

Subnational Governance Approaches on the Rise—Reviewing a Decade of Eastern European Regionalization Research

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ABSTRACT This article reviews the past decade of decentralization and regionalization research on the new Eastern European member states of the EU (EU-10). We classify the existing literature according to focus of analysis, explanatory programme and methodological preferences, and propose a distinction between three different research agendas: system transformation, EU conditionality and subnational governance. We argue that with respect to the EU-10, scholarly interest in the perspectives of state transformation and conditionality is waning. By contrast, the subnational governance approach is growing in relevance because it represents the cornerstone of a multi-level governance perspective that is able to integrate what have up to now been separate debates about regionalism in Eastern and Western Europe.

KEY WORDS: Decentralization, regionalization, new EU member states, transition, conditionality, subnational governance

Introduction

The communist regimes of Eastern Europe were strictly organized as unitary states that suppressed any and all demands for regional or local political emancipation. Thus, the collapse of communism awoke expectations that the countries concerned would quickly catch up with the Western European trend of transferring more and more political authority and rights of autonomy from the national to sub-state levels. At the beginning of the 1990s, it was widely believed that the ongoing political transformation in Eastern Europe would lead to comprehensive processes of regionalization and decentralization. And, in fact, the (re)creation of subnational political structures—albeit of many different shapes and sizes—was subsequently witnessed virtually all over what is known today as the EU-10, that is, the Eastern and South-eastern European states that recently joined the European Union. Political scientists took up the

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issue and produced a great number of studies seeking to describe and understand the subnational transformations that were being observed. Now, more than 15 years after the implosion of the communist regimes, it seems time to take stock and put some kind of order on what we have learned from the many studies on decentralization and regionalization in the EU-10. One good reason is that while we can find numerous empirical works on this topic, little accumulation of theoretical knowledge seems to have taken place. Only a few studies link their results to other research in the field, and so precious potential for comparability and conceptual consolidation has been wasted. The consequence of this negligence is that our descriptive and theoretical understanding of the phenomena of regionalization and decentralization in the new Eastern European EU member states is far inferior to what otherwise might have been possible. Our article cannot hope to remedy this state of affairs, but it can at least lay the ground for the much-needed conceptual consolidation by reviewing the scholarly output of the last decade and by classifying the studies according to their research agenda, their explanatory programme and their methodological preferences.

The article proceeds as follows. In the following section, we will justify our choice of criteria for selecting the regionalization and decentralization literature that constitutes the basis of the review. Subsequently, the third section will provide a short overview of the state of the art and the major outcomes of subnational reforms in the EU-10. In the fourth and main section, we will propose a system for classifying the existing literature. We suggest that regionalization and decentralization research is best differentiated in accordance with three analytically distinct research agendas. In a nutshell, we will argue that scholarly interest in regionalization and decentralization as indicators and outcomes of state transformation and (less so) EU conditionality is waning. What we see, instead, is the emergence of a subnational governance approach rooted in a policy-analytical perspective. As we will explain in the concluding section, the subnational governance approach is growing in relevance precisely because it constitutes a platform for a multi-level governance perspective that is able to integrate the heretofore separate debates about regionalism in Eastern and Western Europe.

Identifying the Relevant Literature

We constructed a close-meshed search net in order to find publications about regionalization and decentralization in the EU-10 that could form the basis for this review. First, the studies had to focus on the intermediate level of government, where we understood ‘intermediate’ as referring to those subnational levels located directly below the national level but above the local level. We are aware of the definitional problems associated with this question.¹ For the purposes of this review, therefore, we decided to use the term ‘subnational’ to capture the full range of existing intermediate political structures and to avoid the often imprecisely used and normatively loaded term ‘regional’ (Keating, 1998: 9f.).

We also decided to restrict our country population to the EU-10. Our exclusive concern with regionalization and decentralization in the EU-10 entails both opportunities and limitations. We believe it is necessary to restrict our analysis to Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia because we cannot escape the nexus of regionalization processes and

European integration, so that a certain EU bias appears unavoidable. On the other hand, focusing exclusively on formal EU members has the advantage of enabling a minimum level of comparability with respect to status and likely exposure to political forces in the EU multi-level system. But this choice also limits our conclusions in certain respects. Most importantly, we have to refrain from generalizing beyond our specific sample to other Eastern European countries and constellations. Nevertheless, we are convinced that those interested in similar questions for other countries will still find our analysis useful as a benchmark for exploring parallels and differences with respect to regionalization and decentralization processes elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

The next criterion for inclusion in our sample was that the publication date for regionalization studies had to lie between 1997 and 2007. This was for the simple reason that major reforms of subnational political structures in the EU-10 had been implemented between the late 1990s and early 2000s (cf. Table 3). Given that we are concerned with academic assessments of the most recent institutional changes, this choice of time period appears self-explanatory.

Finally, we decided to focus exclusively on English-language publications because we are interested in the comparative international debate, which is essentially conducted in English-language journals and monographs. One could certainly object that such an exercise should also include national-language publications in the countries under scrutiny, and we admit that this would be desirable. On the other hand, one might reply that in most cases truly significant work is always also presented in international journals. Ever stronger competition in the academic domain drives individual researchers to strike beyond exclusively national debates so as to address the international community. As a matter of fact, we checked the national-language studies from EU-10 countries of whose existence we were aware and found that in three out of four cases these had also been published in English. In other words, there is a certain language bias in our review, but the risk of having disregarded important research is, in our view, minimal.

In practice, we began identifying the relevant publications through a quite conventional search in what has become the most important social science database—the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). However, this search yielded only a very small number of studies. Moreover, much research held in high esteem by the regionalism community (and which is actually widely quoted in the literature we already knew) does not appear in the SSCI.² We decided to additionally compile a list of political science journals that have either a EU-10 or a subnational focus or that have—like the *Journal of European Public Policy* and the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, for instance—repeatedly published articles dealing with the topics of decentralization and regionalization in the EU-10 (cf. Table 1). Perusing all issues of these journals from 1997 to 2007, we discovered a substantial number of pertinent articles. We then backed up and complemented our results by searching the WorldCat catalogue using the following combinations of key words: ‘decentralisation’/‘decentralization’ AND ‘Central and Eastern Europe’, ‘regionalisation’/‘regionalization’ AND ‘Central and Eastern Europe’ and ‘regional policy’ AND ‘Central and Eastern Europe’. Finally, we cross-checked whether we had missed articles by applying the ‘snowball procedure’, that is, we checked the bibliographies of all articles identified up to this point for references to other works that might potentially qualify.

Table 1. List of reviewed journals, 1997–2007

<i>Central European Political Science Review</i>
<i>Communist and Postcommunist Studies</i>
<i>Comparative European Politics</i>
<i>Comparative Political Studies</i>
<i>East European Politics and Society</i>
<i>Europe-Asia-Studies</i>
<i>European Journal of Political Research</i>
<i>European Urban and Regional Studies</i>
<i>Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions</i>
<i>International Journal of Urban and Regional Research</i>
<i>Journal of Common Market Studies</i>
<i>Journal of European Integration</i>
<i>Journal of European Public Policy</i>
<i>Perspectives on European Politics & Society</i>
<i>Regional and Federal Studies</i>

Source: Authors' compilation.

This resulted in a final list of 64 monographs (individual studies or edited volumes) and articles. The publications that constitute the empirical basis of our analysis are marked with an asterisk in the reference list at the end of this article.

Reforms of Subnational Political Structures in the EU-10: Timing and Outcomes

After 1990, all the countries examined here either newly created, revitalized or reformed their subnational political entities and systems of local self-government. Additionally, they each introduced the EU statistical standard for administrative units (NUTS³) in order to become eligible for funding from Brussels. Despite this common trend, the actual outcome as regards the political architecture of subnational political authorities varies from country to country. In order to comprehend the evident diversity, we suggest categorizing the subnational level in the EU-10 in terms of whether one or several intermediate layers of subnational authority exist and whether each subnational authority is a branch of national government at the subnational level (deconcentration) or a truly subnational government (decentralization). The application of this simple system of classification leads to Table 2, which provides an overview of the outcomes of state transformation in the subnational political spaces in the EU-10. Accordingly, most countries have only one intermediate level between the local and the national level. In a few others we find an additional, usually district-level subnational layer that belongs to local self-government. Other countries have parallel structures of subnational self-government and deconcentrated national government.

In Table 3 we have listed the subnational entities that constitute the focus of our investigation. Here we also indicate the moment of inception (when these authorities were created) as well as the number of academic studies about the entities under examination. The far-right column reveals that most regionalization research in the EU-10 focuses on the 'large' states of Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

Table 2. Results of institutional reform at subnational level in the EU-10, 1997–2007

Level	Statistical entities	Structure of subnational authority ^a
National	NUTS 0	National government ^b
Subnational		Subnational government PL
Subnational or district/county	NUTS 1–3	Decentralized national government BG, EE, HU, LT, LV, PL, RO, SK Subnational [district/county] self-government CZ, HU, RO, SK, [SI/PL]
Local	LAU ^c 1–2	Local self-government (similar in all countries)

Source: This table was compiled by Ansgar Schäfer on the basis of Bailey and De Propris (2002), Brusis (1999, 2002, 2003), CoR (2005), EZFF (2004–07) and Keating and Hughes (2003).

^aBG, Bulgaria; CZ, Czech Republic; EE, Estonia; HU, Hungary; LT, Lithuania; LV, Latvia; PL, Poland; RO, Romania; SI, Slovenia; SK, Slovakia.

^bThe Czech Republic, Poland and Romania also have subnational participation in the second chamber of the national parliament.

^cLAU, Local Administrative Unit.

By contrast, the three Baltic States and Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia all receive substantially less academic attention.

Three Approaches to Studying Regionalization in the EU-10

Although different research interests can always be intertwined, the examination of the literature on regionalization and decentralization in the EU-10 reveals three analytically distinguishable research programmes. These three approaches differ according to the research questions they address, the explanatory programmes they develop and their methodological preferences. The first approach considers regionalization and decentralization processes in the EU-10 as a dimension of the system transformation that these countries underwent. Under the second approach, region building is related to the pre-accession pressure exerted by the EU conditionality regime. The third—currently emerging—approach regards decentralization and regionalization as a topic that concerns subnational governance.

Figure 1 shows the productivity of the three different research approaches between 1997 and 2007.⁴ Until 2003, studies focused basically on subnational dynamics in the context of system transformation. Then, as EU accession became tangible for the EU-10, the focus of decentralization and regionalization research was mainly set on the role of the EU and on its policy of conditionality. When the EU-10 formally joined the EU, questions of subnational governance began to become more important. From 2006 onwards, such governance studies constituted the major part of publications about subnational issues in the EU-10, while the number of transformation and conditionality studies declined.

System Transformation

Studies counted under this approach conceive decentralization and regionalization in the EU-10 as a dimension of system transformation following the breakdown of the

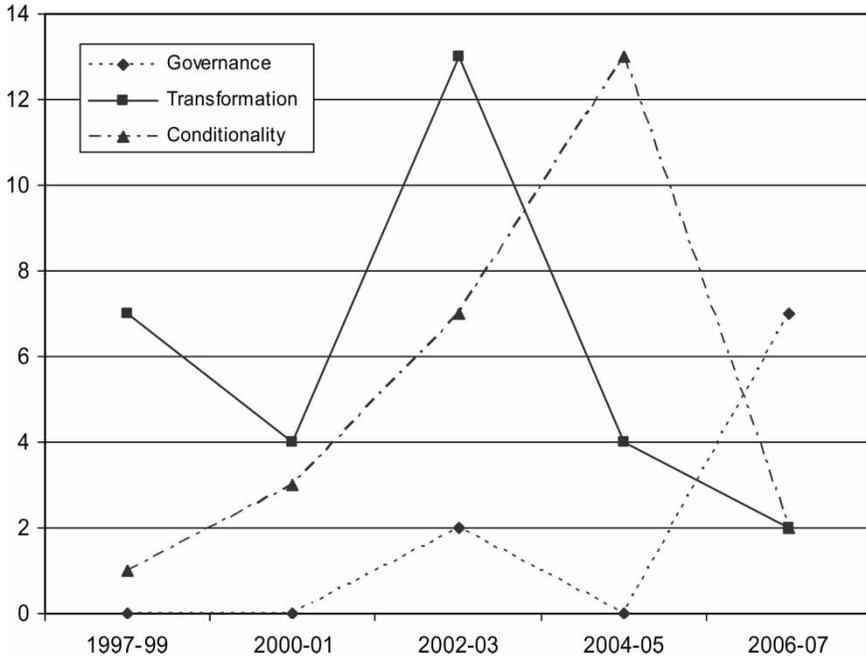


Figure 1. Regionalization research in the EU-10, 1997–2007. *Source:* Authors' compilation. The data points indicate the number of published studies for each research programme, ordered by publication date.

communist regimes. These studies are usually backward-looking and are concerned primarily with exploring the preconditions and the specific outcomes of subnational reforms in the EU-10 (Horváth, 1997, 2000; Petrakos, 1997; Gorzelak, 1998; Keune, 1998; Kimball, 1999; Kirchner, 1999; Bachtler *et al.*, 2000; Bryson and Cornia, 2000, 2004; Zloch, 2000; Hughes *et al.*, 2001, 2003; Rose and Traut, 2001; Batt, 2002a, 2002c, 2003; Batt and Wolczuk, 2002; Bitušikova, 2002; Fowler, 2002; Grüber, 2002; Illner, 2002; Wolczuk, 2002; Balás and Hedegüs, 2003; Pamfil, 2003; Peteri, 2003; Yilmaz *et al.*, 2003; Pálne Kovács *et al.*, 2004; Tatur, 2004; Myant and Smith, 2006).

System transformation studies reveal a substantial mismatch between the high expectations invested in subnational reforms and their *de facto* outcomes. In virtually all the countries under examination, decentralization and regionalization had been promoted by politicians as an important step towards democratization (Wolczuk, 2002; Gerner, 2005). Especially in 'historical' regions and for ethnic minorities, the breakdown of the communist regimes seemed a 'window of opportunity' for gaining more autonomy and participatory rights. Why then did the reforms generally not yield politically stronger subnational governments? This literature argues that there have been two major impediments: history and fears of destabilizing centrifugal forces. As analysts explain, ideas of vertical distribution of political power have traditionally played only a minor role in the EU-10. The establishment of powerful subnational entities with far-reaching competences could therefore hardly be expected

Table 3. EU-10 subnational entities in focus

Country	Subnational entity (name, number)	Establishment (or major reform) ^a	Number of studies in sample ^b
Bulgaria	<i>oblast</i> , 28	1999	7
Czech Republic	<i>kraj</i> , 14	2000	24
Estonia	<i>maakonnad</i> , 15	[several, last] 2005	9
Hungary	<i>megye</i> , 19	1999 [ongoing reform discussions]	24
Latvia	<i>rajon</i> , 26+7	1998 [ongoing reform discussions]	5
Lithuania	<i>apskritis</i> , 10	1998, 2000, 2003	3
Poland	<i>województwo</i> , 16	1999	31
Romania	<i>județ</i> , 42	1998, 2004	8
Slovakia	<i>samoprávny kraj</i> , 8	2001	19
Slovenia	<i>pokrajina</i> , 14 [discussed]	1998 [ongoing reform discussion]	7
EU-10 on average			12

Source: Authors' compilation on the basis of Bailey and De Propris (2002), Brusis (1999, 2002, 2003), CoR (2005), EZFF (2004–07) and Keating and Hughes (2003).

^aThe literature often provides us with contradictory or non-specified dates. Therefore, variations in the years indicated are possible. Sometimes the date of introduction and sometimes the date of ratification of legislation is given; sometimes such specifications are missing.

^bIf a study refers to subnational entities in different countries (example, case studies, etc.), it is counted for each country under investigation. This compilation includes all 'primary sources' marked with an asterisk in the references section.

(Mastny, 2000; Ortino *et al.*, 2005; Pieper, 2006). Alerted by the Czechoslovak and Yugoslav experiences, incumbent politicians evidently became ever less enthusiastic about the idea of transferring power to lower levels the more concrete the reform discussions became. Moreover, contested territorial exchanges following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the Second World War are cited as reasons why politicians opposed the idea of handing over too much autonomous power to 'historical' regions—especially when the cultural bases of these entities spanned across national borders. In brief, political consolidation of the central level was prioritized over decentralization and regionalization in times of system transformation (Besseney Williams, 2007; Tägil, 1999; Wolczuk, 2002).

The most common explanatory mechanism proposed within the transformation approach is that of historical legacies. To understand the specific outcomes of subnational reforms, most studies are thus rooted in the theoretical agenda of historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalists regard the organizational structures of the past as a crucial factor in national policy making. Institutions shape political actors' options and policy styles and structure the decision-making process in the domestic arena.⁵ Political developments and policy outcomes are thus regarded as being path dependent (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1998). Within this approach, scholars seek to demonstrate empirically that historical legacies have a crucial differential impact on the territorial restructuring and thus on the current institutional setup of subnational political authority in the EU-10. For example, it is argued

that pre-war administrative structures have served as a template for the recreation of subnational tiers of government in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. These states reintroduced the Austro-Hungarian dualist model of administration that had existed there until the First World War (Brusis, 1999: 7; Pieper, 2006). But, however convincing the general argument developed under this approach may be, some doubts do remain. Essentially, this is because it is difficult to use the results of these studies analytically so as to learn about other cases. Put differently, the crucial questions often remain vague as to which 'history' actually prevails in concrete constellations—the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the interwar period or the communist past—and how exactly this 'history' shapes concrete political choices in the present.

As regards the methodological preferences adopted within the system transformation approach, there is a clear predominance of historically and cultural-anthropologically guided qualitative case studies. Single case studies dominate the field, while comparative analyses tend to be rare. Moreover, historical regions, such as the Banat, Silesia, Moravia and Pomerania, are the most frequently explored cases (Bafoil, 1999; Batt, 2002a, 2002b; Bialasiewicz, 2002; Wolczuk, 2002; Yoder, 2003). Needless to say, if one's theory is historical institutionalism, one's explanatory mechanism are historical legacies and one chooses historical regions as the testing ground for one's hypotheses, one faces the risk of falling into circular reasoning. While a focus on the larger-sized members of the EU-10 appears understandable if the topic is decentralization and regionalization, the lack of investigation into the subnational dynamics of the smaller states, in particular Bulgaria and Romania, is striking and, at the same time, revealing. The merit of this approach is that it has taught us a great deal about the political processes and outcomes of regionalization and decentralization in the EU-10 during the 1990s. Moreover, we have also gained some notion of the way historical forces define contemporary political choices at least in some regions. The role of the EU, however, was at this stage confined to stabilizing the political context of the whole transformation exercise.

EU Conditionality

In order to support national economic recovery and political modernization in Eastern Europe, Western European leaders offered the newly independent countries the prospect of fast-track membership in the EU. How much time the individual accession processes would take was to depend, however, on the respective capacity of the applicant country to fulfil certain criteria concerning the quality of national democracy, the competitiveness of the economy and the ability to cope with the existing rules and regulations of the European Union (the so-called *acquis communautaire*). The achievement of accession was thus 'conditioned' by the quality of performance of the applicants in a huge variety of sectors. Instantly, questions about how exactly the European Union's rules and requirements would impact on domestic politics and institution building became highly salient (Bauer *et al.*, 2007).

Scholars of regionalization and decentralization also joined the conditionality debate. To understand the context of the conditionality agenda, it is important to recognize that this debate about the top-down impact of the EU in the accession countries was paralleled (some would argue predated) by a similar debate about the differential

impact of supranational policy making 'at home', in other words, in the 'old' member states themselves. In the mid-1990s, the academic community had lost interest in explaining institution building at supranational level, which until then had constituted the central question of European integration theory. Instead, interaction effects and the domestic repercussions of joint EU policy making came into focus and were studied under the new label of 'Europeanization' (Knill and Lenschow, 1998, 2005; Börzel and Risse, 2000, 2003; Schneider 2001). Hence, conditionality may be best understood as a particular form of Europeanization 'abroad', that is, in applicant countries; and questions such as how, in which constellations and to what degree the accession states complied with the conditions formulated by the EU became the central concern of theorists of 'conditionality'. The puzzle was then to figure out the causal effect of the EU in domestic change in Eastern Europe.⁶

With respect to changing subnational politics in what later became the EU-10, conditionality theorists were thus not so much interested in general preconditions or contextual factors of regionalization. Instead, regionalization research under the conditionality agenda focused on questions such as when, how and under what conditions the EU impacted on subnational institution-building processes. In other words, next to domestic factors and national historical legacies, the EU became the preferred candidate that could explain subnational institution building. The hierarchical top-down logic that characterized the first generation of Europeanization theory turned into the central explanatory mechanism believed responsible for driving the adaptation or the establishment of political structures at the regional levels in the EU-10 (Szeplér, 2000; Baun, 2002; Brusis, 2002, 2003, 2005; Marcou, 2002; Marek and Baun, 2002; Batt, 2003; Keating and Hughes, 2003; Smith and Myant, 2003; Czernielewska *et al.*, 2004; Dimitrova, 2004; Hughes *et al.*, 2004a, 2004b; Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi, 2004; Dobre, 2005; Ferry and McMaster, 2005; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005; Sturm and Dieringer, 2005; O'Dwyer, 2006; Sadurski *et al.*, 2006; Yoder, 2007).

The belief in an EU influence was so strong that at the beginning of the 'subnational' conditionality debate even the diffusion of a common regional model in Eastern Europe appeared a realistic possibility (for a critical discussion of this issue, cf. Grabbe, 2001, 2003; Hughes, 2003; Jacoby, 2004). To substantiate such expectations, 'diffusionists' pointed to the power asymmetry between the EU and the applicant states, to the preference of the European Commission for a certain regional model with fixed competences and a certain degree of autonomy for subnational entities, and to the criteria subnational entities had to meet in order to receive funding from pre-accession structural instruments, such as the Phare, SAPARD and ISPA programmes (Brusis, 1999: 18; Yoder, 2003).⁷ By setting concrete standards for membership and by providing financial incentives, the EU was thought to be able to determine the outcomes of subnational reforms.

However, empirical research dismissed such early expectations of convergence and instead painted a picture of emerging heterogeneity with respect to subnational institutional setups, political and financial competences, and jurisdictional autonomy at regional levels in the EU-10. A main finding, therefore, was that the simplistic logic of conditionality, although providing incentives and influencing timing, would only affect very marginally the dimension and precise character of subnational political reform (Hughes, 2003; Hughes *et al.*, 2004a, 2004b). Moreover, the continuing

heterogeneity of emerging regional models in the EU-10 demonstrated that the influence of the EU was obviously much more modest than originally expected. One reason for the weak supranational impact was then identified in the ‘thinness’ of the regional *acquis*, in the sense that they did not include precise regulations on the functions and the institutional design of subnational entities.

As for the determinants of subnational institutional change and persistence, this disenchantment with conditionality explanations reinvigorated explanations based on diverging national interest constellations, politicization due to party-political power struggles, functional inconveniences⁸ and historical legacies—already well known from transformation research. In other words, with respect to subnational institution building, it was not the subnational political reality that converged under the pressure of EU conditionality. Rather, the explanatory programmes of transformation and conditionality research converged as the impact of the European Union turned out to be only one among other factors influencing subnational developments in the EU-10 (Brusis, 2002, 2005; Dieringer, 2005; Lindstrom, 2005; Futó *et al.*, 2006; Jewtuchowicz and Czernielewska-Rutkowska, 2006; O’Dwyer, 2006). Moreover, once the enlargements of 2004 and 2007 were completed, the conditionality theory understandably lost some of its appeal for explaining subnational processes in the EU-10.

As regards the methodology applied in the conditionality approach, we observe a somewhat greater use of comparative agendas, which paved the way for a more informed generalization of results as compared with transformation studies. Hypotheses are often theoretically generated and qualitatively tested in competitive empirical analyses. Although the case-study method still prevails, its use is more analytical than in the transformation approach. The overwhelming majority of analyses, however, still focus on the larger states of the EU-10, while subnational dynamics in Bulgaria, Romania, the three Baltic States and Slovenia are explored less frequently (for exceptions, see von Breska and Brusis, 1999; Kettunen and Kungla, 2005; Lindstrom, 2005).

Summing up, the conditionality approach examines the impact of the EU as the central explanatory mechanism for subnational institution-building processes in the EU-10. With the focus on processes and structural outcomes, conditionality studies adopt a polity- and politics-centred perspective—as indeed do transformation studies. Studies subsumed under the conditionality approach initially conceptualized the impact of the EU within the accession states from a top-down perspective. Confronted with the empirical reality, they then had to shift their focus and concentrate more pronouncedly on the domestic forces exerting influence on subnational institution building in the EU-10. Although they were both methodologically and theoretically more rigorous than the transformation debate, conditionality approaches lost their appeal when expectations regarding the convergence of subnational political structures were disappointed. Moreover, interest in studying conditionality mechanisms in the EU-10 unsurprisingly declined once these countries became formal members of the EU (Steunenbergh and Dimitrova, 2007). However, the lasting added value of the conditionality approach to the debate about subnational development within the EU-10 remains the fact that it enables researchers to blend different qualities of supranational pressure with diverse national context factors into constellations or ‘modes’ of possible reactions to the top-down impact of the EU. This enables the generation of

differential explanations for subnational institutional variation as well as for the processes that produced them.

Subnational Governance

With the implementation of subnational reforms accomplished virtually everywhere and the first waves of accession to the EU completed, the situation in the EU-10 states has now ‘normalized’. The subnational political authorities, whether newly established or revived, have become consolidated. The issues of subnational institution building that dominated the regionalization debate in the 1990s are losing appeal. While refined Europeanization approaches that seek to operationalize the concept not just as a top-down affair but also as a two-way process (cf. Börzel, 2002) remain high on the agenda, regionalization and decentralization scholars have increasingly become interested in the implications of subnational involvement in multi-level policy making (Bauer, 2004; Baun and Marek, 2006; Ferry, 2007; Scherpereel, 2007). The currently emerging approach is thus best labelled as ‘subnational governance’.

Three major characteristics can be identified in the subnational governance approach when it comes to studying regionalization and decentralization issues in the EU-10. First, compared to the transformation and conditionality agendas, it is much more focused on policies and policy making than on polity issues. Secondly, it is also less exclusively Eastern European than comparative in nature, that is, it prompts an opening up and also a convergence of research questions of relevance for Western as well as Eastern European regions. And, thirdly, it is radically empirical in that it abstains from either applying a top-down or a bottom-up logic of Europeanization; rather, it combines both points of view and puts the interdependencies and interaction between EU, national and subnational actors at centre stage.

Once the interest in institution building *per se* vanished and the heterogeneity of subnational entities in the EU-10 was acknowledged as a permanent feature, the study of the differential impact of subnational levels in national or multi-level policy making received ever-increasing attention from scholars (Bauer and Kuppinger, 2006; Futó *et al.*, 2006; McMaster, 2006; Paraskevopoulos *et al.*, 2006; Scherpereel, 2007; Marks *et al.*, 2008). Case studies on the Czech Republic and Poland, for instance, suggest that the subnational level has gained influence in the respective domestic arenas because an intensifying dialogue on regional issues can be detected between national and subnational actors (Baun and Marek, 2006; Scherpereel, 2007). However, it is probably fair to point out that subnational authorities in other EU-10 countries for the time being remain restricted in their capacities to engage in national and supranational policy making (Grosse, 2006; McMaster, 2006). As regards subnational involvement in supranational policy making, the subnational authorities in larger EU-10 states appear nevertheless to be able to engage more intensively and more directly with European-level actors than in the past (Bauer *et al.*, 2007b; Moore, 2008).

What have been seen as purely Western European issues in the debate about regionalization are now suddenly also emerging in discussions about the Eastern European features of regional or local politics. This trend is most tangible in the area of subnational mobilization. From the 1980s onwards, the issue of subnational mobilization, perhaps best understood as the “growing engagement of sub-national

governmental actors with the institutions and processes of EU policy-making” (Jeffery, 2000: 1), was taken up in an increasing number of studies about Western European integration. The unfulfilled expectation was that the strengthening of subnational actors and institutions would help to create an increasingly integration-friendly subnational clientele in the ‘old’ member states, who would then be willing to support initiatives for ever greater EU integration (Marks, 1992). The reality turned out to be more complicated. First, the effects of mobilization were at best ‘differential’; as a matter of fact, supranational–subnational relations of some substance could be established only in those regions that already had the socio-economic and institutional capacity for semi-autonomous policy making (Bauer and Börzel, forthcoming). Secondly, strengthening subnational actors would not automatically induce them to embrace a pro-integration policy. On the contrary, new politics paved the way for rising conflict between strengthened subnational and proactive supranational actors (Bauer, 2002). In brief, subnational entities across the EU showed enormous differences with respect to the demand, scope and intensity of their affinity towards greater involvement in EU policy making (Hooghe, 1995; Kohler-Koch, 1998; Jeffery, 2000; Bourne, 2003; Keating and Hooghe, 2006; Fleurke and Willemse, 2007; Keating, 2008; Mols and Haslam, 2008).

The literature offers four different explanations for the differential dynamics between subnational and supranational levels in the EU. A first explanatory framework bases its argument on cultural distinctiveness. It regards regions with their own regional language or a high share of the population belonging to an ethnic or religious minority as being more active in European policy making than regions without these characteristics (Esman, 1977; Connor, 1994; Alesina and Spolaore, 2003). Other scholars focus on the institutional provisions and constitutional rights of subnational entities. They argue that regions with a strong executive and constitutionally guaranteed competences in major policy fields—such as regional economic development, policing, communications or transport—engage more in European policy making than others that lack these resources (Kohler-Koch, 1995; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). The third explanatory framework sees socio-economic differences among subnational entities as the crucial independent variable.⁹ The fourth programme focuses on regional party competition and argues that mobilization efforts are stronger in regions in which regionalist parties compete for voters (van Houten, 2003; Jolly, 2007). What we now see is that these classical explanatory programmes, which have been competitively used in the debates about Western European subnational mobilization, but which basically account for the available explanations for subnational policy-making capacities in general, are being used to arrive at a better understanding of differential subnational realities in the EU-10 (Bauer and Pitschel, 2007; Scherpereel, 2007).

The research programme within this emerging subnational governance approach is thus characterized by a policy-analytical agenda. It is the identification and explanation of differential policy outcomes that are the centre of interest. Europeanization theory still plays a major part in Eastern and Western regionalization and decentralization research. However, the focus is the interaction between the levels (top-down *and* bottom-up), instead of solely conceptualizing the top-down impact of the EU upon domestic subnational levels. Accordingly, central issues within the transition

or conditionality approaches, like system transformation or the causal weight of supranational demands for subnational institution building, are of less concern (John, 2000; Roller and Sloat, 2002; Sasse *et al.*, 2006). Methodological preferences are difficult to clearly discern at this stage. We do perceive a growing focus on methodological rigour, however, in the form of theoretically generated hypotheses, the use of systematic research designs and, in particular, the increasing application of comparative case-study approaches (Baun and Marek, 2006; Ferry, 2007; Scherpereel, 2007) (Table 4).

Outlook

The aim of this review was to assess recent research on regionalization and decentralization in the EU-10 and to attempt to systematize empirical findings and theoretical arguments. We identified three approaches—system transformation, EU conditionality and subnational governance—that can be distinguished with regard to their focus of analysis, explanatory programme, mechanisms and methodological preferences. As with any attempt at categorization, the proposed distinctions appear helpful because they delineate the more sharply existing contours of the individual research programmes. At the same time, these distinctions remain analytical rather than real insofar as the debates within the three approaches have cross-fertilized each other and some of the explanatory mechanisms identified, in particular various concepts of Europeanization, are integral parts of the conditionality as well as of the subnational governance approaches. Keeping this caveat in mind, it is evident, however, that system transformation and elements of the conditionality programme take a rather polity-orientated perspective and primarily explore processes of subnational institutional building. Then there is the time dimension, which affects the three programmes differently. System transformation studies focus on the period immediately following the breakdown of the communist regimes, while conditionality studies have concentrated on the top-down EU impact in candidate countries throughout the accession process. The point, however, is that the influence of these two approaches is fading. And, yet, a central element that remains important is the conceptualization of top-down supranational influence in domestic affairs, which has been developed in the Europeanization debate and which was used and refined by conditionality theory. Such top-down concepts are complemented by the bottom-up orientated research agenda of the subnational governance approach. Subnational governance paves the way for focusing in a decisively empirical-analytical fashion on political processes and policy making at subnational levels in the EU-10. The perspective is comparative and often explicitly policy-analytical. The top-down conditionality thinking, combined with the bottom-up focus of the subnational governance programme, appears to form the contours of an emerging multi-level governance framework for analysing the current reality of sub-state politics in the EU-10. Moreover, as researchers have lost interest in subnational institution building *per se*, as well as in the particular EU impact in accession constellations, it comes as no surprise that the emerging evidence increasingly indicates a convergence of Western and Eastern European debates about subnational politics. This can be observed, for example, in the area of subnational mobilization, where researchers are starting to take advantage of the

Table 4. Comparing regional research agendas in the EU-10, 1997–2007

Approach	Focus of analysis	Explanatory programme	Mechanisms	Methodological preferences	Main findings
System transformation	Subnational institution building	Historical institutionalism	Path dependency (legacies), national politics	Descriptive case studies	Regionalization and decentralization as a step in EU-10's 'return to Europe'; outcome: modest regionalization conditioned by path dependency
EU conditionality	EU impact on domestic regionalization and decentralization	Top-down Europeanization	EU conditionality regime, domestic factors	Analytical case studies	Outcomes of decentralization and regionalization are determined by domestic factors (government preferences, party-political positions); EU impacts mainly on timing and speed of subnational institution building
Subnational governance	Impact of differential subnational policy, involvement in multi-level policy making	Bottom-up Europeanization, policy analysis	Supranational – subnational push and pull, varying modes of policy making, differential subnational resources (institutional, cultural, socio-economic), (subnational) party competition	Analytical and comparative case studies	Differential patterns of subnational mobilization and supranational – subnational politics due to varying resource situations and particular national constellations

Source: Authors' compilation.

increased number of cases that the enlarged European Union offers for testing some classical propositions (Bauer and Pitschel, 2007; Scherpereel, 2007). It is thus likely that a particular 'Eastern' European research focus will become less popular. Instead we should expect scholars of European regionalism to engage in comparing suitable constellations in Eastern *and* Western Europe in order to enhance the analytical leverage for arriving at answers to their specific research questions.

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Notes

¹We are conscious that the term 'decentralization' usually describes the transfer of political authority not only to the regional, but also to the local level of government. For the purposes of this article, however, the local dimension of decentralization is left aside. Moreover, if we find more than one level between the national and local levels, we primarily focus on the one with an elected assembly, that is, the level with subnational self-government. In countries with a subnational level without elected assemblies, we focus on the highest level of subnational decentralized government. This selection results in a broad heterogeneity among the subnational entities under review. For instance, in Poland we focus on voivodships, which fulfil the criteria applied to many regions in Western Europe; Hungarian *megye*, by contrast, as subnational entities with an elected assembly, are comparable to the county level in more populous Western European states.

²The main reason is that most journals publishing on regionalization and decentralization in CEE are not listed in databases like the SSCI.

³NUTS: Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics.

⁴The specific classification of the individual studies in one of the three different approaches is indicated in the reference list at the end of this article. Transformation studies are marked with 'T', conditionality studies with a 'C' and subnational governance studies with a 'G'. We are fully aware that some studies could be assigned to more than category. For pragmatic reasons we decided, however, to classify them 'unambiguously' in accordance with the major research topic each addresses.

⁵Historical institutionalists usually apply a broad concept of institutions. Hall (1986: 19), for instance, defined institutions as "... the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy".

⁶The conditionality debate itself is too complex and too multifaceted to be summarized easily here (see Hix and Goetz, 2000; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Schimmelfennig, 2007). The regional dimension, which is the main interest of this section, is just one aspect of the broader debate and simplifications are therefore unavoidable. For more comprehensive accounts, see Hughes *et al.* (2004a, 2004b) and Jacoby (2004).

⁷Phare is a programme initiated by the European Community in 1989. Its aim is to support accession states through the establishment of a functioning administration and institutions and through financing investments. Originally the programme was designed for Poland and Hungary, but it was gradually extended to all Eastern European accession states. In 2000, Phare was supplemented by ISPA, which provides financial aid in the environmental and transport sectors, and SAPARD, which focuses on agriculture. For the period 2000–06, the EU allocated €10 billion to Phare (http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/programme_phare_en.htm, accessed on 5 Feb 2008).

⁸Viewed from a functionalist perspective, it did not make sense for smaller states, such as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, to establish a fully institutionalized level below the national and above the local level of government (Kettunen and Kungla, 2005).

⁹There are two competing views along this line of reasoning (Marks *et al.*, 1996). Some scholars attribute mobilizing powers mainly to those regions with a solid financial basis (Bookman, 1993; Harvie, 1994).

Others suggest that it is the less privileged regions that want to strengthen their financial basis and are therefore more involved in European policy making.

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