

Think
Visegrad
V4 Think-Tank Platform

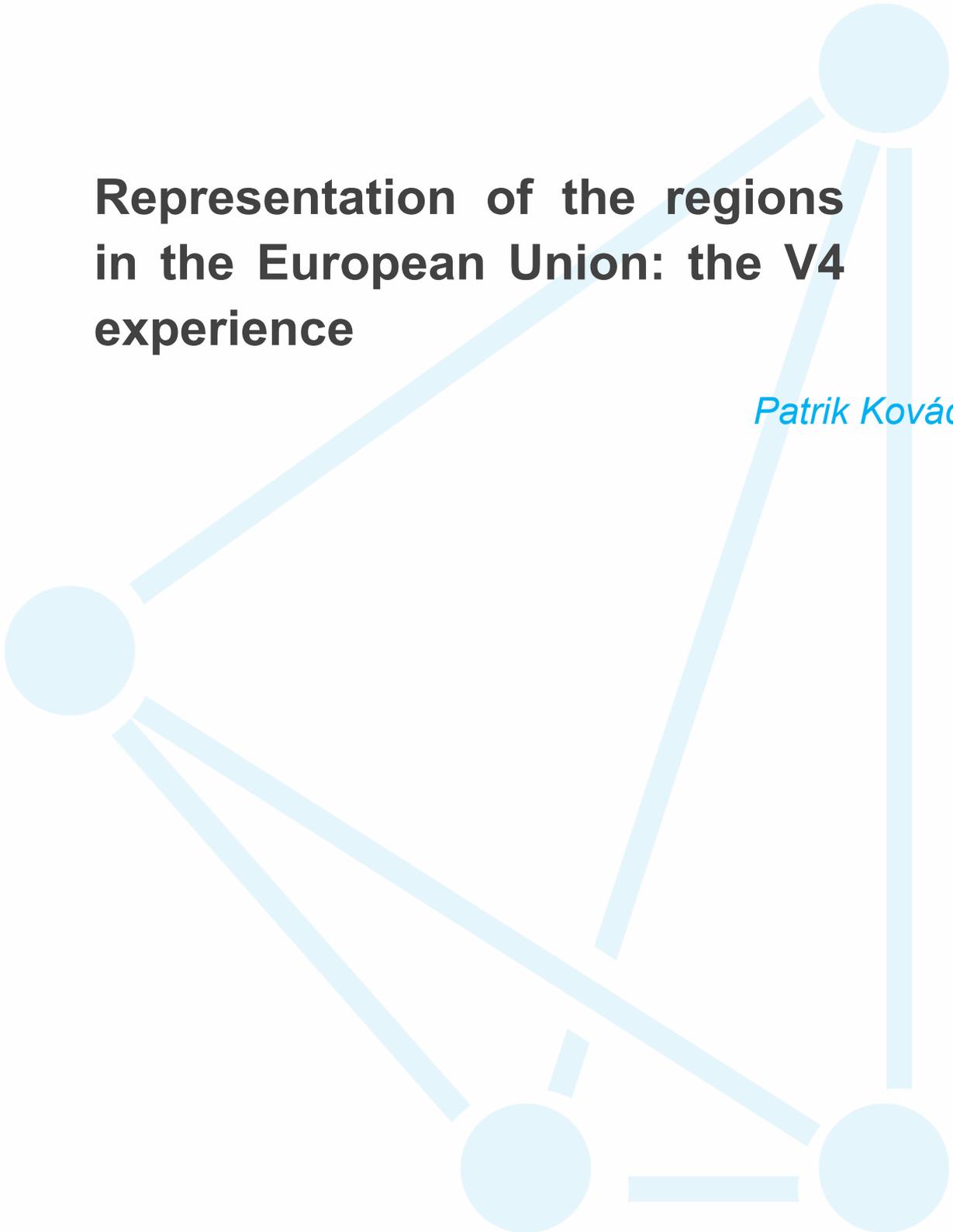
POLICY BRIEF

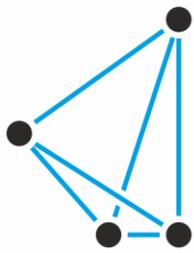
2019/December

Think Visegrad in Brussels

Representation of the regions in the European Union: the V4 experience

Patrik Kováč





Introduction

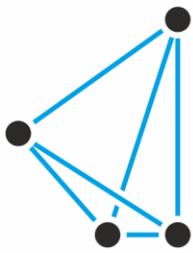
Apart from national governments, interests of the citizens could be also represented by regional and local authorities. Regional politicians are in more frequent contact with their electorate which often allows them to better identify and address their needs. The European Union offers several possibilities to promote and advocate interests of regions. The only formal institution with direct representation of the regional and local politicians is the European Committee of the Regions. However, there are other informal options such as establishing of Regional office in Brussels or participating in bigger regional platforms. This paper examines what is the place of the regions in the EU policy shaping process with the specific focus on the regions of the Visegrad Four countries. The paper builds on series of research interviews with the representatives of the Visegrad Four Regional offices in Brussels, National coordinators and members of the European Committee of the Regions, Permanent representations to the EU, experts of the European Commission and regional platforms, conducted in September and October 2019, as part of the Think Visegrad Fellowship in Brussels.

What is a region?

The term *region* is a part of our basic vocabulary. However, when looking at it in more detail, its definition is not that clear at all. In its widest meaning, the expression could be replaced by synonyms like land or territory. The word *region* is often used to identify a larger group of countries (e.g. Western Balkan region, Central European region and many other), or to address the territory overlapping borders of national states. At the sub-national level, it is not any clearer. The understanding of the term differs from country to country and goes hand in hand with the different systems of local and regional administration. These are primarily linked to different sizes and competences of the regional authorities. Differences can be seen especially between bigger and smaller member states.

In order to understand the situation in the member states, Eurostat has developed its own system of regional statistics by establishing the Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) classification at the beginning of 1970s. The classification puts together both population thresholds and favours territorial administrative divisions of the member states¹, even though the NUTS regions do not always copy the regional administration structure of the particular country.

¹ More about NUTS: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/principles-and-characteristics>



Although the NUTS system helps with the statistics, institutionally there is not any universal EU definition of a term *region*, and it is solely up to national legislation of the member states what part of their territory they consider to be called region. In this paper, the term region is understood as a highest sub-national authority with its own legislative or regulative powers executable at the particular area of the country.

Comparing V4 regional administration systems

Each Visegrad Four country has different system of local and regional administration. According to the classification of Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)², Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia are composed of 14, 16 and 8 regions respectively, while Hungary has 19 counties characterized as intermediate (lower) level of administration which separates Hungary from the rest of Visegrad Four countries. On the other hand, comparing the size of population per region, it is Poland which stands out by average of 2.37 million inhabitants per region, compared to 0.76 million in Czech Republic, 0.68 million in Slovakia and 0.51 million in Hungary. Applying the EU typology, all Polish voivodeships meet the NUTS2 criteria, while in Czech Republic it is only two regions (Prague and Central Bohemia). All regions in Slovakia and Hungary are NUTS3.³

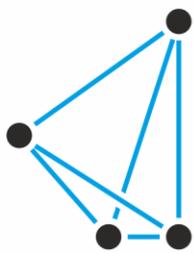
There are furthermore tangible differences in the competences of regional administrations. Hungarian counties, especially after centralization reform in 2012, have the least competences. In comparison to other Visegrad regions, they lack authority in road management, transport, environment, and parts of other competences were also centralized.⁴ Another dimension is the access to the structural funds. Unlike other V4 regions, Polish voivodeships, due to their NUTS2 size, are eligible to negotiate their own Regional Operational Programs directly with the European Commission.

This overview clearly illustrates that region in each country, even when comparing the Visegrad Four countries, has always different meaning. Polish regions have both the biggest territory and the broadest competences. Slovakia and Czech Republic are quite similar in terms of size and competences, while Hungarian regions are the smallest with correspondingly lowest competences. If compared to other EU Member States, the division would be even bigger, since none of the V4 regions have strong legislative powers such as regions with own government like Austria, Belgium, Germany or Italy.

² Local and Regional Government in Europe: Structure and Competences, CCRE: https://ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/CEMR_structures_and_competences_2016_EN.pdf

³ The list of all NUTS regions valid until 31. december 2010 is available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:02003R1059-20180118&qid=1519136585935>

⁴ OECD/UCLG (2019) 2019 Report of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment – Country Profiles. Pg. 340. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/Observatory-on-Subnational-Government-Finance-and-Investment.htm>



Regardless of their size and the scope of their powers, all these regions are recognized at the European level as relevant players and have the right to be represented in multiple ways - in the European Committee of the Regions, by opening their own Regional Office in Brussels, membership in formal and informal platforms or by being an active player participating in networking, and other *ad hoc* initiatives.

European Committee of the Regions

Although 60-70% of European legislation has a direct impact on regional and local governments,⁵ the institutional strength of the regions in the legislation process is quite limited. The only formal body to directly advocate regions interests is the European Committee of the Regions (CoR).

Until Brexit takes place, the CoR still gathers 350 representatives from all Member state countries. The size of a country's representation is contingent on the size of the respective country. Similarly to the European Parliament, the distribution of seats favours smaller countries, who obtain more seats in proportion to their population. As for the Visegrad Four Poland has 21 seats, the Czech Republic and Hungary are both represented by 12 members each, and Slovakia has 9 representatives. While the mission of the CoR is seemingly unambiguous, in practice there are several obstacles, which limit actual representation of regional interests through the CoR.

According to the EU Treaties, European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament are obliged to consult the CoR when adopting new legislation with impact on regions and cities, such as health, education, employment, social policy, economic and social cohesion, and more.⁶ Subsequently, the CoR prepares and adopts an opinion, which is later circulated among all relevant actors. The opinion, however, has only advisory nature and is not formally binding. The power of the CoR opinions therefore relies mainly on the strength of its argument, supported by informal aspects such as personal capacities and active approach of the rapporteur and other CoR representatives. Since 2010, the CoR publishes its Annual Reports on the Impact of CoR Opinion⁷, which measures the impact of respective opinions through the years of legislative process.

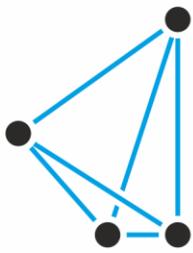
The CoR adopts over 50 opinions each year in average.⁸ This means one seventh of the CoR members get the chance to become a rapporteur who is directly responsible for drafting the opinion, hence has a unique opportunity to set the tone of the opinion and point out issues most relevant for his or her region. Additionally, it is

⁵ Website of the CoR - Key facts: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/about>

⁶ Article 307, Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12016ME/TXT>

⁷ Available at: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/opinions.aspx>

⁸ See ref. 5.



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important to note that similarly to the European Parliament, the division of labor in the CoR is based on the system of political groups, and the assignment of the opinions depends on the political agreement among (and within) those groups. Having an interest in specific topic therefore does not automatically guarantee the opportunity to lead. However, there are no restrictions for other CoR members to actively approach the rapporteur in order to push forward their ideas while writing the opinion, as well as discussing it within CoRs six Commissions and Plenary sessions.

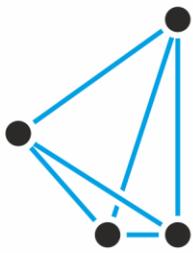
Unlike the MEPs, who are fulltime EU employees, the members of the CoR are usually regional and local politicians (heads of regional administrations, mayors or members of local parliaments) and have primary duties at home. This naturally limits their capacity to fully represent the interests of their region at the EU level. In order to do so, it is a necessity to have a permanent support in Brussels, either through Regional offices as it is in case of Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, or through the Permanent representation, like Hungary.

Another limiting factor is the size of the CoR. Having 350 seats occupied both by the representatives of regions and towns, it can safely be concluded that by far the majority of the 1 348 EU NUTS3 regions is not directly represented. Keeping in mind political differences as well as strategic priorities of each region, it can hardly be expected that those regions are effectively represented by other regions from the same or another country. Regions without their 'own' representative in the CoR, therefore, need to find other tools and ways to advocate their interests at the European level.

In sum, the CoR is the only institution that guarantees direct access of the regions and local administration to the legislation process of the EU. For those having representation in the CoR, it is a good platform for networking, experience sharing and promoting their interests. The instrument of opinions, to greater or lesser extent, helps steering EU legislation in line with the priorities of the regions, despite only being advisory in nature. There are not any indications this should change, since it would require wider political discussion followed by the Lisbon Treaty change, which is still off the European Council's table.

Regional Office in Brussels

The European project with all its specifics often lays the foundation for new innovative solutions. The same applies to the model of representation of sub-national authorities through the establishing of offices in Brussels. The first city to officially open its representation in Brussels in 1984 was Birmingham (UK), which was



followed by the representation of German States four years afterwards.⁹ Currently, there are approximately 215 regional and local offices present in Brussels,¹⁰ but the number keeps constantly changing with the change of priorities of respective authorities.

Czech regions are represented by four offices, while only two of them (Prague and South Moravian Region) are personally present throughout the year. Hungary is actively present only through its capital Budapest. Poland, as the only Visegrad Four country, is represented by all 16 voivodships. Slovakia has officially opened five offices, but only two (Bratislava and Kosice regions) are currently active.

The motivation to establish a so called 'Brussels office' differs from region to region. The first office in the 1980s was opened in order to maximize access to EU funds. Later, offices were also opened with the aim of exploiting possibilities for lobbying for regional interests or to fulfil their political ambitions in their respective home country.¹¹ According to Richard Brooš, Third Secretary, Permanent Representation of the Slovak Republic to the EU, the activities of the Brussels offices might be divided into three main categories: projects, policy and promotion.¹² 'Projects' means searching for project and funding opportunities and sharing this information with the regional administration; 'policy' stands for advocating of own interest towards the EU and other actors; and 'promotion' ensures the visibility of the region in general. Huysseune and Jans in their research identify four areas of action: "information management, networking, liaison between local and regional authorities and the EU, and the influencing of EU policy."¹³

The added value of a Brussels office in each field, including representation of the interest towards the EU and influencing the EU policy, needs to be evaluated in accordance with a capacity and priorities of each region. Izabela Gorczyca, Coordinator of the Polish delegation to the CoR and Director of the Office of the Wielkopolska Region in Brussels, points out that the success of the office's mission starts 'at home' with the clear setting of priorities adequate to the competences and size of the representation in Brussels.¹⁴ While the smallest offices in Brussels have only one employee, the biggest employ over 40 people. If the objective is not set clearly and one person tries to accomplish all possible tasks, it is very likely to end up in failure. According to Thomas Wobben, Director for Legislative Work in the CoR and Former Head of Representation of Saxony-Anhalt to the EU, the Brussels office could be an added value to all regions, but only if a clear vision and willingness to invest

⁹ Huysseune, M. & Jans, T.: 'Brussels as the capital of a Europe of the regions?', Brussels Studies [Online], General collection, no 16, Online since 25 February 2008, URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/547>, paragraph 4.

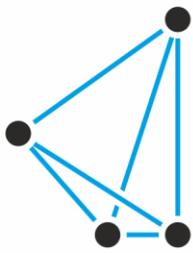
¹⁰ Website of the CoR - List of regional offices (updated on 11.7.2019), CoR. Available at: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/members/Documents/regional-offices-organisations.pdf>

¹¹ Huysseune, M. & Jans, T., paragraph 9.

¹² Brooš R. Interviewed by: Kováč P. (2nd October 2019).

¹³ Huysseune, M. & Jans, T., paragraph 16.

¹⁴ Gorczyca, I. Interviewed by: Kováč, P. (30th September 2019)



both time and financial resources are present.¹⁵ Especially lobbying and networking are very time-consuming until one gets to know all stakeholders and partners for dialogue. The personal stability is crucial since many informal contacts are non-transferable.

Some V4 Brussels offices, such as the South Moravian, rather focus on information sharing and promotion of the region in lieu of prioritizing a 'policy' dimension.¹⁶ Others, such as the Košice region, put more emphasis on achieving their policy aims through the support of the delegation in the CoR.¹⁷ Mogdolna Baranyi, Coordinator of Hungarian delegation to the CoR, and János Karácsony, Member of the CoR, explained that all Hungarian Brussels offices except Budapest were closed due to the inability to articulate their needs and visions to the EU institution, and they consider themselves sufficiently represented through the CoR and the Permanent Representation.¹⁸

The Brussels office is a multifaceted tool. It can be used as promotional agency, source of useful information about funding opportunities, contact point to arrange the logistics for the regional politicians travelling to Brussels, but also an active player advocating the interests of the region towards the EU and other stakeholders. It is up to each region to decide, what would be the role of their representation. Unlike the CoR, the number of seats is not limited and gives equal opportunity to all European regions to promote and advocate their interests in informal way, which in some cases may be even more effective than channeling interests through the CoR.

Other means of representation

The intention to bring European policy closer to the regions can be also seen in newly established format of Dialogues with Regional offices introduced by the European Commission in July 2019.¹⁹ If meetings become regular, it could be considered a new semi-formal way of influencing the EU policy in the field of Regional and Urban Policy. Attendance at quarterly meetings is available for the representatives of accredited offices. Once a year the meeting will take a place of the plenary session to exchange ideas with the Commissioner.

Another option to support the amplification of interests of the region are platforms. In general, platforms unite regions with similar interests, and their main aim is both to share useful information and to represent interests of their members. Platforms representatives are very often professionals, who are capable of putting

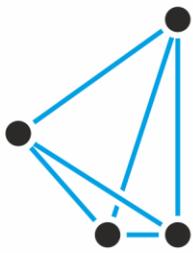
¹⁵ Wobben, T. Interviewed by: Kováč P. (2nd October 2019).

¹⁶ Nováčková, V. - Director of the Representation of the South Moravian Region to the EU. Interviewed by: Kováč P. (1st October 2019).

¹⁷ Roháč, M. - Head of Kosice Region Brussels Office. Interviewed by: Kováč P. (3rd October 2019).

¹⁸ Baranyi, M. & Karácsony, J. Interviewed by: Kováč, P. (30th September 2019)

¹⁹ More information: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/communication/regional-offices/



forward evidence-based arguments supported by relevant data, which may be a difficult task, especially for smaller representations (or regions without any permanent representation). Some platforms, like Assembly of European Regions (AER),²⁰ The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)²¹, or European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN),²² are formally institutionalized and accept members after paying the membership fee. Other platforms are operating on more informal level, and to discover them and to become a member one needs to get to know the right people, most effectively by being present in Brussels and attending social events and other networking occasions.

Conclusion

The EU offers several channels for regions to promote their interests. The only institutionalized body is the European Committee of the Regions, which has an advisory function when adopting new legislation relevant to regional or local authorities. The most effective way of representing regional interests through the CoR is to be active in the process of opinion drafting as well as its further promotion towards all stakeholders once opinions are published. Another tool is establishing Regional offices in Brussels, which may serve different purposes, such as gathering information on project and funding opportunities, promotion of region, but also advocating regional interests through networking and lobbying. Regions may also join various regional platforms, who often have stronger capacity and a better position to negotiate since they represent more citizens.

The size and competences of the regions have a direct link on the capacity of the region to promote its interests to the EU. Large differences can also be found among the Visegrad regions; while Polish voivodships represent the largest number of citizens and have the widest competences, Hungarian counties are the opposite.

Regardless of which tool a region chooses, it is crucial to have clearly defined aim and long-term priorities. These need to be in line both with the competences of the region and capacity of the representatives in the CoR or in the Regional office. Lobbying in particular requires long-term persistence, stability and professionalism to facilitate the creation of a unique network of contacts, which will later help the region achieve its aims.

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²⁰ More information: <https://aer.eu/>

²¹ More information: <https://www.ccre.org/>

²² More information: <https://errin.eu/>