

**Regional Policy and EU Accession
in the Czech Republic 1997 - 1999**

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Abstract

This paper examines the formulation of regional policy and the creation of a Regional Development Plan in The Czech Republic during the period of 1997 - 1999. The regional policy and planning process occurred within the larger framework of the Czech Republic's application for membership in the European Union, and the paper considers the application of the European Union principle of *partnership* in the regional planning process. Analysis focuses on whether this principle, which commits members states to consultative planning processes, was successfully applied.

The Dynamics of European Enlargement

In the span of just over a decade, the Czech Republic has undergone a far-reaching political and societal transformation. From a system of 'real-existing' socialism within the federated Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the Czech Republic emerged in the 1990s as an independent state seeking full membership in the European Union. The economic and social transition from a centralised authoritarian regime to a market-based democracy is on-going and -- importantly -- has become closely intertwined with the process of European Union accession itself (Szablowski & Derlien, 1993). This paper examines one aspect of the broader transition and EU accession process -- the development of a regional policy and planning framework.

To investigate the development of Czech regional policy and programming -- and particularly the application of the European Union *partnership* principle in this process -- field research in the Czech Republic was undertaken from September 1999 to December 1999. Policy research methods were utilized. Sources of information included EU Commission documents, Czech government publications, cabinet decisions, committee lists and meeting minutes, consultant reports and handbooks, public information materials prepared by NGOs and finally, the Czech Regional Development Plan and draft Regional and Sectoral Operational Programmes which were submitted to the EU in December 1999. Information gleaned from these documents was supplemented by a series of conversations with selected participants. Thirty people were spoken to, including officials from the Czech Ministries of Regional Development and Foreign Affairs, the Delegation of the European Commission to the Czech Republic, European Commission Directorates-General for Social and Employment Affairs and for Regional Policy, Regional Development Agency representatives, district and local government officials, members of Regional Monitoring and Management Committees, planning consultants and representatives of non-governmental organizations monitoring the process. The conversations were held off the record. Information drawn from these conversations is noted in the text of this paper as 'Field Notes'.

Regional Policy and the European Union Structural Funds

Regional policy constitutes one of thirty-one chapters requiring compliance from candidate states in their application for membership to the European Union. As the EU is primarily an economic arrangement which facilitates free trade, the accession process largely focuses on ensuring candidate states such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have implemented the necessary policies and legislation to allow the free movement of goods, capital and labour and have "harmonised" laws governing economic matters. Regional policy is an issue of concern, however, as it is the key mechanism through which development assistance is channelled, through the Structural Funds, to the 'backward' regions of the EU.

Within the European Union, all member countries which qualify to receive development assistance are subject to the same process in justifying their need. These states are required to submit a multi-year Regional Development Plan to the European Commission and on the basis of this document a bilateral agreement between the national government and the European Union is established to govern how the funds may be spent. As defined in the Structural Fund guidelines, the Regional Development Plan is a socio-economic strategic plan which describes and analyses the economic and social conditions in the country, articulates development goals which are both in-keeping with EU priorities and meet domestic needs, and outlines specific measures to fulfil those development goals (EU Commission, 1999c).

According to the guidelines, the creation of the regional development plan must also be guided by several principles defined by the European Commission, including 'partnership'. According to this principle, all decisions regarding the preparation, financing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Structural Fund assistance must be taken with a broad cross section of participants. It is incumbent upon the member state to ensure that relevant partners participate in the development process and member states must be able to demonstrate that 'partnership' has been achieved (EU Commission, 1999c). The Structural Fund guidelines state that "in designating the most representative partnership at national, regional, local or other level, the Member State shall create a wide and effective association of all the relevant bodies, according

to national rules and practice, taking account of the need to promote equality between men and women and sustainable development through the integration of environmental protection and improvement" (EU Commission, 1999c, article 8). The guidelines go on to state: "all the designated parties, hereinafter referred to as the 'partners', shall be partners pursuing a common goal" (EU Commission, 1999c, article 8).

The EU partnership arrangement has traditionally involved cooperation along a vertical axis among different levels of government -- European, national, regional and local authorities -- and horizontally encompassing labour unions, business and agricultural associations. Over the years, the definition of a "partner" has also been expanded to incorporate "any other relevant competent bodies" (EU Commission, 1999c, article 8) including, in some countries, civic organisations and non-governmental organisations. The Commission cannot dictate to sovereign states whom to include, but as a 1999 European Social Fund publication communicates, with the new Structural Fund guidelines, the Commission is urging member states toward the "expansion of the partnership beyond national and regional authorities to include in a real and meaningful way, local authorities and social and economic partners on the ground" (European Social Fund, 1999, p.3).

Partnership implies the on-going collaboration, facilitated by the state, of different sectors of society in the planning and implementation of development assistance; the principle further assumes that it is possible to articulate common development goals across diverse sectors and among different interest groups. The partnership principle incorporates within it certain key assumptions: that "partners" exist; in other words, that member states possess a differentiated set of institutions articulating separate interests within society; similarly it assumes that it is both necessary and possible to reconcile different interests within a comprehensive development plan to ensure socially beneficial development decisions.

In a speech delivered to the European Parliament on February 16, 2000, the President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, exhorted the various constituent bodies of the European Union (EU) to invest in the new Central European democracies by re-directing funds to the local level and rebuilding civil society. In this speech, Havel

asserted, on one hand, that it is in the interest of European Union member states to support civil society in candidate countries: he suggests that by helping to build a "richly structured, open and decentralised civil society, which is based on a confidence in the abilities of citizens and of their various communities," (Havel, 2000, p. 2) the European Union will gain new members better equipped for full participation in the Union.

Secondly, he proposes that not only should agents of civil society be supported, but that they should actually become the instruments of assistance; when the redistribution of development funds occurs at the lowest level, closest to the citizen and managed by civic associations, then assistance will be more transparent, efficient and appropriate in Havel's estimation. (Havel, 2000)

In exploring the application of the partnership principle in the Czech Republic, this paper argues that the regional policy and planning process did not achieve the aim of building capacity in civil society organizations or strengthening grassroots democracy. Christiansen (1999) has suggested that territorial and political decentralisation in the European Union has historically been undertaken for a number of reasons, including to improve efficiency in the administration of public services and to enhance democratic participation by bringing public decision-making closer to the citizen. This did not occur in the Czech Republic. This paper describes how the regional planning and development process remained largely in the hands of a closed loop of insiders and excluded meaningful public participation and consultation. It is posited that the study is that the preconditions necessary for participatory development processes are not present in this country in transition: the civic sector is weak and lacks diversity, state and economic interests remain highly intertwined, and government lacks the skills to carry out consultative process. The European Union partnership requirements imposed in these circumstances did not lead to an enhanced civil society.

The Czech Republic: Regional Policy and Planning

The Structural Funds constitute the primary means through which the EU provides development assistance to member states. These funds annually constitute approximately 30% of the EU budget and in 1999, the Structural Fund budget totalled EURO 31.4 billion (approximately USD 30 billion) (European Commission, 2000). It is generally assumed that current candidate countries will be in need of significant development aid once they become full members and thus the Accession Partnership between the EU and the Czech government declares explicitly that "one of the priorities for EU membership is harmonisation of regional and cohesion policies, especially the creation of a legal, administrative and budgetary framework for an integrated regional policy to provide for participation in EU Structural Fund programmes immediately after accession" (MMR, 1999a, p. 4).

In July 1997, in an assessment of the preparedness of candidate countries for membership, the EU emphasized an absence of a comprehensive regional policy in the Czech Republic. The Commission noted that "the Czech Republic lacks a regional policy... and the establishment of a legal, administrative and budgetary framework for an integrated regional policy consistent with standard EU regulations still awaits the Czech Republic" (S' 98, 1998b, p 1).

While there is no question that a regional policy was lacking, the EU opinion paid insufficient attention to the major obstacle facing the Czech government in the development of a comprehensive and transparent regional policy: the stark fact that regions did not exist. Early in 1990, in one of the earliest acts passed by the first post-communist transitional parliament, the existing regional institutions were abolished. Following the elimination of these regions -- or "kraje" -- and the immediate dismantling of regional assemblies, no new intermediate level of government was established. While the re-establishment of elected regional assemblies -- or 'higher territorial self-governing units' -- was mandated by the 1990 Czechoslovak constitution and again by the 1993 independent Czech constitution, this guarantee remained unfulfilled and a subject of intense political discussion throughout the 1990s. Realpolitik dictated,

however, that to be an EU member some regional level of administration was necessary.

Thus, In 1997, after years of heated deliberation and under considerable EU pressure, Act 34/1997 defining fourteen new regions was passed by the Czech parliament. On its heels, the government began to move quickly to pass a number of resolutions dealing with the regional policy vacuum and putting in place the foundation of a framework for eventually receiving the Structural Funds. Cabinet resolution 159/98, passed on 4 March 1998, formally adopted EU economic and social cohesion policy -- the basis for structural fund programming. This resolution also named the Ministry of Regional Development (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj - MMR) as the lead institution for EU structural fund preparations.

This resolution was followed a month later by resolution 235/98 on 8 April 1998, which outlined the government's new, broad-reaching Principles of Regional Policy. The new policy principles closely paralleled EU language, laying out a national framework for integrated socio-economic support to structurally disadvantaged regions, respecting key EU principles like concentration, programming, additionality and partnership.

This policy document also committed the government, in the immediate future, to creating a country-wide development strategy which would articulate specific regional development needs (S'98, 1998b; Pranci, 1999). The proposed strategy matched exactly the requirements set out by the European Union for the Regional Development Plan and the policy document stated clearly that the Strategy created for domestic purposes would also form the basis of the Regional Development Plan for external funding purposes. A complication would arise, however, making it impossible to translate directly from strategy to plan, and it was later stressed by officials from both the European Commission delegation and the MMR that the creation of the Strategy document was not a matter of concern for the Commission and was not subject to Commission scrutiny. The strategy would become a strictly internal Czech document (Field Notes)

Two months after the approval of the Policy document, on 17 June 1998, the Czech cabinet approved another resolution (417/98), setting out an administrative

framework for the participation of the Czech Republic in eventual EU structural fund programming. In the words of the MMR, this resolution mandated the creation of "the necessary organisational structure for the systematic development of conditions for making use of the Structural Funds, with an emphasis on the drafting of programme documents and their discussion" (MMR, 1999a, p. 7). Importantly, this resolution passed by the interim cabinet committed the government to adhering to the partnership principle (sic): "all the documents have to be produced in Partnership i.e. involving of all relevant levels -- government departments, regional and local actors, universities, economic and social partners and representatives of the European Commission" (MMR, 1999a, p. 7). Finally, in this resolution of June 17th, the cabinet also acknowledged the complication which had arisen regarding the fourteen new "kraje" -- the complication which would alter the purpose of the regional strategy process set out in the earlier resolution on the Principles of Regional Policy.

For while the fourteen regions had finally been delineated after years of debate, it had transpired that in terms of geographic and population size, these new 'kraje' did not conform to preferred EU statistical norms. As early as 1988 in Council regulation EEC no. 2052/88, the European Commission had stated that the most disadvantaged regions in need of structural fund assistance should be defined spatially according to the European Union system of 'Nomenclature des Unites Territoriales Statistiques' -- or "NUTS". The NUTS system permits a degree of standardisation for the Commission across regions in different member countries. According to EU recommendations, 'Objective 1' regions are to be defined at the NUTS II level with a population around a million inhabitants. In these terms, most of the new Czech Regions were too small. For the purpose of the administering Structural Funds, they would have to be consolidated.

In October 1998, resolution 707/98 defining NUTS II territorial units "for statistical and analytic purposes and for the needs of the EU" (MMR, 1999a, p. 7) was duly passed. The fourteen 'kraje' were collapsed into eight regions using population size, geographic area and regional GDP as criteria (MMR, 1999a). A delegation official conceded in conversation in November 1999 that the NUTS II complication had been unfortunate for the Czech Republic in light of the difficult political manoeuvring which

had been necessary to establish regions in the first place (Field Notes). The NUTS II designation complicated the relationship among citizens, future regional assemblies and the central government vis a vis EU funding mechanisms. The official emphasised, however, that the Commission's position on the NUTS II designation was a recommendation and not a requirement: the Commission prefers to deal with the larger NUTS II regions than with smaller regions like the new Czech kraje. It was not, however, the role of the Commission to dictate to sovereign nations, the official emphasized: the decision to consolidate regions for planning purposes had been the Czech government's. At least one Czech official saw the decision in a different light, noting that the designation of eight merged regions had not been a willing choice in the Czech Republic (Field Notes).

In the end, the boundary lines of the NUTS II regional entities were determined by the Czech Statistical office in collaboration with the MMR in a decision which has been presented as purely technical. Yet it has serious implications. For it is on the NUTS II level that EU programming and investment decisions will be made.

A plethora of questions regarding transparency and accountability arise with the NUTS II designation. How will the administrative entities relate to the elected assemblies at the kraje and local level or to citizens? Who will monitor their decisions? Several Ministry officials, when asked in late 1999, admitted that no one was exactly sure how the relations would work (Field Notes). The European Commission itself highlighted the accountability problem in its annual progress report issued on October 13, 1999 remarking that "the Czech Republic will be divided into 14 regions (similar to NUTS III level) from year 2000 and 8 regions (similar to NUTS II level). Clarification is needed regarding the division of responsibilities between the political (NUTS III) level and the administrative (NUTS II) level in order to ensure a smooth implementation" (European Commission, 1999b, p. 6).

Creating the Regional Development Plan

In late 1999, while work had begun on developing the regional strategic plans required under the approved Principles of Regional Policy, at the same time the MMR took on

the parallel task of putting in place a process for creating plans corresponding to the NUTS II geographic boundaries. To this end, a resolution (40/1999) was submitted to parliament and passed on 11 January 1999 committing the government to completing a Regional Development Plan for the period of 2000 - 2006 to be submitted by 31 December 1999 to the European Commission.

To develop the NUTS II regional plans, the MMR proceeded on two fronts. First, Regional Monitoring and Management Committees (RMMC) – mandated by structural funds guidelines -- had to be created for each NUTS II region to govern the planning process. Second, the MMR engaged the services of DHV, a Dutch planning firm active in the Czech Republic since the mid-90s, to manage the process of developing the regional documents. DHV formed a consortium with the Ostrava Regional Development Agency (itself an EU-funded quasi-governmental agency) and an Olomouc-based consulting company METHOD CONSULT. This regional planning consortium had the task of coordinating the preparation of the eight regional operational programme documents. To do this, they would work with Regional Monitoring and Management Committees as well as with other actors in the process such as regional administrative secretariats which would have to be established and sub-contractors who would have to be hired to carry out the information gathering and analysis on the ground all of whom needed to be identified.

The MMR began to establish the Regional Monitoring and Management Committees in February 1999. As the Commission's 2000 - 2006 guidelines state: "Monitoring Committees shall be set up by the Member State, in agreement with the managing authority after consultation with the partners. The partners shall promote the balanced participation of women and men" (European Commission, 1999c, Article 35). In practice, the structure, make-up and exact function of these Monitoring and Management Committees differ from country to country, depending on the nature of the assistance programs and shaped by the country's traditions and practices. In general, the Committees determine development priorities and oversee the creation of the Regional Operational Programmes and monitor their implementation, approving changes and amendments. In approving Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs),

Committee members are influential in determining to what ends development funds will be channelled and, in general terms, to whom. While the Committees usually do not have direct responsibility for specific project approval, the ROPs they develop must specify the category of final recipient in advance -- whether government agency, private company, or NGO.

To form RMMCs, MMR officials used the network which they had created only months for the strategy process. At that time, they had assembled fourteen committees corresponding to the new 'kraje'. These fourteen regional strategy (RKS) groups were made up of local officials, prominent business people and government representatives, who were supposed to lay out the needs and potential of the region. The MMR asked these groups to suggest whom from their membership might serve on the larger NUTS II committees. It was based on these recommendations, in consultation with other government ministries, that the RMMCs were established.

NGO Participation and Partnership

It was at this time that NGOs became involved in the process, claiming a right to participate under the EU's 'partnership' principle. Until this point, the regional development processes -- the drafting of policies and strategies -- had remained the domain of government officials and business representatives who had participated on Regional Strategy groups. But in autumn 1998, a non-governmental organisation, Centrum pro Kommunitni Prace (Centre for Community Work -- or CpKP) began to follow the regional strategy process and recognised that little information about potentially momentous development decisions was being provided to citizens or civic organisations (Jindrova et al., 1999). Founded in the mid-1990s, the mission of CpKP is to promote citizen participation in public decision-making through training and advocacy; interestingly, the organisation is heavily dependent on European Union funding sources through the EU PHARE Democracy Programme and EU-NROS programs (CpKP, 1999a; CpKP 2000).

An article written by CpKP leaders and published in the government-run weekly public affairs magazine Verejna Sprava/S'99 in March 1999 discusses the lack of NGO

participation in the planning process: "To prepare for the Regional Development Strategy... a methodology handbook [was produced]. Neither in the preparatory planning of the Regional Development Strategy, nor in this methodological material, however, was the role of the non-governmental, non-profit sector taken into account. This practice sharply contrasts with the approach to the creation of analogous documents taken in EU countries (for example, Ireland) where the public was consulted in detail about the preparation of regional development plans and where the non-profit sector was also expressly represented in the monitoring and management committees for the operation of the structural funds" (Jindrova et. al., 1999, p. 24).

Using EU partnership rhetoric, CpKP would become a key agent in pushing for NGO involvement in the development planning process. To that end, CpKP organised a number of workshops for interested NGO representatives in November 1998 on how to get involved in their regional strategy process. In addition to organizing workshops and seminars, CpKP also tapped into a broad-based national coalition of community-based organizations which was in the process of forming at the time. As the prime motivator of this coalition 'OKAMRK' (oborova konference aktivit mistnich, regionalnich a komunitnich -- or the sectoral conference of local, regional and community activities) CpKP used this forum to engage NGOs in the regional planning process. At the second OKAMRK meeting in March 1999, attended by over 50 NGO representatives, CpKP placed the lack of NGO participation in regional planning high on the agenda.

According to a CpKP representative, while the organisation was attempting to engage other NGOs, it was also approaching the Ministry of Regional Development in late 1998 and early 1999 to discuss the lack of civic involvement in the Strategy process. CpKP had learned about the NUTS II work in the pipeline and lobbied to be included, pointing to Western European member countries like Ireland and the UK, where NGOs had been included in decision-making structures. Since the NUTS II Committees were to oversee and monitor EU Structural Fund programming, they argued, the government was obliged to comply with the partnership principle; on this basis, CpKP maintained that civic organisations representing community interests should be involved (Field Notes). The two main reasons for NGO participation were

articulated by Roman Haken, a co-founder of CpKP, in a speech he delivered publicly at the 3rd OKAMRK meeting on October 22, 1999; he asserted that it was important for NGOs to be involved in Committee decisions, on the one hand, because the structural funds represent an important source of funds for the Czech Republic and the cash-strapped third sector should also have the opportunity to be potential recipients. Secondly, he asserted, the public needed to know what was being proposed and the NGOs needed to be able to scrutinise the plans. He expressed the fear that these plans might contain detrimental projects which might have important consequences for communities (Field Notes).

CpKP was ultimately successful in its attempt to introduce NGO representatives into Regional Management and Monitoring Committees through the intervention of the Cabinet Committee on the Non-Governmental Sector. Represented by Haken, CpKP holds a seat on this committee and in this capacity put forward a motion requesting NGO involvement. The committee passed a request to the MMR in late 1998 and then in early 1999, space was allotted to one NGO representative per committee. OKAMRK was handed the task of delegating the NGO representatives.

A working group was struck within OKAMRK. It determined that NGO representatives would be identified through regional NGO elections. Candidates for the NGO seats would have to meet certain qualifications, the working group decided: they needed to be able to devote time to the process, to commit to attending all meetings, to be able to channel information to other regional NGOs by providing updates and written materials and to agree to serve as the voice for the interests of the NGO community on the committees (Field Notes). This would prove to be an onerous task.

The NGO delegation process, which was carried out in different regions from March to May 1999, was not without problems -- both practical and conceptual. First, the notion of electing an NGO activist within each region to "represent" the diverse interests of various civic organisations -- environmental, social, health-related, religious, or secular -- was contested (Field Notes). The question of 'representativeness' was echoed in conversations with several NGO participants in the process as well as others from outside the NGO community. A team member from the ROP planning consortium

considered the NGO appointments controversial and one planning consultant believed that NGO participation on the committees was inappropriate: it gave one individual too much power and it would be more appropriate for NGOs to be included later in the process – perhaps when concrete projects were being discussed (Field Notes). As Goetz & Hargetts (1999) have written, officials within state structures in post-communist countries are often reluctant to recognise institutions of organised civil society as legitimate representatives of societal interests and actually perceive NGOs as a constraining force on democratic decision-making.

The NGO election process does highlight, in any case, the awkward fit of these individual agents of civil society within the mechanics of representative democracy; they are, at once, "the foundation of the democratic state and a guarantee of its political stability" (Havel, 2000) and yet on an individual level it is difficult to speak of these associations as representative.

In addition to conceptual problems, there were also practical issues to contend with. A lack of communication prevailed among the different actors such as the ministries, the OKAMRK working group, and regional administrative secretariats -- a problem exacerbated by the tight time frame. Furthermore not all parties understood how the NGO delegation process should work. In the city-region of Prague, the election conference was erroneously not held until the end of May, which was then deemed to be too late; the NGO representative was not accepted on the committee by Chairman Kovarik and was later allowed to attend meetings only with special, non-voting status. In another NUTS II region, the chairman of the RMMC initially bypassed the delegation process and simply appointed an NGO person whom he had met the previous year to the committee without even consulting the individual (Field Notes).

Establishing RMMCs

While the elections for NGO delegates were being held in the spring, Regional Management and Monitoring Committee meetings were also starting to be convened in most NUTS II regions. As the minutes from the inaugural meeting in the Northeast NUTS II district held in March 1999 indicate, however, none of the gatherings of the

Committees could be considered official until the Ministry of Regional Development formally appointed members to their positions. It was, in fact, not until the last week in May -- two months into the Committee gatherings -- when the official letters of appointment -- or "decrees" -- were signed by the Minister for Regional Development and sent. And it was at the following meetings in most regions that confusion erupted. Participants from the NUTS II regions of Ostrava, the Northeast, the Southeast, Central Moravia and Central Bohemia all recount a similar story: a heavy-handed replacement of committee members. Many 'old' members -- including in some cases the delegated NGO representatives -- found themselves off the list, abruptly replaced by new members, who were suddenly sitting at the table. According to one participant, this surprising turn of events was fundamentally political: the Minister of Regional Development had been pressured by his party - the Social Democrats - to ensure strong party representation on the Committees (Field Notes). A Ministry official involved in the process also felt that this assessment was accurate (Field Notes). Apart from illustrating the relatively heavy-handed practices of parties and state agencies in this new democracy, this sudden substitution perhaps more importantly indicates that within political structures, a general belief had developed that these positions were a locus of future influence with the potential for control over the significant sums of structural fund money.

The final composition of the Committees is shown in table 1, which provides a breakdown of members according to sex and organisational affiliation. The central government (CEN GOV'T) category includes employees from both ministries and government district offices including, for example, labour offices; it also includes parliamentarians, senators, and in one case a representative of a central-government funded agency. In short, it comprises those people who represent national or state interests. The local government (LOC GOV'T) category includes elected and appointed local officials, including employees of local government-owned agencies like public transit authorities or local government associations. The economic (ECON) category includes the representatives of major economic interest groups, either directly from large firms or Chambers of Commerce, business associations like the Association of

Entrepreneurs in the Construction Industry, or agricultural interest groups. The academic (ACAD) category comprehends participants from Czech universities and the NGO category includes representatives from non-governmental civic organisations and, in the case of the Southeast, one representative of the Catholic Church. The category "none" refers to those committee members without a stated affiliation.

Table 1 *Composition of Regional Monitoring and Management Committees*

	Total	Men#	Women#	CEN GOV'T	LOC GOV'T	ECON	UNION	ACAD	NGO	NONE
Central Bohemia	30	28	2	13	13	3	1			
Northwest Bohemia	27	27	0	14	7	4		1	1	
Southwest Bohemia	34	29	5	16	8	5	1	2	1	1
Northeast	35	32	3	14	13	4	1	1	1	1
Ostravsko	31	29	2	13	10	4	1	1	1	1
Central Moravia	30	27	3	14	10	3	1	1	1	
Southeast	30	28	2	14	7	5	1	1	2	
Praha	29	27	2	13	10	3	1	2		
TOTAL	246	227	19	111	78	31	7	9	7	3

Data drawn from membership lists posted on MMR website at www.mmr.cz downloaded 27.9.1999

This breakdown does prompt a few remarks regarding the adherence to the EU partnership principle. First, women are strongly under-represented in the process with more than 90% of Committee places taken by men. This is the case despite the fact that EU guidelines state that promoting equality between men and women is an explicit goal of the partnership principle (European Commission, 1999c, article 8). It is, secondly, worthy of comment that based on the ethnicity of last names provided on the list of RMMC members, it would appear that there is a distinct under-representation of minorities on committees -- notably no Czech Roma names appear -- though this is a point which would certainly require further direct investigation. A further remark relates to the imbalance between the governmental sector on the one hand -- whether central or local -- and the sphere of 'civil society' -- the layer of organisations which inhabits the public space between the individual citizen and the state. In keeping with the traditional definition of 'civil society', in which business and economic actors are a component, fewer than 25% percent of the Committee members represent agents of organised civil society. It can be also be argued, however, that the lines between the state and economic sectors in this post-communist country remain fuzzy with the interests of both closely intertwined under the conditions of incomplete privatisation and in the absence of conflict of interest legislation; if we consider economic actors separately, in this light, then the participation of non-state, non-business interests represents only 26 people out of 246, or 11%.

Developing the Planning Documents

The task of each Regional Monitoring and Management Committee was to review and approve planning materials prepared by sub-contracting agencies. The work was divided into three phases: first in each region, a "consultation document" was to be prepared for review and approval by each Committee by June 1999. This document would set the scope of the ROP. The second phase involved the development of the so-called 'strategic-analytical' section of the ROP by September 1999 and the third phase would focus on creating a detailed financial and implementation plan by November 1999. The final ROP would take the shape of a six-year strategic plan --

including a detailed analysis of a region's strengths and weaknesses, an articulation of the region's strategic vision based on this 'SWOT' analysis, and a list of separate measures aimed at fulfilling the strategic vision and improving the region's socio-economic condition. The ROP would include a budget and indicate final beneficiaries. As noted above, while the ROP would not necessarily specify actual recipients or actual projects, the RMMCs would approve general programming and designate the category of recipients.

Work began on the consultation documents in April and May 1999 -- prior to the MMR's controversial replacement of committee members. The material in these documents was drawn directly from the regional strategies which had been developed a few months earlier. While the consultation document was, in theory, the basis for all further decisions, in fact Committee input was severely limited in the development of these documents due to time constraints. A CpKP document notes that in the Southwest region, the members of the RMMC received a draft of several hundred pages for review on May 17, were then required to submit comments by May 25 to the secretariat, so that local planning consultants could incorporate their opinions into a submission to the DHV consortium by May 31 (CpKP, 2000). Correspondence issued by the head of secretariat of the Northeast NUTS II region on May 10, 1999 to Committee members tells a similar story:

"We will attempt to collect the background materials for review in electronic form (this amounts to hundreds of pages, in total) and in the interest of saving time and saving paper and postage costs, we will send the material to members of the Committee and working groups by e-mail...Given the extraordinarily tight timeline for preparing the consultation document, I apologise in advance for any potential delays in sending the material to you before the RMMC meeting" (Sekretariat RRMV Severovychod, 1999).

A result of the time pressure, one planning consultant admitted, was consultation documents of poor quality in which the analysis was extremely superficial (Field Notes). The time pressure, furthermore, did not let up in any of the subsequent phases. Prague Committee meeting minutes show that the consultation materials produced for the second phase of the ROP which comprised of hundreds of pages was sent by e-mail from the Prague Planning Office on Friday 24 September and the Committee meeting to discuss and approve this document was held on the following Monday (City of Prague, 1999). Participants from the Northeast, Prague, Central Moravia, Ostrava, and Northwest RMMCs all spoke about the untenable time pressure to turn over and approve documents where it was physically not possible to read carefully and comment thoughtfully on the materials (Field Notes).

This pressure, according to participants, had a variety of negative effects. One planning consultant complained that the planning team he worked with had been required to carry out a year's worth of work in the space of four months (Field Notes). One participant noted that the short time available for advance preparation in reading the documents resulted in participants focusing specifically on their own area of interest, to ensure that their turf -- if nothing else -- was protected (Field Notes). One NGO participant also noted that the time pressure, combined with the expense of reproducing documents, made it virtually impossible to share the materials with the regional NGOs and get feedback from them. Another NGO participant from a different region echoed these sentiments stating his conviction that only those individuals from organised interest groups could have an impact in the Committee sessions. He felt that the NGO coalitions did not have this kind of agenda and didn't have the time or capacity to develop a strong viewpoint as their interests were too disparate (Field Notes). In this sense, the NGO members of RMMCs, instead of being active representatives of civic interests, played rather a kind of weak watchdog role.

Public Consultation and Involvement

Too much to do and too little time, finally, was the reason given by a number of participants for the lack of full public consultation or comprehensive public presentation

of the plan -- either on a national or regional level -- prior to submission to the European Commission at the end of 1999. The Ministry of Regional Development claimed in a September 1999 publication that "the official public discussion of the RDP draft will take place in the course of October and the public will have an opportunity to comment on this policy document" (MMR, 1999a, p. 16). This did not occur though the National Development Plan and individual ROPs were posted on the Internet in zipped format, which was considered by the government to be the primary means of consulting the broader public (MMR, 1999a, p. 16).

A member of the DHV/ARR/METHOD CONSULT consortium noted in a conversation held in late October that there had not been time for any public presentation (Field Notes). In a November conversation, a member of the Prague city planning staff articulated the opinion that a public presentation was not necessary, noting that the full City Council would also not have an opportunity to approve or discuss the plan. The ROP was finished, the planner explained, and there was no time or opportunity to change anything. He asserted that in any case there was no need for public consultation: that there had been broad representation on the Committee, including an 'NGO woman' and that the whole process was really only an exercise for the purposes of the EU and not of real import for the city given Prague's exclusion from the 'objective 1' category (Field Notes).

Finalising the Plan

On 11 October 1999 -- a mere 10 months after the government resolution mandating the plan and only 6 months after the first RMMC meetings -- the National Development Plan was compiled in draft form and submitted to the Czech cabinet by the MMR. The draft was endorsed by cabinet on October 26 and a new set of tasks were handed down to the MMR to finalise the document for submission to Brussels. In addition to translating the document into English -- a problematic task in itself -- the plan was subject to an ex ante evaluation. Under the Structural Fund guidelines, a preliminary evaluation is required to assess the clarity and viability of a plan prior to its implementation. The contract for the ex ante evaluation was awarded to Jan Maarten

de Vet of the Netherlands Economic Institute in collaboration with Jiri Blazek, from the Policy Advisory Unit (PAU) - Task Force. The PAU-Task Force is a special agency which was set up with EU and Czech government resources adjunct to the MMR, to provide specialised advisory services on structural fund preparation. As noted in a MMR publication, the PAU co-operated closely with the MMR in drafting the Plan (MMR, 1999a). In the introduction to the evaluation document, the authors state, however, that as they did not directly write the documents under review, they could undertake the evaluation without bias (Blazek & de Vet, 1999).

What were the conclusions of the evaluation team regarding the Czech Regional Development Plan? With respect to the degree to which the document was prepared in partnership among different sectors in society and subject to public consultation the evaluation is positive. While the evaluators note that the planning process was hindered by the fact that institutions had to be created at the NUTS II level while planning was already underway, the evaluators maintain that "the involvement of a large number of partners must be commended -- whether through their direct participation on preparatory committees and the RMMCs or through the consultation process in which a relatively broad spectrum of participants, relevant to the given areas, was approached" (Blazek, de Vet, 1999, p. 25).

Concluding Remarks

On 11 October 1999, the Minister of Regional Development stated that the necessary legislation and infrastructure had been put in place in the Czech Republic to meet EU regional policy obligations; the new policies and institutions -- as well as the programming documents generated -- had been developed in keeping with EU principles such as 'partnership'. The Czech Republic, the Minister announced, was prepared to meet the requirements of the EU's *acquis communautaire* for Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments outlined in Chapter 21 (Verejna sprava '99, 1999).

The Minister's optimistic statement reflects the enormous effort and energy invested in creating a regional policy framework. It is questionable, however, whether

the process itself or the outcomes as described in the planning documents will enhance balanced democratic development and civil society into the future. In reviewing the process to date, we find that the articulation of regional development policy and a National Development Plan in the Czech Republic falls short on several counts.

The process was driven strongly by the requirements of the state and EU institutions, with little opportunity for meaningful civic input. The composition of the RMMCs were imbalanced and politically biased. Women were strongly under-represented in these groups. Similarly, it would appear that ethnic minorities were under-represented, particularly Czech Roma. The participation of non-governmental, non-business representatives from labour unions, academia and civic organisations numbered merely 26 of the 246 RMMC members, or 11%. The final program documents cannot, in this light, be said to have been the result of broad partnership.

It is important to note that this lack of broad participation contradicts the claims of the Ministry of Regional Development, which prominently discussed commitments to 'partnership' and public involvement. In September 1999, referring to the preparation of the ROP consultation documents, the Ministry of Regional Development noted that "all the consultation documents were developed in broad co-operation of public, special-interest non-governmental and non-profit organisations, as well as the business sphere, professional associations and other organisations" (MMR, 1999a, p.13). This claim is open to further criticism since, in reality, there was a limited role for outside participants given the speed at which the documents were prepared. Finally, the public consultation which did occur was primarily through the internet. As a means of engaging the broader public, this practice can be called into question as computer ownership and access remains limited in the Czech Republic (Flashcommerce, 1999).

Indeed, the fact that the evaluation of the final plan was carried out by one of the people who had helped in the preparation of the document itself is symptomatic of the degree to which the process was folded in upon itself and realized by a closed loop of insiders.

Thus, while the notion of partnership in decision-making required by EU structures offered the potential for the Czech Republic to include broader participation in

decision-making process, this aim was not realized. Whether intentionally or inadvertently, the rapidity with which the policy and planning process was undertaken resulted in the effort being controlled by a narrow band of state and insider interest groups. Transparency was lacking, the civic sector was weak and lacking in diversity, and the state unwilling or unable to engage the public. Throughout the process, links between economic and political interests remain highly intertwined and decisions were not subject to public scrutiny. The regional policy and planning process has remained largely in the hands of a limited number of elite participants. Despite President Havel's exhortations, the process of implementing EU principles in the post-communist conditions in the Czech Republic has not resulted in the devolution of decision-making to lower-level civic institutions or the strengthening of civil society.

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