structure, but after joining the EU most development policy was centralised, again, leaving little tasks for the new regions.

2.8. Slovenia

Slovenia was in 2004 the first of the former Yugoslavian federal states to enter the EU. It is the most northwest part of this former Republic and at the same time the most developed part. Its size is 20,256 km² and with a population of 2.05 million it is one of the smallest members of the EU. After declaring independence, Slovenia made many efforts to brake with its past history; enjoying independence for the third time in history, in total not even for one

century, it looked for a new direction and soon the decision was made to prepare for joining the EU as soon as possible. A new constitution was drawn up and a new Law on Local Self-Government was enacted in 1993, to be revised many times since then, e.g. after the European Charter on Local Self-Government was enacted in 1997 (Setnikar-Cankar *et al.*, 2000).

Due to its small size and population, the Slovenian constitution only provides for two levels of self-government: the municipal and the regional. So far, only the first, lowest level is fully operative – at present there are 210 municipalities (*obcinah*). This relatively small number is due to the fact that Slovenian municipalities normally consist of several settlements, especially in the case of the 11 urban municipalities, consisting of a central town and surrounding villages. Their average population therefore is higher than in the countryside, and with an average population size of over 10,000, the division can be considered to be relatively integrated, especially considering the fact that the mountainous country lacks large cities and the number of towns is also limited. There are only few municipalities with populations below 1,000, and around 50% of the communities has a population over 5,000 (Setnikar-Cankar *et al.*, 2000). The tasks and policy areas of municipalities are defined and their scope is relatively large, although not all tasks can be performed by smaller municipalities.

Therefore, the Law on Regions provides possibilities for municipalities to form so-called regions in which they cooperate and perform tasks jointly. Originally, this form of cooperation was voluntary and was carried out by means of alliances, but later it became obligatory. In this way municipalities can retain their independence, but the performing of tasks is guaranteed at a higher level, especially in the fields of economic, cultural and social development (Setnikar-Cankar *et al.*, 2000). These ‘regions’ – due to their size they should rather be viewed as micro-regions or perhaps districts – are therefore multipurpose institutions of self-government.

Additionally, there are 58 deconcentrated administrative units (*upravne enote*, LAU level 1 for NUTS) in Slovenia, with their own fields of operation, competencies, functions and authority, having jurisdiction over one or several municipalities with regard to tasks delegated by the state (Setnikar-Cankar *et al.*, 2000). They can be considered to be a kind of district, but not really, as their tasks and competencies differ from sector policies. As there is no further administrative division of the country and there are no additional sub-national governments at this moment, they are the connection between the central and the local level. This results in a structure that is rather centralised in its system and division of resources, also for development policy (Tüske, 2003).

For statistical purposes, at the NUTS level 3, a purely statistical division is created by 12 *statisticne regije*. They are partially made up of historical cultural divisions, but there have been many disputes about their boundaries. Steps have

been made to change these statistical regions into self-governmental bodies in the future, or at least they should form a basis for a final division into 10–14 such regions. This might be effected from 2010. At the NUTS level 2, Slovenia is divided into two parts (West and East), again solely for statistical and planning reasons; due to its small population the country is considered as one region at the highest NUTS level.

Concluding, it can be stated that large reforms of public administration were made after gaining independence and revisions were subsequently made to create more decentralisation and deconcentration, which was partially influenced by the European Charter of Local Self-Government by the Council of Europe. For statistical reasons, a statistical division was set up before and also after entering the EU, but additional regions at intermediate levels were not created. Thus, the EU did not really influence the administrative division.

2.9. Romania

Romania has been a member of the EU since January 1st, 2007. With an area of 238,391 km², it is after Poland the largest of the new member states. The same goes for its population, which is just slightly over 21.5 million. Around 1.6 million are ethnic Hungarians, mainly living in Transylvania.

After the Revolution in 1989, new administrative structures were created, based on the Law on Local Public Administration. It was subsequently amended, partially due to adoption of the European Charter of Local Self-Government by the Council of Europe, and also in connection with the Phare programme of the EU.

In principle, there are two sub-national institutional levels in Romania. The lowest of them is the municipality. Around 13,000 settlements – including hamlets and some neighbourhoods – are grouped into 2,685 communities: over 2,400 *comune* (rural municipalities) and around 263 towns and cities; these can be divided into normal towns (*oraşe*) and 82 *municipii*; the latter being larger towns and cities with a regional function, which can be divided into sub-districts with a small council. Most municipalities therefore consist of several settlements and only few of them have less than 1,000 inhabitants (Coman *et al.*, 2001). The structure can be considered to be integrated, although there are still many small municipalities, especially in the countryside, which is mainly due to the small size of the settlements, despite the fact that under the communist regime of Ceauşescu, the policy was to slowly let those settlements disappear.

Apart from having some districts for central government sector policies, the only other intermediate level of self-government is made up by 42 provinces

(*județe*), including the capital district of Bucharest. This division did not change from the one before 1989. They have a council functioning as a self-government, and also they perform the representation of the national government at the lower level (the prefect), which is partially comparable with the system of the Polish voivodships; the competences and also budgets of the prefect are in general much greater, which in practice makes the structure still highly centralised (Horváth and Veress, 2003). In the NUTS structure, they are the NUTS level 3.

At the NUTS level 2, there are eight planning or regional development regions. They were set up in 1998, in connection with the aid of the Phare programme – leading to the *Green Paper for Regional Policy* in Romania, and showing the influence of the EU. However, their division mainly follows the economic division in existence for a couple of decades, but without administrative meaning. At present, they only play a role in regional development policy and do not perform other functions in public administration, apart from the fact that the division is sometimes also used for deconcentration of other sector policies. There are national and regional development agencies and councils (Coman *et al.*, 2001). They were set up for the purpose of dealing efficiently with and benefit from EU support. It is interesting to note that despite the fact that from the beginning it was clear that Romania would not be among the first group of countries to join the EU, it was among the first to carry out the regional division, based on regional development policy and meeting the criteria of the EU, including the NUTS structure. This might have been helped by the fact that from the beginning it was clear that they would not be administrative bodies with self-government, but would only serve economic and statistical purposes, as the provinces continued to exist and also other levels of government were not changed.

There are discussions whether to retain the provinces only for the *prefect's* administration and to merge the provincial self-governments at the level of the present eight regions. Nothing is concrete yet, and a lot of resistance is to be expected.

Recently, four macro-regions were introduced at the NUTS level 1, only for statistical purposes.

Concluding, we can state that as regards the purely administrative division, the influence by the EU and the Council of Europe was not significant, as until in practise the system is still highly centralised. But as regards regional development policy and the related division, the programmes by both European institutions did play an important role, helping to develop it and setting up new institutions, totally different from those in the past. Of course, it will not be surprising that although they have been functioning for about a decade now at the regional level, due to the fact that Romania entered the EU quite recently, it still takes time to see how everything is functioning now that Romania has

became a full member, leading to much higher money transfers. Just as in Bulgaria, the fighting of corruption – at all levels – is still one of the most important issues for the EU.

2.10. Bulgaria

Just like Romania, Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007. This country on the south-eastern part of the Balkan peninsula extends over 110,912 km². With a decreasing population of only about 7.6 million, it is relatively sparsely populated, especially in the mountainous countryside. Turks make up 10% of the population.

Before the Revolution of 1989, a two-tier system of sub-national government existed in Bulgaria: municipalities and counties, as districts were abandoned already some decades before. In September, 1991, a new Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act was adopted, setting up municipalities as replacements for the former local councils and nine regions at a higher level. For many reasons there was dissatisfaction with this system and in 1998 an amendment to the act changed the division, partially returning to the previous division (Drumeva, 2001).

At the local level, there are just 264 municipalities (*obshtini*), making the system strongly integrated or structured; with an average population size of over 30,000, Bulgarian municipalities are among the largest in the EU and after Lithuania the largest of the new member states in terms of population. These municipalities make up the LAU level 1 in the NUTS structure and just as in other countries such as the United Kingdom for example, they can be divided into neighbourhoods and town districts or ‘parishes’. This is not obligatory for all municipalities, only in larger towns and cities. In smaller municipalities, such a lower division can be set up, administered by a kind of mayor, who is responsible for administering this settlement or group of settlements, the budget, some services, ensuring public order, and organising public works (Drumeva, 2001). There are around 1,600 such units comprised of a total of 5,338 settlements, which form the LAU level 2.

The highest level of sub-national government is formed by 28 provinces or counties (*oblasti*); they replaced in 1998 the former larger regions, and their boundaries largely coincide to the division before 1991 (Drumeva, 2001). Thus, opposite to most other countries, this shows rather disintegration and a decrease in scale. They are the result of long political debates and much disagreement between political parties. More changes have been made within a short period, indicating a lack of a consistent regional conception (Pálné Kovács, 2005). These *oblasti* are governed by a governor, who mainly serves the interests of the national government, comparable with the *prefect* in other countries, such as Romania and France and the *wojewoda* in Poland.

With the introduction of a new Regional Development Act, also in 1998, regional policy was modernised. Although the entry to the EU was still not very close, the reform was inspired by it – as it was also partially financed by the Phare programme – while the new administrative division was influenced by the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe (Kandeva 2001), introducing some more decentralisation. The EU divided Bulgaria into two groups of regions at the NUTS level 1; at the second level there are six *rajon za planirane* (planning regions), which play a role in regional development policy and are statistical and economic regions, but lacking the institutional self-governmental body; 28 *oblasti* form the third NUTS level. Thus external influence is visible, not only by the EU, but also by the Council of Europe. Time will show if the structure will lead to real deconcentration and decentralisation, as despite having large municipalities, everything is still rather centralised.

3. SOME PARALLELS AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TEN COUNTRIES

When comparing the developments in connection to administrative division over the last two decades in the new member states of the EU in East-Central and South-West Europe, we can see some differences, but also a lot of parallels. All states show a considerable degree of centralism in the structure of administration and division of money for regional development. Some countries, such as Bulgaria and Poland, made some changes in favour of decentralisation, but in most cases reforms have led to more deconcentration; in Poland and Romania the role of representatives of the national administration seems to be stronger than their directly elected counterparts at the same sub-national level. Despite the influence of the EU and the Council of Europe, and programmes of reform set up to modify the structure, apart from introducing several councils and agencies – such as e.g. in Hungary, Slovakia and Romania – in practice the result is not much different from that before 1990. As a matter of fact, in the past few years after the entry to the EU the allocation of development funds in most of the countries is quite a centralist affair.

The division of administration differs in the different countries. There are states with a highly fragmented structure, where almost all settlements form an independent local self-government, a municipality. This can be found in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia and also in Estonia, where some hamlets and neighbourhoods are joined to villages. In countries such as Romania, Slovenia and Poland, municipalities normally consist of a town or central village and some surrounding smaller settlements, though there are still many rather small municipalities. The most structured or regionalised division of local

government can be found in Bulgaria, Lithuania and recently also in Latvia. In two countries with larger local government units, Bulgaria and Lithuania, there exists or may exist a sub-division of ‘wards’ or ‘neighbourhoods’ with some authority in local matters.

Apart from the size of the municipalities, also the number of levels differs. The larger countries, most notably Poland, also have districts. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia they are not fully self-governmental entities, but in Poland they are. Nevertheless, despite the differences in the size of municipality and number of intermediate levels, there is not much difference between the countries in respect of decentralisation. In comparison to most (North-)West European countries, administration is quite centralistic in all new member states. It could be expected that countries with larger local governments would delegate more tasks to them and also grant larger budgets, but, at least in relation to development policy, this is not really the case.

But what about the higher sub-national levels, especially the ‘regional’ ones? This would be expected to be the level at which the EU interferes, whereas local administration is seen as a national affair, in which the member states are totally free to decide, as long as the division meets basic requirements, especially those laid down in the Charter of Local Self-Government by the Council of Europe.

Most of the member states modified their administrative structure after gaining independence in the early 1990s; in most cases this meant a new experience, as they belonged for a long period of time to a larger federation. This is the case with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The newly achieved independence provided an occasion for changing the structure, to break with the past. Nonetheless, not everything was changed and especially in Slovenia and Slovakia, the previous structure of municipalities and districts was at least partially continued, or modified; the new structure was not created as a *tabula rasa*. As this meant a new comprehensive system, these countries did not change their structure again after entering the EU, although sometimes some minor modifications were made; larger reforms were mainly implemented at local government level and do not seem to be inspired by entering the EU. Another interesting feature is that the new structure differs between these member states, even in cases of countries which shared a common past, such as the three Baltic States. In Lithuania there is an additional intermediate level, unlike in Estonia and Latvia, whereas the size of the municipalities also differs significantly between the three of them. We can see parallels between Slovakia and the Czech Republic, especially since the new Slovakian structure was based on the previous common design, but there are some differences, as in Slovakia no new administrative regions were created, such as in the Czech Republic some years later.

Some countries did change their intermediate level of administration – examples include Poland and Bulgaria. Poland is a relatively large country, which makes the regional level more necessary. However, just as in Bulgaria, the discussions on creating a new structure started already before there were

serious discussions with the EU about entering the Union and what would be the requirements for administrative design in connection to regional development. The outcome in Poland is a step back to the situation before 1975, while in Bulgaria the new division of 1998 abolished the new structure of 1991 and also meant a return to the division as made under socialist rule. To many people this division was familiar and therefore more readily accepted, something people could identify with. Nevertheless, in Poland this resulted in a division of larger 'regions' (*voivodships*), while in Bulgaria the result was a decrease of the size and increase in the number of *oblasti*; this example seems to be quite rare, as most reforms led to an increase of the size of divisions, no matter at what level.

A real, direct influence of the EU on the administrative division has been identified in those countries which created a new 'regional' structure, mainly for statistical and planning purposes. The cases of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria all show the setting up of special planning regions. To this, the NUTS level 3 in Estonia can also be added, although in the Soviet Union such planning 'rayons' did exist, too. Only in the Czech Republic, new regions were set up to fulfil more tasks than just being there for statistical reasons. The original idea was to give them more powers, forming a new intermediate tier between the national level and the local government, while reducing the tasks of the districts/counties (*okrešy*). This should also lead to more European integration. The same can be seen in Slovakia, but there, the roles and powers of the *kraje* are less far-reaching. However, the final outcome in Czechia resulted in regions being too small for the NUTS level 2, the most important for European regional development policy. Therefore, an additional division of eight 'groups of kraje' was introduced, which was a purely statistical and planning division, causing misunderstanding and uncertainty, especially at the beginning. The creation of such a division purely for the NUTS structure can be considered to be fully influenced by the entry to the EU. The same is true in cases of Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria: planning regions in accordance with the 'European model', meeting the requirements of the NUTS thresholds, were introduced. As most of them are at the NUTS level 2, they form the basis for regional operational plans, as well as statistical calculations concerning the development of the regions. Because of the connection to EU policy, in most countries regional development agencies and/or councils were also set up, to match the funds becoming available with people to advise or make decisions. In some cases, regional divisions from previous periods in connection to economic or other development and planning policies were used or just slightly changed. In other cases a totally new division was devised. In Slovenia, a new regional statistical division – probably even at two levels – will be set up, partially to benefit as much as possible from the funds becoming available.

Table 1. The NUTS division of 10 East-Central European members of the EU

NUTS 0	NUTS 1		NUTS 2		NUTS 3		LAU 1		LAU 2	
	Groups of regions	2	Rajon za planirane	6	Oblasti	28	Obštini	264	Naseleni mesta	5 338
Czech Republic	– (Česká Republika)	1	Groups of Kraje	8	Kraje	14	Okrešy	77	Obce	6 249
Estonia	– (Eesti)	1	– (Eesti)	1	Groups of Maakond	5	Maakond	15	Vald + Linn	227
Hungary	Statistikai nagy régiók	3	Tervezési-statisztikai régiók	7	Megye + Főváros	20	Statistikai kistérség	174	Település	3 152
Latvia	– (Latvija)	1	– (Latvija)	1	Regions	6	Rajoni + Pilsetas	35	Novad + Pilsetas	118
Lithuania	– (Lietuva)	1	– (Lietuva)	1	Apskritys	10	Savivaldybės	60	Seniūnijos	546
Poland	Regiony	6	Województwa	16	Podregiony	45	Powiaty	379	Gminy + Miasta	2 478
Romania	Macroregiunea	4	Regions	8	Județe + București	42	–	–	Comune + Orașe + Municipii	2 685
Slovakia	– (Slovenska Republika)	1	Zoskupenia krajov	4	Kraje	8	Okrešy	79	Obce + Mesta	2 891
Slovenia	– (Slovenija)	1	Makroregije	2	Statisticne regije	12	Upravne enote	58	Obcinah	210

Source: based on data from EUROSTAT and the respective national statistical offices; statistical data of January 1st, 2009.

At the NUTS level 1, less important for the EU, Poland was followed by other larger countries – Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania – which were recently divided into two, three or four large or macro-regions; in all cases these are purely statistical divisions, without additional meaning or administrative purposes. They may play a role in future regional development policy, in the area of planning.

As not much is known about the negotiations prior to accession, as discussions were not public, it is not sure to what extent the administrative designs and institutions were recommended by ‘Brussels’, but it is no coincidence that those countries, which did not have a regional structure so far and which are not very small, created a new division meeting the NUTS requirements. Support from Phare and other programmes by the EU and the Council of Europe also stimulated this solution.

At the same time, this comparison shows that some countries, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, shifted more tasks to the newly created regions. The discussion on the ‘regional question’ is not at all typical of certain nations, but nevertheless it is taking place in most of these countries. They might learn from the experiences of other new member states, although this overview also reveals huge differences in tradition and present arrangements existing between the nations.

The different outcomes, once again, underline the right of the EU member states to autonomy in decisions on their administrative division and public administration.

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