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Non-profit organizations' participation in the management of public programmes: The case of the Czech Republic

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Abstract

EU Cohesion Policy requires the interaction of public, private and non-profit sectors in policy making. The case of the Czech Republic enables us to identify the major obstacles to the successful implementation of this approach as the Czech population perceives the ability of NGOs to influence policies at the lowest level among all the EU member states.

The goal of the study is to identify and explain the determinants of success and failure regarding NGOs' participation in designing public programmes.

The methodology includes a combination of in-depth interviews with NGOs' representatives and public servants, a review of official documents, a focus group, and a stakeholders' review of the study's conclusions.

The main obstacles to the implementation of the partnership principle are the following: insufficient capacities among NGOs; fluctuations in participating public servants and NGO representatives; dependence of partnership on personal contacts; late start and non-consultative, informative character of partnership.

Keywords: Cohesion Policy, Non-profit organizations, Participation, Partnership Principle, The Czech Republic

JEL-Classification: L31, R50, R58



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1. Introduction

The partnership principle within the EU Cohesion Policy has the objective of ensuring that the main sectors in the economy participate in designing and implementing public policies. The variety of partners includes civil society, business sector, central public administration, regions and municipalities. This variety also helps to achieve long-term consensus regarding the policies. Thus, the partnership principle is a tool for improving the relevance of policies (OECD, 2001: 18).

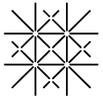
EU Cohesion Policy officially requires that the partnership principle is implemented. The EU member states are legally obliged to implement it, whilst the EU provides a framework for its implementation. This policy covers the main fields of activity that non-profit organisations (NGOs) are engaged in; e.g., employment, social inclusion, environmental protection, social entrepreneurship, and informal education, training. Article 5 of the European Union's Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013 stresses that NGOs should be included as social partners in designing and implementing the European Union's Cohesion Policy. This requirement opens opportunities for NGOs to participate in designing and implementing programmes, and thus to participate in political decision-making.

Cohesion Policy responds to peoples' needs by involving relevant partners in the proposed programme's design and implementation processes. Thus, if executed correctly, the policy should have at least some effect in satisfying the public's perceived needs. People should also be informed about the Cohesion Policy in order to be able to link the specific policy with the satisfaction in their needs. Where are Europeans able to attribute a positive change in their lives to the Cohesion Policy, they will also perceive EU integration positively. This fact supports the Barca Report (Barca, 2009) by pointing out that all EU citizens should have access to benefits from the EU Cohesion Policy. It is therefore crucial that local actors participate in these cohesion policy programmes, as their participation not only helps to implement EU Cohesion Policy successfully, but also enhances the relationship between European citizens and the European Union.

The importance of NGO collaboration (NGOs include trade unions, professional associations and organisations with a specific interest) in partnerships is mirrored by the fact that 6% of EU citizens see the membership or the support of an NGO as a means to influence the political decision-making process (TNS Opinion & Social, 2012: 44). Only 12% of EU citizens perceive political party affiliation as providing them with a means to influence policies, despite the fact that the sole purpose of the political party system is to facilitate popular participation in the political decision-making process. The current disengagement of the electorate from participating in the political process accentuates the importance of integrating the NGOs' role into the political decision-making process.

Of all the EU countries, NGOs in the Czech Republic have the least capacity to change public policies (TNS Opinion & Social, 2012). This provides a unique opportunity to study the main causes of the barriers that obstruct NGOs' attempts to change policies. Thus, an analysis of how the partnership principle is implemented in such an environment will highlight most of the hidden barriers. The European Commission obliges national authorities to allow NGOs to participate in policy-making relating to the EU Cohesion Policy. This allows us to compare the results with the standards applied to all EU member states, as the Czech public administration has to apply the same rules.

The attitudes to NGOs and their role in the society differ among the EU member states. According to 41% of European citizens, NGOs are not necessary (TNS Political & Social, 2013: 9). However, this view is biased by five Member States – Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal and Cyprus – where the majority of the population says that European citizens do not need any NGOs. It is important for the purpose of our



study that the Czech respondents viewed NGOs as a necessary component of society (54% pro and 40% contra).

Although the Czechs view NGOs as being necessary, they have the least confidence among all other EU member states in an NGO's capacity to influence political decision-making. As the study by TNS Political & Social (2013: 13) points out, 70% of European respondents think that NGOs and associations are capable of influencing political decision-making at a national level. In the Czech Republic, however, only 55% of the respondents hold this to be the case. This disparity in attitude between EU and Czech respondents is also apparent with regard to the perceived importance of NGO participation in influencing policy-making at the EU level, with respectively 53% (average) and 37%.

The same study (TNS Political & Social, 2013: 9) mentions that Czech citizens do not perceive NGOs to be effective political agents, and also only 47% of them share values or interests with NGOs and would trust them to influence political decision-making in the right way. Again, the Czech Republic, as well as Spain and Estonia, rate NGOs worse than the other EU member states in assessing the capacity NGOs. Moreover, the Czech Republic and Latvia are the only two countries where individuals do not perceive NGO membership as presenting an effective way to influence political life (52% and 54%, respectively).

From this perspective, the present paper investigates the following key research questions: What are the determinants of success or failure regarding NGO participation in designing EU Cohesion Policy programmes? What managerial consequences must be borne by civil society from the perspective of the triple constraints of the project management— costs, time and quality?

The main contribution that this study makes to the body of research on the partnership principle in partnerships is that, compared to the other member states of the European Union, civil society in the Czech Republic receives little public sector support when trying to influence public policies. Another issue is that the design phase of the EU Cohesion Policy programmes which are currently operational has concluded, but that future programme call for proposals will continue to be submitted until the end of the period 2014-20. The findings of this research can therefore be applied to improving the practical implementation of the programmes' specific policies. This study is also the most recent study to track actual experience in applying the partnership principle in the Czech Republic.

The article is structured in five sections as follows. After the Introduction in Section 1, Section 2 outlines the historical development of the partnership principle and its implementation in the Czech Republic. Section 3 explains the data collection and processing procedures. Section 4 presents the results and discusses recent developments drawn from practical experience in applying the partnership principle using NGO participation in order to identify the determinants and the managerial consequences that explain the success and failure of NGO participation in designing programmes for the EU Cohesion Policy. Finally, Section 5 concludes with findings.

2. Partnership principle – general development

2.1 Importance of the partnership principle for Cohesion Policy

EU Cohesion Policy belongs to the main EU investment policies. Its budget is EUR 453.2 bn. for the period 2014–20. Such an investment aims to support regional development, especially in those regions lagging behind. The main objectives of the policy are the creation of jobs; an increase in competitiveness and economic growth at regional and company levels; sustainable development and standards in the quality of life (EC, 2015). Social partners, civil society, European, national, regional and local-level partners should



participate in programming at all stages of the programme's development and implementation process; i.e., during the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases of programmes.

The importance of the partnership principle is stressed by its long-term presence in the European legal framework. Partnership had already been part of the Cohesion Policy in the 1994-99 programming period. At that time, the Regulation 2081/1993 referred to the partnership principle in Article 4: The member states were supposed to implement partnership according to their respective national rules, current practices and with their respective institutional, legal and financial capacities of the partners. It was also a period when the partnership principle began to be used more extensively within the European Union (Piattoni, 2009).

During this period, the scope of the partnership principle implementation was further refined and broadened. The programming period 2000–2006 added a clause in Article 8 of the Regulation 1260/1999 that the partnership should be as representative as possible at all levels of the Cohesion Policy implementation. Regulation 1083/2006 Article 11, later, went further as the importance of the civil society is mentioned directly in the programming period 2007–13. This document also specified the requirement that the partners have to be involved in de-signing, implementation and monitoring at all levels of policy-making (within the respective national strategic reference framework and all operational programmes).

The most recent development not only confirms the approach, but also introduces a new tool for the partnership. This is done by combining definitions based on Regulation 1303/2013 in Article 5 with a new tool – the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (EC, 2014b). These guidelines provide partners with more elaborated information on partnership principle implementation. Thus, the partnership should be ensured by strengthening of the capacity of partners including civil society and necessity to assess the performance and effectiveness of the partnership principle implementation.

The partnership principle has undergone numerous developments ever since the Cohesion Policy was first introduced. On the other hand, all the above-mentioned regulations allow the managing authorities to implement the partnership principle in accordance with national rules and practices. This has led countries which have low participative cultures and a centralized public administration to opt out of initiating a consultative process of participation, and instead run it on an informative basis only in order to satisfy the requirements of the regulations. The form of the partnership is still framed by the constitutional arrangements of the particular member state (Baun and Marek, 2008: 33) and is more or less standardized in many EU member states (Batory and Cartwright [2011] or Dabrowski, Bachtler and Bafoil [2014]). This situation is also confirmed by Kendall and Anheier (2009), who identified the low level of involvement of third-sector representatives in the partnership process in designing and implementing the EU Cohesion Policy. This finding fits in with Salamon's and Anheier's social origins theory of the civil society (first published in Salamon and Anheier, 1998, which was revised after the critique of, for example, Steinberg and Young, 1998 or Ragin, 1998, and republished in Anheier, 2014). According to this theory, the Czech Republic has a statist non-profit sector model with less importance attributed to civic engagement, low level of volunteer input and a smaller civil society labour force. Given these characteristics, our research results are primarily applicable to other countries with similar non-profit sector models; especially those in the Central and Eastern Europe (see also Baun and Marek, 2008: 11-12).

This type of polity is prevalent among former post-communist countries which have centralized public administrations. This situation was also partly caused by the European Commission (EC) itself. The EU Cohesion Policy has not changed the attitudes to policy design and implementation by introduction of the partnership principle in the Central and Eastern European countries. Implementation of the *acquis communautaire* was instituted in the countries in question without applying the partnership principle. The countries which gained access had no option to negotiate the scope of implemented policies (for examples,



see Grosse [2010] or Kutter and Trappmann [2010]). Thus, the partnership processes and means were not ready to be applied in the programming period 2000--2006 (2004-06 for that time new member countries). Path dependency is then evident there, as the implementation of the partnership principle is in a process of development throughout the two periods 2007–13 and 2014–20. The situation is similar on both the managing authorities' and the potential beneficiaries' sides of the EU Cohesion Policy. States with structures ready to apply the partnership principle appeared if their public administration was introduced into the system by countries which possessed participative experience as in the case of Eastern Germany (e.g., Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in Perron, 2014).

Policy relevance according to the actual needs

Knowledge of public's actual needs is crucial in order to successfully design and implement public policies for the long term – and this also applies to EU Cohesion Policy. If this aspect is neglected, problems will emerge regarding local programme ownership, requiring further part-project solutions, and thereby hazarding the sustainability of project and programme outcomes. Although the limitations posed by a centralised approach without knowledge of the local needs are one of the important concerns mentioned by the EC (2004: 9) and also by Kelleher, Batterbury and Stern (1999: 16), this issue has not yet been tackled with regard to EU Cohesion Policy. On the contrary, this issue has been evaded owing to anxiety about rent-seeking behaviour (Milio, 2014) and democratic deficit (Perron, 2014). Partnership, however, has also been identified as a condition for greater effectiveness in EU Cohesion Policy by Mairate (2006).

Citizens' needs are usually only identified during the programmes' initial preparatory phase; i.e., approximately two years before the beginning of the programming period in the cohesion policy's programme management. Once the preparatory phase is concluded, the cohesion policy is then implemented within a seven-year programming period (including a two-year finalisation phase). Thus, approximately 11 years will pass from an early beginning to the ultimate end of the programme. This period is too long for the needs to remain un-changed. Ignoring this fact has effects on the EU Cohesion Policy as the actual needs inevitably change within such a long period. Such a situation is projected into an absorption capacity of the EU Cohesion Policy assistance as the actual needs inevitably change within such a long period.

The absorption capacity of the EU Cohesion Policy

The absorption capacity of a specific EU cohesion policy concerns not only a programmes' expenditure of EU resources, but also the results it achieves through such spending. Low absorption capacity can signal that the managing authorities have difficulty with the administrative process burden, and also that the needs and capacities of a particular programme's target group have not been taken into account. In the context of such obstacles, Dabrowski (2014) refers to the political importance in promoting that EU Funds are spent correctly. The Czech Republic is one of the six countries with the lowest overall absorption capacity in financial terms of the countries applying EU Cohesion Policy (EC, 2014a: 209 – 210).

There is also another reason for enlarging the implementation of the partnership principle among EU member states. As Lane (2010) points out, civil society, expressed via citizen participation, can help to redress perceived democratic deficits of EU institutions. The European Commission's policy resolution EC (2014b: 5) stresses the institutional capacities of partners: "...effective implementation of a partnership should be ensured by strengthening the institutional capacity of relevant partners through capacity building activities targeting social partners and organisations representing civil society who are involved in the programmes."

Thus, the promotion of civil society and the empowerment of NGOs became a policy objective, although in the case of the post-communist countries NGOs do not yet possess adequate financial and personnel capacities. Moreover, such a process is again an imposed top-down method of implementation, instead of



a bottom-up approach which is more sustainable in the long term. In a similar vein, Lane (2010) emphasizes the role of an economic civil society in providing a necessary foundation to support long-term democratic development in Western European countries, which was missing in Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, however, the size and the role of civil society also vary among Western European societies (Salamon and Anheier [1998] or Sissenich [2010]).

2.2 Czech civil society organizations and partnership development in the Czech Republic

Development of civil societies in the post-socialist period

The progress of civil society in post-socialist countries is analysed academically in terms of two paths of development (Lane, 2010). The first path relates to economic development, and the second one to political participation. This approach focuses on the difference in the chronology of these developments between Eastern and Western countries. While Western European countries were the first to witness an economic development which enabled their civil societies to start participating in political life, Eastern European post-socialist countries had to undergo an economic and socio-political transition simultaneously at the beginning of the 1990s.

Although civil society in post-socialistic countries has been developing economically and socio-politically, the economic base did not provide sufficiently robust foundations to support the political activities of NGOs. Political decision-making power, up until now, has been concentrated in the political parties (Frič, 2004). Moreover, Laboutková (2009) comments that the Czech politicians view NGOs as representing interests opposed to their own goals in political decision-making process.

The Czechs view Western European civil societies as the best model for nurturing NGO activity in the Czech Republic; in particular, they esteem the liberal model used in Great Britain or the corporatist model due to their geographic proximity to Germany. This is evident from the fact that Czech NGOs predominantly find foreign partners for their projects in Western Europe. According to IREAS centrum (2011), 68.2% of all international partners participating in Czech NGO projects financed by the European Social Fund are in Western Europe. Moreover, 17.9% of all partners are from Slovakia due to the language similarity.

The economic and socio-political conditions facing Czech Republic in implementing the partnership principle were very different from those obtaining in Western-style civil societies. In the first half of the 1990s, civil society organisations blossomed in the Czech Republic. The growth of a number of newly established NGOs was rapid (Mansfeldová et al, 2004). Some of the NGOs already existed, but they needed reorganization and transformation or they revived their previous suspended existence. Some NGOs began to operate domestically, having previously had to work abroad or new NGOs were set up.

Barriers to the partnership principle in the Czech Republic

In theory, the partnership principle allows NGOs' to deploy political resources. From this perspective, the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in 2004 offered Czech NGOs new hope. High expectations were mainly linked to the Structural and Cohesion Funds that are allocated by EU Cohesion Policy. Sudbery (2010) confirms the climate of expectation and empowerment that domestic NGOs experienced in Central and Eastern European countries subsequent to EU accession and their utilization of the available EU funds.

These high expectations were followed by disappointment (Harvey, 2004). Insufficient means together with the inability of NGOs' to shape the priorities according to the new programmes hampered the adoption and implementation of the partnership principle. After the accession, capacities of NGOs were mainly



restricted to projects whose objectives were determined by the EU and ministries responsible for particular operational programmes. Thus, NGOs became providers of parts of public-policy programmes, rather than pursuing their own objectives and issues.

One of the most important barriers to the partnership principle is the Czech NGOs' lack of sufficient funding. This is reflected in their lack of strategic planning. According to the USAID study (2006), an awareness of a need for strategic planning in the non-profit sector generally prevails, but a large part of the NGOs have no written strategic plans.

Lack of funding has led NGOs to sacrifice planning long-term strategic objectives and, instead, focus on achieving short-term operational goals. According to Novotný and Lukeš (2008: 57), less than ten percent of organizations formulate written strategies that extend beyond three years. The same authors compare short-term NGO goals (12 months) with medium-term NGO goals (3 years), and find similarly defined both types of goals (Novotný and Lukeš, 2008: 62).

Another barrier to effectively implementing the partnership principle is long-term low level of employment amongst NGOs. In 1995, this was only 1.7% (Mansfeldová et al, 2004: 112). The share of NGOs in employment increased to 2.04% in 2012 (Vrzáček, 2014: 3), but this percentage is still three times lower than that in Western European countries.

This lack of NGO personnel capacity can also be identified in the absence of NGOs' managers who enter politics. NGOs do not have the capacity to change political issues in a political arena or frame policies in accordance with the model introduced by Sudbery (2010: 140). In summary, Czech NGOs are mainly oriented by the policy instruments and funding programmes of their short-term needs, rather than by long-term strategies.

Empirical surveys show that Czech NGOs are aware of the main requirements for successful participation in the political decision-making process (see Černá and Marek, 2003: 174-175), but that they do not have sufficient capacity, either economic or socio-political, to improve their position (Rose-Ackerman [2007], Frič [2004] or Polverari and Michie [2009]).

The need for associations

Associations could function as partners for the managing authorities. They help to avoid turmoil when there are too many individual partners involved. Pre-negotiation within associations could help to align the heterogeneous ideas and interests of the various groups of stakeholders in the civil society sector and increase effectiveness of the partnership process.

Some associations represent NGOs interests as a generic sector and other associations represent their interests based on their field of specialisation. The first attempts to unify the civil sector formally and to create a system of self-administration for NGOs appeared in 2003 when the Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic (ANNO) was established. When regional associations became members of the nationwide association, it became difficult for public servants to ascertain how many members were represented by ANNO in this two-tiered system of involvement. Another deficiency of this umbrella organization relates to the range of NGOs that it covers, as sports and environmental issues are not represented (Pospíšilová, 2014: 7). Moreover, there is not only one nationwide association. In 2010, a new umbrella organization, The Association of public benefit organizations in the Czech Republic, was set up.

Prior to these developments, the Czech Republic's civil sector was characterised by heterogeneity and lacked the support of umbrella associations. Thus, the public administration was obliged to cope with het-



erogeneous groups of NGOs (Černá and Marek, 2003). Moreover, the public authorities involved in managing programmes often did not know whose role it was to represent the Czech civil society sector. Thus, the selection process used to determine which of the NGOs' representatives would enter into partnerships was exposed to criticism and perceived as being insufficiently transparent by both the NGOs and the public administration.

3. Data and methodology

The current study is based on a combination of information derived from official documents and data collected via in-depth interviews and focus-group research. This research design allows information to be collected from both the public administration and the NGOs involved in the partnership for two programming periods (2007-13 and 2014-20). It also enabled us to match the interviews with information from official documents such as the records of the meetings of the monitoring committees (MCs), and different versions of the programming documents.

First group of interviewees

The in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups of interviewees. The first group consisted of representatives and managers from Czech civil society who are members of MCs of operational programmes in the programming period 2007-13 or who are members of working groups for the programming period 2014-2020. Civil servants compose the second group (see the following text). Thus, some of the interviewees participating in the period 2007-13 have sufficient experience of the partnership principle and knowledge concerning the EU Cohesion Policy.

To obtain the data, we had to secure a list of the contacts of the members of the MCs and working groups. We gained lists of the nominees of two organisations, the Czech Republic's Committee for the EU of the Government Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations and the ANNO for the programming period 2014-20. The contacts of individual members of the MCs for particular operational programmes were obtained from the web pages of the respective managing authorities.

The first issue to solve was a list of contacts of members of the monitoring committees and working groups. We gained lists of nominees of the Committee for the EU of the Government Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations and the Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic for the programming period 2014-2020. The contacts of individual members of the monitoring committees of particular operational programmes were obtained from the managing authorities. These contacts were usually obsolete as we realized that some people were not members of those administrative bodies any more. This fact, however, was not reflected by the official information presented by the managing authorities on the particular web pages of managing authorities.

We managed to collect contact details for each of the 94 NGOs' representatives who participate in the partnership principle of the EU Cohesion Policy in the programming periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. In all, 48 interviews with NGO representatives were realized in the period between the second half of July and the first half of September 2014. The interviews were conducted primarily with representatives of associations (of which 15 were national and 10 regional associations) and six larger NGOs (with offices throughout the Czech Republic) to cover as large a part of civil society as possible. Seventeen interviewees were from smaller NGOs, but they are important individuals who act as NGOs' position-makers or issue makers (especially INT 6, 46 and 47) or experts who have a great degree of expertise in EU Cohesion Policy (INT 27, 34 and 41).



Second group of interviewees

The second group consisted of public servants from eight managing authorities which are responsible for the main operational programmes. The eight programmes that were selected for the interviews were drawn from eight thematic and nine regional operational programmes (Prague had one programme financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) and one programme financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)) in the programming period 2007-13 and nine thematic operational programmes and one integrated regional operational programme in the programming period 2014-20. Five of the interviewees represent thematic programmes with national scope (these are: the Ministry for Regional Development which acts as the national coordinator of the EU Cohesion Policy in the Czech Republic; the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs; the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture). These managing authorities overlap between programming periods. Moreover, these are the operational programmes that NGOs are most interested in as they are the programmes' final beneficiaries.

Three of the interviewed public servants represented regional operational programmes (South-East; North-West and South-West). The implementations of these regional programmes may be either successful or failing (depending on their capacity to absorb EU funding). We also interviewed two members of the Committee for the EU of the Government Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations who are not members of other surveyed groups.

The in-depth interviews with representatives of the Czech managing authorities were conducted during September and October 2014.

Interviews

The interviews consisted of 46 questions in three blocks: (1) general questions concerning partnership principle; (2) questions concerning previous experience with the partnership principle; and (3) recent participation in the EU Cohesion Policy programming period 2014-20. The structure of questions covered topics concerning the application of the partnership principle, and the possibility to actively suggest ideas and voice opinions during preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of operational programmes. Further questions also investigated the expectations of the individual partners and the extent to which these expectations had been fulfilled.

The results of the analysis of the official documentation and in-depth-interviews were triangulated with the results of a focus group (October 2014, participation of three people from the public sector and nine from the civil society sector) and two rounds of peer-reviews provided by representatives of both the public and the non-profit sector (October and November 2014).

The set of questions was prepared according to the form of partnership approach defined by Potluka and Liddle (2014). It covers the following main issues of the partnership principle:

- The goals are clear for all partners and are shared by all of them – the goals are perceived the same way by all partners and all partners make attempts to successfully achieve them.
- Partnership is beneficial for all partners – the added value is present for all partners (positive internal value). A situation when one partner becomes zero added value and positive effects are gained by other partners is not a partnership.
- Partners cooperate in the long-term – at least several years. Moreover, pre-existing coordination increases effectiveness of policies implemented (Milio, 2014).
- Form of cooperation in partnership is accepted by all partners – the means of work are understandable and acceptable for all partners.



- Added value of each partner is clear – each partner adds something what would be missing otherwise. All partners are equal and respected. This synergy is important for achievement of goals of partnership (for Irish case see Adshead, 2014).
- Sum of effects is higher in partnership than without partnership – the total effects of partnership are higher than the sum of separate effects of each partner when not being in a partnership (positive external value).
- Consensus decisions are made by all partners – final decision is a consensus of all partners.

Selection of these issues (goal agreement; anticipated benefits and age of partnership) is supported by Gazley (2010) who proved positive influence of the three mentioned issues to reported partnership accomplishments.

These data sets and information enabled us to construct a problem tree (EC, 2004) for the implementation of the ideal partnership principle based on the seven characteristics mentioned above.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis was conducted as if the partnership principle were ideally implemented so that all partners involved benefit according to the principles outlined in the methodological section. The investigation identifies the main barriers to managing the partnership principle in the Czech Republic, but also shows that capacities to cooperate are developing in both the civil and the public sectors. The particular results are discussed in the following parts. The main issues, causes and effects are visualised in the problem tree which is presented in the Appendix.

Transparency of the selection process

The NGOs' representatives were selected differently in the programming period 2014 - 2020 than in the previous periods. During this period, they were selected via the NGO Working Group, later renamed the Partnership Platform 2014+. This group, which was originally established in 2012, was mostly composed of representatives of regional and sectorial umbrella associations as well as major NGOs. This platform took the initiative to conduct the nomination process as it had the capacity to organize this within a few weeks in late 2012 and early 2013. The process was led by the ANNO. NGOs managed to organize the nomination process within the non-profit sector as a basis for selecting suitable NGO representatives to particular operational programmes. In total, approximately 100 to 120 NGO representatives were nominated, of them 54 nominees participated in the partnership at the end of the nomination process.

The vast majority of interviewees considered this system of selecting representatives to the programming structures to be sufficiently transparent. Thus, these selection results were considered more legitimate than those of previous programming periods. The interviewees also emphasized the bottom-up principle as the candidates were nominated and selected by NGOs. Likewise, this method of selection covered all operational programmes.

An unprecedented number of NGOs engaged in the partnership process in the programming period 2014 - 2020 in the Czech Republic. This initiative involves of experienced people who have previous experience with the partnership principle and knowledge about the European Structural and Investment Funds as well as those who do not.

Added value for partners

The majority of the implemented partnerships are still rather formal. This applies in particular to MCs that have very formal processes, which is not only the case in the Czech Republic (i.e., for Slovakia and Hun-



gary, see Cartwright and Batory, 2011). The NGOs' representatives perceive the added value obtained from a partnership as being very low, although improvements in public-sector openness are revising attitudes in the programming period 2014 - 2020. Almost two thirds (61.5%) of interviewed NGOs' representatives who held clear opinions on the issue reported that the Czech public administration implemented the partnership principle in conformity with the requirements of the European Commission. The interviewees indicated that success in implementing a partnership depends on the personal approach adopted by the managing authorities' personnel and the NGOs' representatives.

Table 1 provides opinions of the NGOs' representatives regarding the application of the main principles of the partnership principle. The interviewees responded 'no decision' when they were unable to decide on the issue or did not have a strong opinion on it.

The answers indicate that the main problems associated with implementing the partnership principles relate to differentials in the added values of the stakeholders, in the effects of partnership, and in decision-making within the partnership. A detailed inspection of the responses shows that NGOs' representatives initially expected to obtain an opportunity to influence the objectives of the newly formed operational programmes, but that they were unable to do so as their role in the process was limited to commenting on the documents.

Table 1: Implementation of partnership principles

Is the following statement valid according to your experience?	Interviewees (N)				Interviewees with opinion (%)		
	No	Yes	No decision	Total	No	Yes	No decision (%)
Partners cooperate over the long term	18	18	12	48	50.0	50.0	25.0
Partnership is beneficial for all partners	12	24	12	48	33.3	66.7	25.0
The goals are clear for all partners and are shared by all of them	21	11	16	48	65.6	34.4	33.3
Form of cooperation in partnership is accepted by all partners	22	9	17	48	71.0	29.0	35.4
Added value of each partner is clear	16	17	15	48	48.5	51.5	31.3
Sum of effects is higher in partnership than without partnership	9	24	15	48	27.3	72.7	31.3
Consensus decisions are made by all partners	29	8	11	48	78.4	21.6	22.9

Source: In-depth interviews with NGOs' representatives

Politics vs. policy

The NGOs' representatives expected the process to be highly open. In total, 50% of the interviewed NGOs' representatives considered that public servants had no motivation for implementing the partnership. This percentage accounts for 66% of all the interviewees who responded to this question. Moreover, 60.4% of all interviewed NGOs' representatives did not witness another NGO's participation in decision-making. Almost 80% of all interviewed NGOs' representatives did not witness the participation of NGOs in decision-making. These results point out a locked situation in the political decision-making process as the political parties and politicians are the dominant decision-makers. Furthermore, 47.9% of all interviewed NGOs observe the Czech public administration's resistance to involving other partners in decision-making.

Politics prevails over policy in the implementation of the working groups' outputs. The outputs of the working groups are problem-oriented. Thus, it is possible to find a solution to the particular problems and programme orientation. However, the working groups' output transition into the political decision process re-



veals that there are no or very few incentives for implementing the results of working groups in real policies. Public administration simply follows the rules given by the European Community.

Another issue is the weak relationships that NGOs have within the political decision-making process and with politicians. The NGO's role should be that of agenda setting and not of political decision-making, as is the case in a system where the European Union is a regulatory political system with civil society involvement as prescribed by EU Cohesion Policy (Kohler-Koch, 2009).

Partnership process

The interviewees stated that the partnership process is impersonal. A number of issues may be discussed and explained, but this requires time and intense discussion. Moreover, many NGOs' representatives receive no information about how their comments are being dealt with.

The interviewees reported that less important comments (e.g., on the formulation of sentences) were usually accepted. Some working groups succeeded in persuading managing authorities to extend the pool of potential beneficiaries to include NGOs (INT 1, 10, 40 and 42 and also the managing authorities' representatives). On the other hand, pleas to reallocate funding according to the priorities of the NGOs' objectives were rejected by the managing authorities.

The fact that NGOs entered the partnership process after the programming documents had already been existed was identified as another hindrance to NGO participation in the partnership process. Thus, when new NGOs' representatives entered the process, they did not have sufficient time to gain an in-depth understanding of the upcoming programmes and influence them. Also working-group meetings were often held in response to developments in negotiations that had taken place at the national level or national negotiations with the European Commission which offered NGOs' representatives no opportunity to contribute to the formulation of the respective strategic documents.

These impediments to NGO participation are partially the result of the fragmentation of the civil society sector. Representatives of the Czech national coordination body contacted bona fide representatives of ANNO which was thought to be the representative of the non-profit sector. However, the information that ANNO provided was not shared with other NGOs. This omission caused delays in the partnership process lasting several months.

The fragmentation of the civil sector is evident in the NGO representatives' perception of openness and communication within the public sector. Some of the interviewees assessed the public sector's approach favourably (INT 15, 17, 19, 27, 28 and 41), while others criticized the form and content of the communication (INT 25, 26, 32 and 40).

These problems obstructed long-term planning and also prevented NGOs from organizing their participation. As a result, many of the NGOs' representatives who participate in working groups for the first time have no idea how their contribution should be programmed.

Fragmented civil society in the Czech Republic

The fact that NGOs' interests are fragmented is reflected in their inability to form a consensus. The Czech Republic's public administrations as well as the populace are not informed about the civil society sectors issues. Non-profit organizations are able to reach consensus within their fields of specialization, but not as a sector. A number of NGOs' representatives stated that there was a lack of mutual communication and awareness with regard to determining what the common interests of the civil society should be and how workloads should be shared (INT 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 20, 26, 36, 39 and 41). Other interviewees (INT 1,



2, 14, 20 and 25) stated that communication amongst NGOs operated well. Some NGO's representatives therefore did not know what to actually promote and approached the negotiations from the perspective of their personal priorities. On the other hand, since the NGOs' representatives did not share the workloads among themselves, they were overwhelmed by the amount of information that they received from the managing authorities. This situation occurred in both programming periods (Polverari and Michie, 2009: 15).

Both the public administration and the NGOs interviewees considered that fragmentation among NGOs is an important barrier to implementing the partnership principle. Three quarters of interviewees see specific competing interests within civil society sector as posing a problem (see Table 2 for details). In this respect, the Czech situation is very similar to that of Hungary, Poland and Romania; here, Börzel and Buzogány (2010: 175-6) identify instability in the relations among stakeholders as being responsible for the non-alignment of interests with regard to environmental policies.

Table 2: Particular interests as a barrier to implementing the partnership principle

Do you see particular interests of NGOs as a barrier to implementing the partnership principle in the Czech Republic?		Frequency (N)	All Interviewees (%)	Valid responses (%)
Valid responses	N	9	18.8	24.3
	Yes	28	58.3	75.7
	Total	37	77.1	100.0
Missing responses	Interviewee could not decide	4	8.3	
	No answer at all	7	14.6	
	Total	11	22.9	
Total		48	100.0	

Source: In-depth interviews with NGOs' representatives

We have identified four interest groups among the NGOs in an EU Cohesion Policy partnership: ANNO, CEU GCNO, National Network of Local Action Groups and strong NGOs. These groups are usually gathered around strong NGOs or official platforms. The first group mentioned is ANNO. This organisation allocates contacts to the top managers of other member associations; i.e., 47 of which 17 other associations, mainly regional. It has the capacity to mobilize other NGOs to actively participate. This is evident from its role in the selection process that nominates NGOs' representatives for the EU Cohesion Policy partnership. This mobilization is performed through regional associations. The Partnership Platform 2014+ demonstrates ANNO's capacity to mobilize competent NGO representatives in affiliation with other organizations. Seven of the ten top-ranked elected candidates for MCs were members of the Partnership Platform 2014+. On the other hand, other NGOs criticize this association, because it often performed its activities without considering stakeholders in other civil society groups.

The second interest group has formed around the Committee for the EU of the Government Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit. It is an official public administration body. Thus, as an official structure it has the advantage of communicating directly with the Czech government and the civil society sector on EU issues. Moreover, the Council is an advisory body of the Czech government. Thus, it is seen by NGOs' representatives as a body which represents public sector interests, as opposed to civil society interests.

The third interest group is a national network of local action groups. These local action groups engaged in their own way to implement EU Cohesion Policy in the programming period 2004 - 2006. They act as intermediary bodies in providing small-scale grants to micro-regional applicants. Their programme decisions



applied the partnership principle to the LEADER initiative, which involved all key local stakeholders. Their function is therefore to provide a partnership platform which acts as an implementation structure. By participating in the implementation process, these local action groups were not only able to gain experience, but were also able to present themselves to their stakeholders as active and respected participants in implementing the partnership principle. Because these groups are able to access modest amounts of institutional funding, other groups of NGOs classify them as a part of a public sector.

The fourth interest group is the least structured group. It consists of representatives who support strong NGOs and who exert an equally influential and timely impact on their behalf (INT 3, 7, 16, 28, 30, and 31).

In order to achieve their goals, all the above-mentioned groups create coalitions. They rarely collaborate to create a unified national coalition that covers the whole civil society sector in the Czech Republic. If the NGOs unify, then it is usually only for a short-term period as it happened during the preparations for the programming period 2014 - 2020 in the Partnership Platform 2014+.

The role of communication among NGOs

The fragmentation of the civil society sector is partly the result of inadequate communication among NGOs. Mutual communication among NGOs would not only raise awareness about the issues that have already been solved, but it would also increase opportunities to share experience. Thus, it would allow the operational programmes to become more closely aligned to the actual needs of society.

A communications system was created for NGOs within the Partnership Platform 2014+ (INT 2 and 25). The main purpose of this system was to facilitate the transfer of information concerning the preparation process for the operational programmes as well as updated documentation to NGOs. There were coordinators in each group who were responsible for the transmission of all documents to the platform's secretary who would forward the information to other interested NGOs.

This system was only operative at the beginning of the partnership implementation in 2013. According to 58.3% of the NGOs managers interviewed, negotiations concerning the priorities in the EU Cohesion Policy were often badly coordinated, and NGOs, in particular, promoted their own interests without attempting to reach a consensus with other NGOs. The greatest problem that NGOs encountered was the insufficient exchange of information concerning recent developments across the thematic areas, as well as a lack of coordination within the non-profit sector. In some instances, meetings were organized, but most often communication was conducted electronically, which was often insufficient. Moreover, sometimes even representatives of NGOs within the same working group did not communicate with each other at all (INT 41).

In other instances, the NGO representatives attempted to establish and manage their own websites so that they could share information and documents internally as well as with other non-profit organizations

Disillusionment and fluctuation

NGOs stated that their primary interest was to participate in creating new priorities. At this stage of the programme development process, they have optimal access to information about the operational programmes' focus and can prepare proposals for new development projects. Their interest in participation was shown to gradually decline the longer they were involved in contributing to the working groups and MCs for free as volunteers.

Moreover, the interviews showed that the inability of non-profit organizations to adequately promote their long-term objectives causes disillusionment and weakens their willingness to remain in partnership with



the public administration. The fact that the work-related costs of NGOs' representatives have to be carried either by the NGOs or by the representatives themselves is not sustainable in the long run. This funding disparity between NGOs and public servants was mentioned by fifteen of the interviewees (INT 2, 4, 7, 10, 13, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 29, 34, 39, 40 and 44).

These problems gradually obliterate the initial enthusiasm that exists. More than a quarter (26.7%) of the NGOs' representatives felt that they had lost their initial drive. As a result, there is strong fluctuation in participation rates among NGOs' representatives. Experience-related disinterest is also reflected in the finding that only 5 of the 32 members of the MCs involved in the thematic and regional operational programmes in the period 2007 - 2013 decided to participate in the Platform 2014+ and that only 2 of them stood for a seat in a MC in the programming period 2014 - 2020.

Fluctuation in participation rates does not only concern NGOs' representatives, but also the public sector's management. Here, the turnover rate is stronger owing to the reshuffling managerial posts after each election. We assume that the Public Service Act which came into force in 2015 should solve this issue for the public administration.

Timing of the partnership principle implementation

Implementing the partnership principle when programming documents already exist causes a problem. This problem derives from the fact that NGOs had no opportunity to intervene in the preparation of the programming documents, but only had a chance to voice their opinions once the first drafts of the operational programmes had already been prepared. Furthermore, due to procedural matters, the process was delayed and not enough time was spent on specialized debates and discussions with NGOs. In addition to this, only about one half of the NGOs' representatives were aware of how time-consuming it would be to find consensus among partners, since they had only joined the partnership structures in the most recent programming period.

The interview responses showed that, apart from insufficient information about the actual needs of target groups also the delayed timing of the intervention obstructed the preparation of the programming documents in partnership. Due to delays, there was insufficient time to comment on the documents. This could have been solved either by engaging more personnel, or by lowering the quality of the output of the partnership process. In response to these alternative propositions, 94.7% of the interviewees (or respectively 75.0% of all responding NGOs' representatives) considered that the only option was to reduce the quality of the partnership process. In total, 58.3% of the interviewees attributed this problem to the insufficient time capacities of NGOs, and 12 of them specifically identified the time that is necessary to read and comment on documents as being the main problem. The NGOs' low level of expertise in partnership participation was identified as a general problem (Kohler-Koch, 2009), but the perception of Czech NGOs' lack of capacity is striking.

To sum up, Table 3 displays the successes and failures of Czech NGOs in implementing the partnership process.

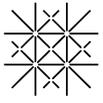


Table 3: Summary of successes and failures of NGOs in partnership process

Successes	Failures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great effort of NGOs • Transparent process for selecting NGOs' representatives • Partnership process is more open than before 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low persuasive capacity of NGOs • Fluctuation and loss of skilled people in NGOs • Fragmented civil society sector • Low coordination and communication among NGOs • Low NGOs' capacities (personnel, financial, time)

5. Conclusion

Our study provides an analysis of the opinions of top NGOs' managers with regard to the implementation and development of partnership principle within the Czech Republic during the EU Cohesion Policy period 2014-2020. We provide reliable data which we gained from in-depth interviews with 56 leaders of the most prominent NGOs in the Czech Republic and with the managers of managing authorities. Moreover, we collected data from the official documents of the particular MCs, working groups and negotiations.

Although we found that the long-term development in the application of the partnership principle is positive and is evaluated as satisfactory by both managing authorities and NGOs, we also identified the main causal determinants for the suboptimal interactions between the non-profit and the public sector. The main obstacles to successful implementation of the partnership principle in the Czech Republic are the four following issues:

The first and most crucial problem is the widespread fragmentation of the civil society sector in the Czech Republic. This dysfunctionality impedes the need to collaboratively determine the priorities and joint actions of the sector. Thus, many partners are unable to profit from the added value that ought to be gained from efficient cooperation. Moreover, uncoordinated activities sometimes counteract the actions which would improve public policies and position of the civil society. If the NGOs were able to introduce means of coordination (i.e., if they developed communication systems or instated effective leaders), they would achieve better results in the policy negotiation process.

The second important issue concerns the low level of competence that NGOs' representatives receive in the partnership process; i.e., they work at their own expense, they work in their free time, and they cover their expenditures for meetings privately. Thus, if their efforts are not fruitful, they simply leave the partnership or stop being active. In turn, the partnership stagnates and the implemented policies do not generate develop. NGOs should therefore draw on the funding support that is offered by the Cohesion Policy (see EC, 2014b), as this would help them to extend their personnel and time capacities and finance full-time experts.

Thirdly, the fluctuation in representatives from the civil society sector prevents the establishment of a functional partnership. However, the public administration is also subject to fluctuations due to the habitual electoral changes in its managing authorities. Although rotation in policy making is a principle of democracy, this can nevertheless have a disruptive effect on the decision-making process when members of administrative staff change too often. Fluctuations result in a loss of previously established personal contacts and the partnership not only becomes unsustainable, but may also need to be rebuilt. This problem deprives the working groups' long-term memory and means that partners have to share information. It



means that the situation does not meet the requirement of a long-term relationship. As mentioned above, efforts aimed at building the capacities of NGOs' representatives in MCs and working groups would decrease such fluctuations and consequently increase the NGOs' ability to participate successfully.

The fourth and final issue is the timing of the partnership. NGOs' representatives which join the partnership at a late stage in programming have insufficient time to consult priorities, which leads to low-quality outputs. A timely implementation of the partnership principle is necessary to satisfy the triple constraints of the programme's project management: costs, time and quality. It is simply not possible to achieve a high standard of quality in the partnership if NGOs lack time and financial resources. From this perspective, it is up to the managing authorities to initiate proceedings by holding discussions about the forthcoming policies with reliable partners three years prior to submitting the programme proposal to the EC.

Furthermore, it is crucially important to improve cooperation among NGOs and strengthen their motivation. This paper found that the creation of a working group for NGOs to deal with issues of the EU Cohesion Policy resulted in their increased activity and interest in the Czech Republic. This paper found that enabling NGOs to achieve their specific goals was a key contributing factor in promoting greater involvement of NGOs' representatives in the preparation of programmes in the current programming period 2014 - 2020.

Recent developments have shown that the intensity and quality of future partnerships within the EU Cohesion Policy will depend on the degree of support that the European Commission can offer. The partnership principle must be an official mandatory requirement in order to be satisfactorily implemented. Otherwise, there is a strong reluctance among politicians (although less among public servants) to adopt the partnership principle in the Czech Republic.

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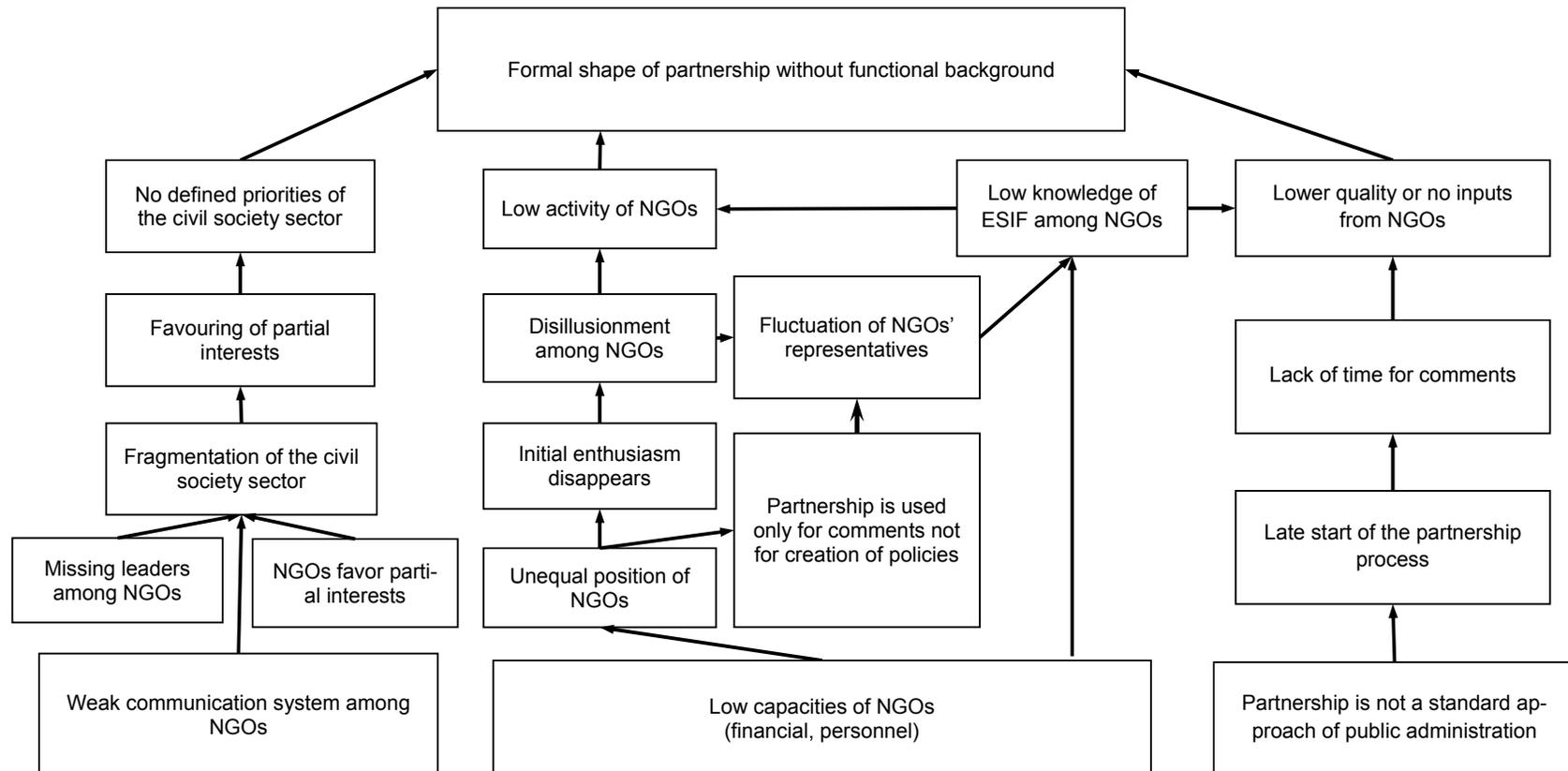
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Annex 1: Causes and effects of problems in partnership in the EU Cohesion Policy in the Czech Republic



Source: in-depth interviews, own elaboration