

## **Evolution of the Czech Regional Policy in the Context of the EU Regional Policy.**

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### ***Abstract***

*Regional policy in the Czech Republic has been shaped by several influences since 1990: (i) transformation and development of the Czech national policies, which started to build in some regional aspects after the rejection of the regional policy and planning in early 90s, (ii) Phare instrument, and later also ISPA and Sapard in the pre-accession period which indirectly formed policy focus of the Czech regional policy and to a lesser extent also the contents of various programmes; (iii) public administration reform as quite a strong decentralization mechanism which enabled new bodies to express their interests and to articulate new issues to tackle; (iv) the EU accession which brought in new mechanisms of intervention, both in terms of the implementation structures and procedures as well as the contents of programmes.*

*The article describes the Czech regional policy evolution and analyses its features using the above determinants as grounds for explanation. It focuses particularly on the nature of pre-accession instruments and on the requirements of the EU regional policy as a new (institutional) paradigm introduced into the Czech environment. Finally, current situation at the dawn of new programming period is described in the context of the evolution of the Czech regional policy and its institutional background.*

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### **1. Introduction: the background of the Czech regional policy.**

Regional policy is always part of much broader national policy framework. This is particularly the case of the Czech Republic, which does not have any comprehensive regional policy but rather evolving set of tools, measures and policies with more or less intentional regional impacts (Uhlř, 2004). Therefore the features and evolution of what can be called regional policy relate to the evolution of national policies as well as of the nature and scope of the regional disparities and of the regional development issues. Moreover, national policies in the new EU member states also had to take into account requirements of the Economic and Social Cohesion Policy, the EU regional policy, which consequently, in the Czech Republic, influences much broader policy framework than the regional policy itself. Hence the characters of the national policies and of the regional disparities are very important because they create a ground on which the regional policy is formed by more direct influences.

#### ***1.1. Czech regional differences.***

The Czech Republic had inherited very small regional differences from its communist past and these differences grew quite slowly until the second half of 90s due to an economic transformation which caused neither large social differences nor regional disparities (Blažek, 2000). As soon as the differences started to increase they emerge at three different levels. First, the micro regional inequalities emerged locally in a limited scope in the first half of 90s and since then they have continued to spread to other areas. Second, Prague and its close hinterland has begun to grow very early much faster than the national average and in many characteristics the differences between Prague and other NUTS 2 regions are much larger than any other differences among NUTS 2 and NUTS 3

regions in the rest of the country. Third, there is a prevailing west-east gradient in the level of regional development in the Czech Republic, with western regions being generally more successful than the eastern ones. With the growth of regional disparities in the second half of 90s, the structurally affected areas such as Northwest Bohemia and North Moravia and Silesia became the most important issue for national interventions which stimulated the regional policy.

### ***1.2 National policy framework in the Czech Republic.***

Czech national policies have certain traditional features, many of them with negative implications to implementation of these policies. These features have not been overcome yet and are more or less present through the whole period after the fall of communist regime in 1989. Czech regional policy had to cope with them or had to adjust to them.

Czech national policies are generally understood as a subsidising mechanism with the aim to support various groups of actors that may be – or may claim to be – disadvantaged in a certain way. Beneficiaries of such policies may be specified as wide social groups, territories, professional/occupational groups, etc. Czech policies are based on a welfare concept (which is contrary to the development concept). Moreover, there is a gap or at least weak link between these policies and implementing instruments which may result in the mismatch between the policy objectives and the results of real spending of public funds. It is partly because the Czech Republic has got traditionally strong sectoral ministries which tend to develop their own policies and public spending mechanisms with limited co-ordination with other actors though the agreement is formally made at the government level. Another inherited feature of the public spending mechanisms is the focus on technical, formal issues and very limited (if any) consideration of the purpose, objectives and results of the public intervention. Therefore the public interventions are not usually driven by the programmes as they are understood in the EU context, even if sometimes there are certain programming documents available. Hence the words „spending mechanisms“ are used to distinguish only technically based public interventions that are common for the Czech national policies from programming based interventions that are one of the key features of the EU regional policy. Due to all these features the national interventions in the Czech Republic (both, at the central as well as at the regional levels) are extremely fragmented and isolated from each other (Blažek, Vozáb, 2004). For example in 2005 the national interventions consisted of more than 150 more or less isolated spending mechanisms administered by numerous state and public authorities and their agencies, starting from minor subsidies for beekeepers to the Active Labour Market Policy scheme which was likely the largest one (MMR ČR, 2005).

Specific feature of the Czech Republic which influences the national as well as regional policies, programmes and spending mechanisms is the settlement and administrative structure and division of competencies between the three levels of government. The Czech Republic has got more than 6000 municipalities with local government. Majority of them are small villages, with the mayor acting only after his/her main job elsewhere. On the other hand the cities and regional governments play very strong role in regional development as they budgets (based on their own revenue or on state grants) represent more than half of the public investments spent in the Czech Republic (Macešková, 2007). Being such a strong stake-holders, the city and regional governments influence the national policies as well as newly formed policy of the economic and social cohesion.

Though the above described characteristics are relevant to all of the Czech public policies, they are one of the fundamental reasons why the Czech regional policy has not been fully adjusted to the requirements of the EU regional policy yet. As it will be argued later, whatever are the requirements of the EU regional policy they should be incorporated into the national policy framework, changing it only partially, or they are existing in parallel within such a framework, in a certain isolation. Even if the more direct influences have formed the Czech regional policy, the overall national policy

framework has had (and still have) significant influence on the resulting nature of the Czech regional policy.

## **2. Stages of the Czech Regional policy and main influences forming it.**

Some influences forming the development of the Czech regional policy until the EU accession has been described in other articles focusing on partial issues, such as estimation of impacts of future EU accession on the Czech Republic (Blažek, Boeckhout, 2000), discussing the role of the new regions (Uhlíř, 2004) or dealing with EU programming and evaluation problems (Blažek, Vozáb, 2003; Blažek, Vozáb, 2006). Combination of formative forces has been changing in time with the „European factors“ becoming more and more significant, though overlapping or summing up with others. The description and arguments in the following chapters built on the work of previous authors and try to provide both a concise description of main influences as well as explanation of consequences of the Czech regional policy evolution.

### ***2.1. Evolution of the Czech regional policy until 2000.***

In the first half of 90s (with the exception of 1991-1992) there was no regional policy at all carried out in the Czech Republic though there existed instruments with very significant regional impact, such as equalisation grants for municipalities which income from the locally levied taxes was below certain level (Blažek, 2002). Also state sectoral interventions aiming at supporting development or tackling various partial problems on an ad hoc basis were moderate and their regional impact was unintentional and mostly also unconceived (Blažek, Vozáb, 2004). The official policy of economic liberalism (though not very consistent) between 1993-1996 led to the prevailing opinion that market forces will solve all the problems and state should intervene only in a very limited extent. Quite restrictive supporting mechanisms were aimed mostly at SME support provided for on a project basis. There was no coherent legislative or institutional framework for such interventions though first delivery agencies of a moderate scope were established at that period. EU regional policy had no influence in the first half of 90s, because the accession to the EU was still uncertain and the only financial instrument – Phare programme – was focused on economic transition and institutional building at the central level.

In the second half of 90s the situation has started to change for several reasons: (i) increasing unemployment and growing regional disparities at NUTS III and NUTS II levels gave rise to the opinions that state interventions may be useful, which was also strengthened by the overall political view of the new social democratic government since 1998; (ii) with the new government the neo-liberal paradigm has been abandoned and the government became to prepare and implement the first conceived steps in the field of the regional policy, which has also been stimulated by (iii) the first preparatory steps for the EU accession which required the deliberate regional policy as part of the Chapter 21 of the negotiation on the EU accession.

The above described stimuli resulted in the moderate and still quite weak regional policy of the Czech Republic. The first set of national programming documents, such as National Strategy for Regional Development and set of Regional Development Strategies, were drafted, though they had either no or very small budgets for implementation, almost no implementation procedures and structures, loose links to policies and their contents was very general one. Therefore the implementation of this first set of national regional policy programming documents was very questionable. Although it could be argued that some of the planned interventions were realized there are doubts whether they would not be realized anyhow, without the programming exercise. Together with the first programming attempts new delivery agencies were either established or some of the older ones strengthened, such as RDAs or Centre for Regional Development. The Act on Regional Development was also adopted at the end of this period which was the first overall legal act to codify the goals, institutions and structures of the regional policy.

It can be generalised, that the new rise of the regional policy was driven by the internal needs of the Czech Republic to tackle regional differences and to stimulate regional development, which was also an important part of the political agenda of the new government. Nevertheless the form and the structures of the new policy, and partly also the contents, were determined by the hope of EU accession which was expected (in the half of 90s) to happen in 2000. For example the formal structure of national/regional programming documents was very similar to the structure of the EU operational programmes.

Modest preparation to the EU policy of the Economic and Social Cohesion started during the second half of 90s, partly as the follow up of the above mentioned programming exercises, partly supported by the Phare programmes. At the end of 90 the first set of operational programmes and first („training“) national development plan were drafted and negotiated among wide array of stake-holders at national, regional and local levels. Yet these programmes were not implemented at all, partly because they were not mature enough, partly because they were not based on any national institutional or implementation structure and no money were allocated for their implementation. Phare programme also slowly started to change its focus from the institutional building to the investment support in the late 90s, though it was mostly in the field of the cross-border co-operation programme and not in the main national component of Phare.

It may seem, from the above description, that the Czech regional policy in the second half of 90s was just an exercise with no real impact. Nevertheless these exercises, though officially focused on preparation of regional policy investments and interventions, had considerable impact on institutional environment. The stake-holders at national and regional levels became aware of the programming principles and procedures of the EU regional policy as well as with the practices of planning interventions for regional development. Requirements of the EU regional policy spread among stake-holders at all levels and the first informal partnerships were established in order to co-ordinate the planning of interventions. Though almost nothing of these exercises brought in real investment and real public interventions, it prepared the institutional environment for the future, much wider and much more intensive programming effort after 2001.

Despite some successes (and failures) described above it must be stated, that deliberate regional policy as such remained very small part of the national policy framework during the 90s. Non-regional policy instruments and support mechanism prevailed, though they continued to have some, often unconceived, regional impacts (Blažek, Nejd, Příklad, 2002). Moreover, the Phare programme started only to recognise the importance of the issue of EU regional policy in its focus and its influence on the Czech policies and interventions was still very small. Phare projects and decision making was also separated from the Czech national policies in all its features: it was built as a parallel system (because of its nature as EU external aid) which remained true until its finish with the Czech Republic entering the EU in 2004.

## ***2.2. Evolution of the Czech regional policy between 2000-2004. An intensive preparation for EU accession.***

If the later 90s could be described shortly as the slow rise of the Czech regional policy, the years after 2000 and before the EU accession in 2004 were the years of its further development driven by the preparation to the EU Economic and Social Cohesion Policy and its Structural Funds. Trends started in late 90s continued, particularly concerning the national policies, supporting programmes and spending mechanisms, with only small changes. Also the reasons for regional policy, regional disparities and uneven development of regions, did not change though the economy began to grow, partly because of the inflow of foreign direct investors (Berman Group, 2005). The unemployment remained at a high level (around 10%) as well as did the differences in unemployment among NUTS II/NUTS III regions.

Yet two major factors influenced the Czech regional policy before the accession to the EU. First, public administration reform which, among others, created regional government structures in 14 NUTS III regions in 2001, second the preparation of the Czech Republic to the EU Economic and Social Cohesion Policy (Blažek, Vozáb, 2004). Newly created regional governments became important stake-holders in the field of the regional policy, in the first years particularly because they started to articulate regional interests at central level as well as started co-ordination of development issues within their territories. Due to the very scattered settlement structure of the Czech Republic, the political powers of regional governments were partly based on their defending the interests of (smaller) municipalities as well as on gradually increased provision of services which was related to the gradual transfer of responsibilities from the state (ministries and their agencies) to the regional authorities. Especially social services, health care and regional transportation became important responsibilities of the regional government. This gradual transfer of powers from the state was accompanied by the reform of financing of public service which also strengthened the regional governments (and larger cities). Nevertheless the total investment budgets of the regional governments remained in average much smaller comparing to the total investment budgets of municipalities (Macešková, 2007). Co-ordination role of regional governments towards municipalities and other actors was also manifested by increasing number of programmes and strategic documents that were created (and partly even implemented) at the regional level, either by the regional governments themselves (in partnership with other stake-holders) or with regional governments taking the leading role in these processes. On the other hand, most of these programmes and strategies were not mutually co-ordinated even within one region and many of them remained only a planning exercise not being followed by implementing structures and financial means. Unfortunately, the regional programming exercises were carried out almost independently from the Czech preparation to the EU Economic and Social Cohesion Policy programmes. Finally, even if regional governments' role had been generally increasing since 2001, they did not pursue coherent (regional) policies within the territory of their regions.

Czech preparation to the EU accession and to the Structural Funds intensified between 2000 and 2004 giving rise to the new regional policy features, elements and structures. New development programmes have been elaborated (National Development Plan, operational programmes, programme complements) creating completely new programming structure. It was followed by an extensive project preparation to be submitted to the EU programmes. Despite the previous experience with programming and two rounds of programme drafting the quality of programmes was not too high, the programmes were too broad and vague (Blažek, Vozáb, 2003) opening up various possibilities for interventions without specifying enough their substance. Consequently the programmes did not serve as a guidance to prepare detailed interventions on the ground. Main likely reason for this problem was the above mentioned gap between broad and perhaps too vague policy objectives at the national and regional levels and mechanisms or programmes. This gap caused the programming to be disconnected from the policy level, which itself was rather weak, and generally led to the lack of justification of public interventions.

Together with the extensive programming effort the Czech Republic prepared the new structures and institutions to manage and implement the Structural Funds programmes. These structures were built as parallel ones to the existing organisations responsible for interventions from the national/regional resources, or were built as new departments within the existing administrative structures. For the Structural Funds operational programmes were elaborated with loose links to the weak existing national policies (including the regional policy) the whole preparation for the EU regional policy and its Structural Funds resulted in creation of the completely parallel system of interventions to be implemented after the EU accession.

Finally, the Phare programme and other pre-accession instruments also influenced the Czech regional policy during this period. It was more and more focused on the preparation of the country for the EU regional policy requirements. The amount of funds devoted to the institutional building decreased while the real investment part increased during 2000-2004 and the funds were given to the projects which were in line with the EU regional policy. There were also three small scale schemes

implemented in the three microregions of the Czech Republic pretending Structural Funds procedures. Unfortunately the Phare programme had to remain project based. Together with its increasing focus on cohesion policy interventions it contributed to building false expectations concerning the Structural Funds and broader EU regional policy issues.

In the period 2000-2004 the Czech republic established the system of “policies” and interventions which put grounds for the problems after the accession to the EU. The regional policy became a significant part of the political agenda because of the requirements of the EU regional policy and necessity to make the Czech system formally compliant to it. Nevertheless it may be concluded that the Czech regional policy was shaped by the external forces/requirements which weren't fully absorbed into the national structures and institutions. It can also be argued that the contents and focus of the Czech regional policy in this period was formed from the lower levels as it was project and intervention driven, rather than driven by explicit policy objectives.

### ***2.3. Evolution of the Czech regional policy between 2004-2006.***

#### ***Two parallel systems.***

The EU accession and the opportunity to simply get funding from Structural Funds (rather than the opportunity to participate in cohesion effort using the EU regional policy tools) was the most influential driving force of the Czech Regional policy evolution during the programming period 2004-06. The EU Economic and Social Cohesion Policy (regional policy) has become an important part of the agenda of many public actors across the administrative and government system at all levels. But it continued as a separated system, parallel to national policies, programmes and spending mechanisms, as it was built in the previous period.

The Czech Republic has developed quite an isolated system of programmes, implementing structures, rules and procedures for the EU cohesion policy, which was embedded into the national legislation and administrative habits and linked to them mostly at the project level. The fragmentation of the Czech national policies, programmes and support mechanisms has been transformed into the EU programmes by creating large number of measures, often with limited funding. The delivery mechanisms for the EU operational programmes were also partly transformed from the existing national system which led to more than 60 grant schemes throughout the only 5 operational programmes. The grant schemes were used as redistributive tools in order to enable supporting wide array of stake-holders. The old national policies, their structures and programmes or spending mechanisms continued. It led to the paradoxical cases where the national programmes and EU operational programmes competed for the same final beneficiaries and projects. The types of interventions supported by the national programmes and EU operational programmes were sometimes similar or almost the same.

Thought the national policies have been seemingly influenced by the EU cohesion policy as it was apparent from their pro-claimed objectives, their content, focus and interventions almost did not change. The loose links between the upper level national policies and their implementation on the ground still existed and certain logical and hierarchical ties have been pursued only in case of Structural Funds programming documents (and partly also in the programmes themselves). Therefore the separated implementing structures have been built (managing and payment authorities, implementing bodies and even final beneficiaries) in order to carry out the EU cohesion policy interventions. Sometimes these bodies became part of the existing structures in the form of a new departments endowed with responsibilities for the Structural Funds implementation, such as Regional Labour Offices for HRD OP, in many cases the new bodies were established, e.g. regional offices of Centre for regional development, secretariats of the Regional Councils at NUTS II level for Joint Regional OP, or regional offices of CzechInvest for Industry and Enterprise OP. Parallel programmes

and implementing structures were completed by parallel financial mechanisms and financial flows for funding the interventions on the ground.

During the first programming period the Structural Funds and the EU cohesion policy co-existed as a more or less parallel system in the Czech Republic, forming the national policy issues quite substantially by bringing in the regional agenda to the focus of political debates but the real content, structures and institutions of the Czech national policies did not change too much with the Czech regional policy being still rather weak. The Czech spending mechanisms and programmes continued until 2007 because there was not a big pressure to cut them off or change their substance. The amount of funds available from the Structural Funds also did not require major changes since the interventions were not (all together) too large and still could be implemented independently out of the Czech national programmes.

#### ***2.4. Czech regional policy after 2007.***

##### ***Challenges of merging national and EU policies and programmes.***

The programming period 2007-13 has made a big change and has created a challenge not only for the Czech regional policy but for the Czech national development policies and their institutions as a whole. The reason has been twofold: (i) the political one and (ii) the practical/financial one. At the political level the Lisbon agenda, National Reform Plans and Community Strategic Guidelines have established set of objectives which each country will have to contribute to and this contribution and success will be (somehow) measured. As the Czech Republic used to justify its regional policy objectives in quite a simple way so far and since the Czech Republic has not measured the results of its interventions, with the exception of the Structural Funds programmes, new commitments to be fulfilled have required to be incorporated into the grounds of the national policies which will have to be substantially adjusted to the EU cohesion policy standards, including evaluation of results achieved. Unlike the previous programming period, the new EU regional policy objectives, which have been agreed also by the Czech Republic, have introduced very new kind of interventions in the field of innovations, research & development, adaptation of workforce and HRD as well as stronger interventions at regional and urban levels. Even if the Czech Republic has not experienced such interventions in the past, it has had to start them since 2007. It means that these interventions will have to be integrated into the core of the national policies, with the regional policy as a leading framework.

The adjustment of the content of the Czech regional policy to the EU cohesion policy will have to be accompanied by the change of the implementing structures and mechanisms so that the two parallel systems are merged and the EU regional policy will become part of the mainstream national policies. Because of the many new programmes to be implemented as well as because of the new types of interventions to be started, the new implementing structures have been created during 2007, only partly using the skeleton of the existing administrative bodies in the relevant areas of interventions. Some of the new structures have been inevitable, such as the Regional Councils at NUTS II level with their offices becoming the Regional Operational Programmes managing authorities. Other structures are still subject to certain changes which roles and tasks may take some time to settle. Combination of old and new implementing structures, of which only some staff are experienced, may cause difficulties in co-ordination of interventions.

At the practical level the programming period 2007-13 has required major change of the national programmes and spending mechanisms to be used for match funding of the EU funds. The Czech Republic has negotiated the fifth largest financial allocation from the EU funds and the largest per capita allocation among all the member states. It means that the national investment funds will have to be re-oriented to match funding simply because there will not be enough national funds to run two systems of interventions. Consequently many existing national programmes and spending mechanisms in the field of economic and social cohesion, which were to a certain extent competitive to the interventions of Structural Funds, has had to become part of the operational programmes. But the level of their integration into these programmes differs. Moreover, this integration has been often to a

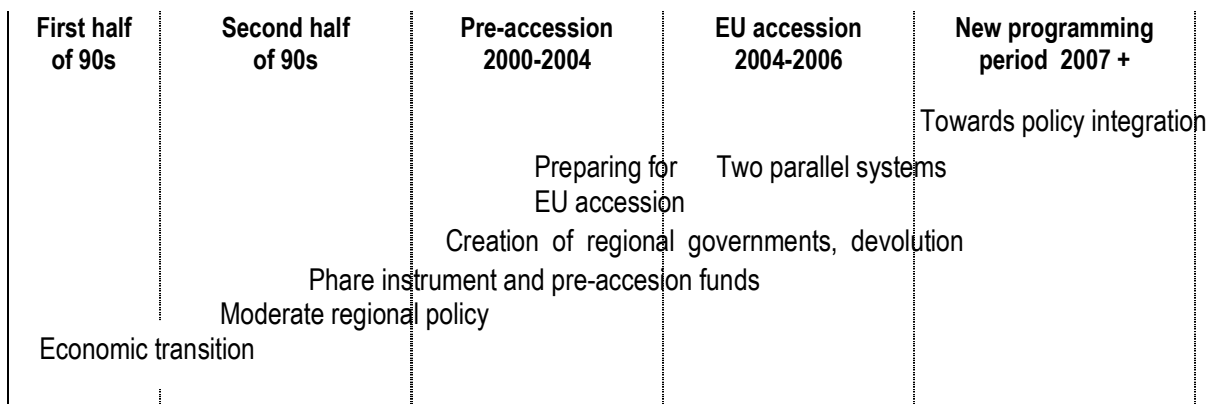
certain extent artificial, mechanical and has not been based on policies but on technical requirements. This has led to partly incoherent programmes (such as OP Environment or Integrated OP) as well as to an extensive number of operational programmes (and therefore implementing structures) which have been based more on previous division of interventions among state administration bodies rather than on the logically linked sets of interventions derived from the national (and EU cohesion) policy objectives.

Though the changes introduced with the new programming period to the Czech regional policy and its implementation have been quite extensive, not all of them have come to light in full yet. It must be also stressed that the implementation of the new policies and programmes, funded from the EU funds, almost has not started yet in the 2007. Therefore it is difficult to assess how the new structures will cope with the challenges of the new programming period until all the implementation of all programmes is fully started. The success of the new Czech regional policy as well as the broader EU cohesion policy should be measured in the future not only by the level of drawing down the EU funds but more importantly by measuring the social and economic results and impacts that have been achieved by the interventions within the framework of the above mentioned policies.

### 3. Conclusion.

The chart below shows the main factors forming the Czech regional policy, their influence and changes in time. Some of the factors have become almost irrelevant or disappeared while others still persist, but sometimes with contradictory effects.

**Figure 1 Evolution stages of the Czech regional policy.**



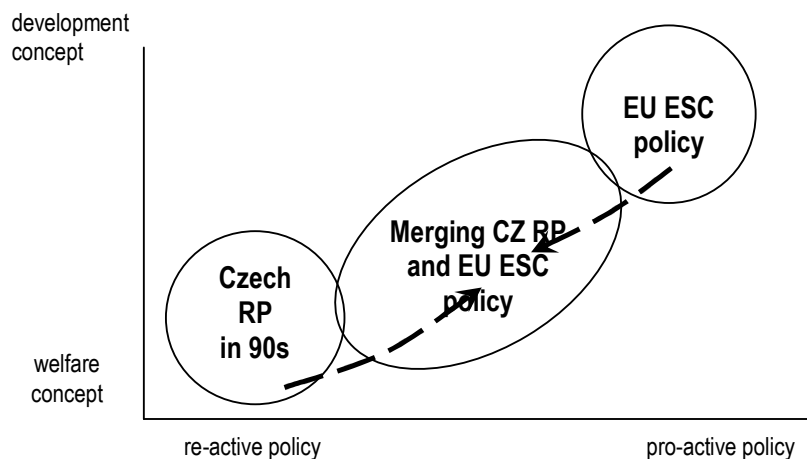
Economic transformation and especially the new formation of public policies after the collapse of the communist regime established the main institutional features and policy framework as described in the first part of this paper. Therefore the roots of the current Czech regional policy are in this very first period and still can be recognised despite many changes since that time. Late 90s and early years after 2000 are periods of the rise of the Czech regional policy with the EU influences becoming more and more important. The creation of the regional authorities in 2000 added a new element to the Czech institutional system which sped up the need of more active regional interventions. Nevertheless the Czech Republic has run two parallel systems of interventions until 2007 though the EU and Czech programmes have been becoming more and more part of the same policies, reflecting the national needs in the context of the EU accession and later on of the economic and social cohesion. The adaptation of the Czech policies and interventions to the EU ones based on the Structural Funds has become more necessary with the preparation of the EU funds programming period 2007-13 for two main reasons: (i) in the political field the increased responsibility for achieving the overall European objectives and accountability of the Czech Republic for spending EU funds has required to put the EU



cohesion policy into the core of national policies and in fact merge the so far disconnected systems of interventions, (ii) in the financial management field it has become apparent that the Czech Republic cannot afford two intervention systems any more.

The new programming period 2007-13, its requirements and challenges have had considerable impact on the Czech national policies. First, the regional policy agenda became much stronger agenda at the national level as well as through the Regional OPs. Second, even if the national sectoral policies do not formulate the explicit regional development objectives, the regional factors became rather important for most of the EU funded programmes. At least the regional scope of these policies is reflected by varying allocations in the programmes to implement the policies, though their objectives to decreasing the regional disparities are rather implicit and consequential and not conceived in the programming objectives. Third, and most important, is probably the changing paradigm of national (regional) policies from the welfare concept to the development concept. This new attitude has been proclaimed at the policy level and is being incorporated to the programmes, particularly because of the merging the national schemes into the operational programmes which explicitly requires development results and impact of interventions. But apparently the new concept has not been accepted by all stakeholders yet and therefore could not be integrated in full into all the implementation and delivery mechanisms and structures. Therefore, merging the Czech and EU policies will inevitably require changes at both sides as the EU regional policy concepts will be incorporated into the Czech institutional environment and by it partially transformed.

**Figure 2. Merging the EU Economic and Social Cohesion Policy into the Czech regional policy**



The programming period of 2007-13 will be the period of continuous adjustment and adaptation of the structures, measures and development actors to the new policy concept, but also the period of partial adaptation of the content of the concepts to the structures of the Czech Republic. The new concept, unlike the previous welfare concept based on the ad-hoc reaction to existing or emerging problems, will need more pro-active attitude, based on strategic decisions made in advance, pursued by the programmes and projects. The development objectives of the Czech policy stem from the need of the Czech Republic to contribute to wider European objectives as well as from the overall Czech political goal to decrease the gap between the national economic level and EU average. Nevertheless these development objectives will still need to be integrated into the Czech institutional environment in order to be really transformed into the activities of individual stake-holders at all levels.

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