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Examining Regional Autonomy through Policies: Evidence from the Czech Republic*

PETR KONEČNÝ**

Abstract

Scholarly research on regional politics has been gradually shifting from the institutional descriptions of the past decades to detailed examinations of the real manifestations of self-governance. The so-called second generation of research on multi-level governance emphasizes the policy dimension and conditions for autonomous decision-making, an approach offering greater analytical depth. In this article, this approach is applied to the neglected case of the Czech Republic and is especially fruitful due to the country's mixed model of administration, which combines the principles of decentralization and deconcentration. Examined by the example of the South Moravian Region, the Czech regional level of self-governance is identified as significantly weak in almost all policy areas. There is extremely limited space for autonomous political decision-making, mostly in the form of mere financial investment, not direct regulation.

Keywords: Czech Republic; decentralization; regional politics; regionalization; regions

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1. Introduction

Regional self-governance is a reality in many European countries. The research on this phenomenon has come a long way. Detailed analyses and comparisons have gradually complemented institutional descriptions and the research on the causes of decentralization of the past decades. Today's so-called second generation of research on multi-level governance focuses on the real manifestations of self-governance. To achieve proper analytical depth, researchers emphasize the policy dimension – policy-making accompanied by the study of decision-making (Kleider & Toubeau, 2022).

At the same time, fundamental differences in the state of research can be observed between the eastern and western parts of Europe. This applies to almost all the post-com-

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munist states. There is often a lack of an elementary understanding of the institutional setting in these countries, which is the necessary background for the overall functioning of regional self-governance, which in turn impacts regional development. European cohesion policy has been rather unsuccessful in the long term – both in comparing old and new members of the European Union and within many countries. Especially in the post-communist part of Europe, there are often socioeconomically dominant metropolises contrasting with significantly weaker regions and underdeveloped peripheral areas (for an overview, see e.g. Eurostat, 2021).

Contemporary regional self-governance as an outcome of the vertical division of power arose in the post-communist part of Europe mostly at the turn of the millennium. Two decades of research on this phenomenon, *the second wave of regionalization*, have yielded mostly descriptive summaries or analyses chiefly focusing on fiscal decentralization.

One of the neglected cases in this research area is the Czech Republic. There are brief mentions in descriptive and comparative texts and several analyses focusing on fiscal decentralization or European integration (e.g. Bryson & Cornia, 2004; Brusis, 2005; Hooghe, Schakel, & Marks, 2008; Illner, 2010; Lysek & Ryšavý, 2020; Saarts, 2020). However, an in-depth treatise on policy-making is still missing. Information about the Czech regions is included in broad comparisons, namely the Regional Authority Index and the Territorial Self-governance Dataset (RAI, 2021; TERRGO, 2020), which operate with descriptions of the institutional setting. Again, there is a lack of examination of individual policy areas and the specifics of mixed administration.

This article is an attempt to place the Czech Republic more firmly in international comparison. Its goal is to provide an analytical framework that can be applied in studies examining individual areas of governance in the Czech Republic in detail, with possible extension to other cases with similar structures.

The Czech self-governing regions seem to be endowed with inadequate competencies (discussed below); all the more surprising is their relatively extensive democratic legitimacy – regional councils are elected in direct elections and select an executive body headed by a governor from among them. At the same time, low interest can be observed among Czech citizens. Regional elections in the Czech Republic typically have low turnout – approximately one-third of all eligible voters (Czech Statistical Office, 2020).

It is necessary to ask whether there is room for autonomous decision-making by the Czech regional representatives. The following analysis shows that decision-making autonomy is extremely limited in most areas of governance, existing mostly in the mere form of financial investment, not direct regulation through norm-setting. A mixed model of administration further complicates the situation, hindering the distinction between self-governance and subordinate exercise of power.

2. Theory

Czech regional politics is one of the neglected cases in this research area. Several studies describe the legal basis or administrative processes of the Czech regions and region-

al self-governance without proper examination of their political nature. Rudolf Cogan's (2018) comprehensive commentary on the Law of Regions can be considered the most significant. In one of the few works in the field of political science, attention is paid to regional politicians and public opinion about elections (Ryšavý et al., 2015), but does not place the regions in the context of the Czech political system and does not consider the real manifestations of regional politics. American political scientist Jennifer Yoder compares the origins of contemporary regional self-governance in Central Europe. However, she does not examine in detail the competencies of regional entities and individual areas of governance (Yoder, 2013). The lack of detailed examination of individual policy areas also applies to a study by Illner (2010); for a broader comparison of the post-communist European states, see Saarts (2020).

Several terms that are key to researching regional politics and self-government in the Czech Republic need to be defined. Self-governing regions represent one of the two levels of territorial self-government in the Czech Republic. The other is municipalities as self-governing territorial units at the primary level. Above the regional level is the state level representing the central government. Regional politics is also influenced by the EU level – especially from the economic perspective (see e.g. Lysek & Ryšavý, 2020).

In the case of Czech regional politics, the core concept of *decentralization* must first be distinguished from *deconcentration* since the *mixed administration model* is applied.

Deconcentration means the delegation of competencies of a state administration office to territorial offices. The bodies created on the basis of deconcentration are subordinated to the central power as part of the state administration. In contrast, decentralization means entrusting some political power in the hands of a self-governing entity. A self-governing territorial unit is not subordinate to the state administration but independent of it. Its dependence is (ideally) related only to national law, which determines the limits of the competence of territorial self-government. The key element that determines the difference between decentralization and 'mere' deconcentration is the relationship of subordination to or independence from the state administration (Capano, 2022).

While states within a federation tend to have a share of legislative power (while these acts must not conflict with the partial constitution of the unit and the constitution of the entire federation), self-governing units created on the basis of regionalization usually have only the sub-legislative power of regulation, i.e. issuing rules of a secondary nature to regulate the social reality within its territory to a predetermined extent. The term *norm-setting* is used within Czech literature (e.g. Cogan, 2018).

The relationship between the state administration and self-government, or centralization and decentralization, within the realities of the Czech Republic, is complicated by the existence of the mixed administration model, which combines self-governance and deconcentrated state administration within one entity at the regional (and municipal) level.

Territorial self-government operating according to the mixed model has a dual scope. In Czech terminology, the so-called *independent* (or *natural*) *competence* is the actual performance of self-government when the self-governing body is (ideally) not subordinated to the state administration. The so-called *delegated competence* consists of obligatory acts of administration when the local body is subordinated to a higher state administration level (Cogan, 2018, p. 12).

The complication is that it is not always evident when a self-governing unit exercises an independent or a delegated competence. In other words, when it 'behaves' like self-government or as deconcentrated state administration. The internal division of independent competence further complicates the distinction between *regulative* and *fiscal* administration (discussed below).

The general research question is, what are the characteristics of Czech regional politics, how does it work – is it characterized by autonomous politics, or just a subordinate execution of power delegated from the upper level? To answer this question, this article follows the approach of the second-generation studies in the research of multi-level governance.

Earlier studies focused on the comparison of regional politics. However, due to the great heterogeneity of the regional level of politics, it was impossible to establish a general theory of regional politics. The pitfalls of this heterogeneity were overcome by emphasizing policies, which also brought a more analytical character to the research. At the centre of attention are the possibilities of regional politics to create original policies and the actual policy outcomes. This approach started to dominate scholarship in the years following the wave of regionalization in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) at the turn of the millennium (Pitschel & Bauer, 2009; cf. Kleider & Toubeau, 2022; on the concept of multi-level governance, see e.g. Hooghe & Marks, 2001). The focus is on competencies or areas of governance, which are entrusted to territorial self-governance, and to examine the possibilities of autonomous decision-making within policy-making.

This approach is particularly beneficial in the context of a mixed model of administration, where it is necessary to carefully distinguish the performance of self-governance from the execution of deconcentrated administration.

The basic theoretical assumption is that regional politics is manifested mainly in so-called independent competence (Cogan, 2018; cf. Illner, 2010). In contrast, delegated competence is a manifestation of delegated administration.

The detailed functioning of the Czech self-governing regions is defined primarily by the Act on Regions. This act does not apply to the capital city of Prague, whose legal status is determined by a separate act. Overall, it is a special region, more precisely, a combination of a municipality and a region to which specific competencies are related. Several other legal norms also apply to the regions. In general, it can be stated that the self-governing regions, except for Prague, are based on the same institutional setting.

The region's constitutionally enshrined political body is the regional council (*zastupitelstvo kraje*), directly elected by the citizens of the region. Other bodies are the regional government (*rada kraje*) and the regional governor (*hejtman*), who the council members elect from among themselves. The council decides on matters of independent competence. The executive body of the region's independent competence is the regional government, which also adopts resolutions in delegated competence cases. Some regional representatives (members of the regional government) thus find themselves playing a 'dual role' as politicians deciding on independent competence and as 'elected officials' deciding on delegated competence. The same applies to the regional governor, who represents the region externally.

The non-political body is the regional office (*krajský úřad*), an institutional expression of the region's administrative component. According to the act, the region's political rep-

resentation does not directly influence the operation of the regional office. The only exception is the post of the director of the regional office, who is responsible to the governor for fulfilling the tasks entrusted to the office within the region's competence.

Self-governing regions operate on the basis of a mixed administration model, thus combining a self-governing component (independent competence) and an administrative component (delegated competence).

The region's political representation makes political decisions concerning both types of competence – independent and delegated. Theoretically, the region's political representation should have a free space for exercising its independent competence, and the given matters should be fully under its direction. However, this is complicated by the lack of a clear line between voluntariness and duty within the Czech legal system. On the contrary, 'formally declared independent competence is often standardized as a mandatory task of territorial self-government' (Cogan, 2018, p. 12).

Independent competence can be divided into *regulative (authoritative)* and *fiscal administration*. Regulative administration imposes obligations, enforcing implementation and punishing violations. Self-governing regions are endowed with the power to issue regional decrees, which is an expression of norm-setting – and thus of autonomous political decision-making; the regional council approves them. In practice, however, there are only a few conditions under which the regional representation can adopt a regional decree. Until 2006, it had distinctive possibilities in connection with the Building Act – later, the term 'principles of territorial development' began to be used. This is the most general form of spatial and regulatory planning documentation (Cogan, 2018, p. 25). Another example is the symbols of the region (emblem and flag). In both cases, these powers represent a certain 'minimum' of norm-setting through which the region fulfils its main task (territorial development) and determines the external visual representation (Cogan, 2018, p. 25).

Thus, the share of regulative administration is minimal, almost only formal, and often associated with an obligation (obligatory administration). It is the opinion of some theorists that obligatory independent competence is inappropriate, and these matters are to fall under the delegated competence; otherwise, the principle of self-government is violated (Cogan, 2018, p. 57).

Fiscal administration is mainly represented by economic competence. Its share is disproportionately higher within regional self-governance than regulative administration.

The Act on Regions enshrines the economic basis of self-government in the form of its management according to the approved budget. However, there is no guarantee of the region's own income. Self-governing regions cannot levy their own taxes; they are fully economically dependent on the central power. The revenues of the regions are determined by other legal regulations, particularly the Act on the Budget Determination of Taxes. It is only guaranteed that the self-governing region's political body can freely decide on at least some amount of finances. Still, in theory, it can be a very minimal amount (cf. Cogan, 2018, p. 7).

Regional revenues are usually categorized as follows: tax revenues (shared taxes granted by the state), transfers (subsidies), fees, and revenues from owned property and activities (Cogan, 2018, p. 60). A substantial part of the income of the regions consists of national or EU subsidies.

The high share of subsidies represents a particular problem for Czech regional self-government. Because the regions have had long-term insufficient revenue streams, they must still be supported by the central government. The share of subsidies in the total income of regions has remained the majority throughout their twenty-year existence. Recently, it was approximately a two-thirds share.

The amount of regional tax revenue is determined by the Act on the Budget Determination of Taxes. According to this Act, for a long time the regions received a share of 8.92%¹ of the so-called shared taxes (taxes, the revenue of which is divided between the state, the regions and the municipalities) each year. This amount is further divided between individual regions according to percentages defined in the appendix of the Act. Since 2021, the share of self-governing regions has increased to 9.78%. This change happened due to a major public finance reform that came into play partly due to the Covid-19 crisis (OECD, 2022). The allocations to self-governing regions have remained almost the same throughout the twenty years of their existence. The amount of tax revenue also expresses the inferior position of regions within the administrative structure.

The distribution of shared taxes in the Czech Republic looks (in a simplified form) as follows: 9.78% to the regions, 25.84% to the municipalities and 64.38% to the state. The allocation of shared taxes points to the Czech state's clear economic dominance over the self-governing territorial units.

Overall, it can be stated that the constitutionally guaranteed regional self-governance is realized as the right to legal existence and exercise of economic competence; the norm-setting role is minimal. According to Cogan, '[t]he legislation does not provide the regions with any support for the exercise of self-government in terms of political power, i.e. activities of a sovereign nature, which distinguish a self-governing corporation from any legal entity' (Cogan, 2018, p. 59). Besides, there is an apparent effort by the state to limit the almost exclusive space of autonomous decision-making of the regional representations – fiscal administration – through enforced budgetary responsibility (cf. Cogan, 2018, p. 7).

According to the Act on Regions, independent competence includes everything 'that is in the interest of the region and the citizens of the region', except for matters explicitly designated in the delegated competence (cf. Cogan, 2018, p. 63). According to the relevant legal norms, it is generally assumed that the following areas of governance belong to the independent competence of the Czech regions:

- spatial planning (principles of spatial development);
- regional roads;
- regional public transport;
- regional hospitals;
- social services;
- secondary schools and special school facilities;
- regional cultural institutions;
- coordination of municipal activities;
- crisis management (Cogan, 2018, p. 62).

The authority to establish legal entities, usually so-called contributory organizations, also falls under independent competence. Furthermore, regional development as such can

be considered a part of the independent competence, at least in terms of financial administration (discussed in the Results section below).

Based on the findings mentioned above, it can be assumed that Czech regional self-governance resembles the activity of a financial director directing the flow of public finances rather than an administrator of the territory who determines and enforces obligations. Moreover, there is no regional tax, and the regions are entirely financially dependent on the central power, especially in the form of subsidies, which represent a two-thirds share of their total revenues.

However, it is necessary to test these assumptions with a detailed analysis of individual areas of self-governing Czech regions' independent competence, focusing on decision-making.

3. Methods

This article follows the approach of the studies in the research of multi-level governance emphasizing the policy dimension (mentioned in the Theory section above). The focus is on the competencies or areas of governance that are entrusted to territorial self-governance, and on examining the possibilities for autonomous decision-making within policy-making at that level. This approach is particularly useful in the case of the Czech regions, where the whole system of regional self-governance is affected by the mixed model of administration and high level of financial dependence on the national level. The focus on policies has proven fruitful in the study of other cases of regional self-governance. For example, a detailed examination of policy areas in neighbouring Austria has led scholars to make a distinction between the country as a nominal federation and its de facto unitary system (Erk, 2004).

The basic theoretical assumption is that regional politics is manifested mainly in the areas of so-called independent competence. In contrast, delegated competence is a manifestation of delegated administration. To properly distinguish between the two, it is necessary to look in detail at the individual areas of independent competence of the Czech regions. There, the main focus is on the conditions or institutionally given possibilities for autonomous decision-making.

The research question is formulated as follows:

What are the possibilities for autonomous political decision-making of the Czech regional self-government in the areas of independent competence?

This article uses the concepts of autonomous and subordinate political decision-making to achieve a coherent conceptual framework. Autonomous political decision-making is based on the will of self-government representatives and is limited only by the legal framework. Subordinate political decision-making is subordinate to a political (executive) decision made at another political level.

An example of subordinate decision-making is the relationship between two political levels, where one establishes a policy in terms of basic objectives and financial framework,

while the other only concretizes the organization and investment of resources. A typical example of autonomous political decision-making is creating original policies. The limitation of the legal framework is taken into account since the existence of a common legal system is a substantial element of a regionalized, not a federalized, system.

To answer the research question and to properly implement the new approach, it is necessary to examine the conditions of decision-making in the individual *policy areas of independent competence of the Czech regional self-governance* – namely spatial planning, administration of regional roads, regional public transport, regional hospitals, specialized social care institutions and social services, administration of secondary and special schools, regional cultural institutions, coordination of municipal institutions, and crisis management. The decision to focus on all these areas is based on the absence of a general theory of regional politics, which would distinguish which areas inherently belong to the regional level or other levels. This will undoubtedly lead to a higher degree of descriptiveness. However, this article aims to provide an overall analytical framework that can be applied in future studies examining individual areas of governance in the Czech Republic in detail, with possible extension to other cases with similar structures.

In each policy area, in addition to a general assessment of the conditions of decision-making, examples of particular issues are given to better illustrate the role of the self-governing body in relation to other governance levels.

The same basic institutional setting of each Czech region (except for Prague) suggests a hypothesis stating that the possibilities for autonomous decision-making are the same in each region. This hypothesis needs to be checked (and possibly falsified) by examining a case which has the potential to deviate from the whole.

The debate on the relationship between democratic governance and development enters into the research of regional politics. Some scholars are inclined towards the relationship between democratic governance and socio-economic development (e.g. Acemoglu et al. 2008; cf. Gerring et al. 2005). At the same time, it is necessary to extend this debate to the level of regional self-governance, which is an result of the vertical division of power.

Political autonomy gives regional representatives the opportunity to develop the polity democratically entrusted to them, thanks to the possibility of creating original policies together with the potential to maintain or obtain (through redistribution) financial resources which regional representatives can spend autonomously (discussed for example by Filippetti, 2021).

Following this debate and findings on the institutional structure of regional self-governance in the Czech Republic, the South Moravian Region (*Jihomoravský kraj*) was selected as a case for testing the main hypothesis.

The South Moravian Region is relatively large and the second richest Czech region in terms of GDP per capita, with the second highest share of inhabitants with higher education (see Table 1). Its position as the second-strongest region socioeconomically has been long-term (Czech Statistical Office, 2021). The region's socio-economic strength could give it a higher degree of autonomy. It also contains the core of the historical land of Moravia with its capital, Brno (the second largest city in the Czech Republic). There are several institutions following on from organizations which traditionally had a *landwide*

scope; this continuity is evidenced by the names of some of them (mentioned in the Results section below). Although it is only a nominal continuity, it may indicate the strength of the regional centre, which could result in a higher degree of autonomy. However, the significance of these 'land' institutions must be evaluated individually.

Table 1: Comparison of regions in the Czech Republic

Region	Population in 2022	GDP per capita in 2020 (Euro) ²	Share of inhabitants with higher education in 2021 ³
Capital Prague	1,275,000	43,700	41.5%
Carlsbad	283,000	12,600	10.9%
Central Bohemian	1,387,000	18,000	20%
Hradec Králové	543,000	18,200	16.9%
Liberec	438,000	15,300	14.9%
Moravian-Silesian	1,178,000	15,700	17.8%
Olomouc	623,000	15,800	20.4%
Pardubice	515,000	16,500	16.7%
Pilsen	579,000	17,700	16.9%
South Bohemian	637,000	16,400	17.5%
South Moravian	1,188,000	19,400	24%
Ústí nad Labem	799,000	14,000	12.2%
Vysočina	504,000	16,800	17.5%
Zlín	572,000	17,100	17%
Czech Republic	10,517,000	20,100	20.9%

Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2021, 2022; Eurostat, 2022.

Relevant official documents of the government of the South Moravian Region and other involved institutions (namely strategic documents and decisions by regional representatives) for the period of the region's existence (since 2000) were collected as the research data. Their content was qualitatively analysed with a focus on references to particular policies. Related legal norms (see the References section) were also analysed when examining the decision-making conditions.

4. Results

The analysis focuses on all areas of independent competence of the Czech self-governing regions. The results are reported in the following subsections. An overall evaluation and an overview table are presented in the Conclusion section.

4.1. Spatial planning

One of the few regulative competencies of the Czech regional self-governing bodies is associated with the policy area of spatial planning. It involves the adoption of the so-called principles of territorial development (*Zásady územního rozvoje, ZÚR*). The regional council approves this document as a legal norm. The adoption of ZÚR was mandated by the Building Act of 2006 (Act No. 183/2006 Coll.), which obliged the regional councils to approve the document within five years of the Act's entry into force.

ZÚR applies to the territory of a region. It determines the public benefit constructions of supralocal significance in particular areas or corridors and requirements for their usage. The spatial plans of municipalities in a given region must correspond to the ZÚR.

When creating and approving the ZÚR, the regional council is, on the other hand, limited by the so-called territorial development policy (*Politika územního rozvoje, PÚR*), which the national government adopts. In addition to general development zones and axes, the PÚR determines basic development areas and infrastructure corridors. It applies to all elements that exceed a single region's boundaries or significance (including state borders).

Therefore, the relationship between the individual levels of governance with regard to spatial planning is hierarchical. The ZÚR approved by the regional council is a specification of the PÚR, just as the spatial plans of municipalities are a specification of the ZÚR. From this point of view, the political decision-making of the regional representation concerning the adoption of the ZÚR is not completely autonomous. It seems subordinate, especially in regard to any spatial planning elements that by their significance or location cross the borders of a given region. This subordination applies to many regional issues, as explained in other policy areas below, due to the unnatural character of the territory of the Czech regions (Balík, 2021). The regional self-governing bodies have greater autonomy in deciding about the supralocal elements.

A typical example of an element determined by planning documentation is transport infrastructure. In the case of the most important transport structures, i.e. motorways and high-speed rail, regional political representatives cannot affect their basic intention (where they will lead), only the routing.

For instance, the political representatives of the South Moravian Region could influence the routing of the D52 motorway from Brno to Vienna (more accurately, from Brno to the state border with Austria near Mikulčice), which forms part of the PÚR previously adopted on the state level. However, they cannot decide on the purpose of building the D43 motorway from Brno to Svitavy, although the South Moravian regional council has repeatedly supported its construction (D43 is also part of the current ZÚR) (South Moravian Region, 2020c). The Ministry of Transport decided to abrogate the D43 from the national motorway construction plan. Furthermore, the planning of the D43 was complicated because it would lead through the territory of two regions (South Moravia and the Pardubice region).

Although the regional political representatives do not have the authority to determine the basic plans of major transport structures nor to participate in their construction, they can influence their routing, which significantly affects the region's inhabitants. From this

point of view, disputes over public infrastructure routing appear to be a space for autonomous political decision-making, albeit limited. In the case of constructing the D52 motorway, a relatively strong ideological dimension to the political dispute could be observed in a dispute over environmental protection, specifically in the vicinity of the Pálava Protected Landscape Area. The council approved the final routing in 2016 (South Moravian Region, 2016).

The very processes of approving the ZÚR in the South Moravian Region and later updating it were accompanied by numerous political disputes. Litigation has become a frequent tool of entities that oppose the political decisions of regional authorities, whether it be municipalities or interest groups. In some cases, the plaintiff requests the complete annulment of the document (e.g. Regional Court in Brno, 2017; Supreme Administrative Court, 2019), as in the disputes over the routing of the D52 motorway and road 43).

4.2. Regional roads

The regional policy area of transport infrastructure is related to the administration of second and third class roads. Roads of the second class are intended for transport between districts, and third-class roads serve to connect municipalities or to connect a municipal road to a higher level road. Third-class roads are traditionally called ‘district roads’ – see Act No. 13/1997 Coll. On Roads – while second-class roads can be labelled ‘inter-district’ roads. Above these classes are categories of motorways and first-class roads (primary regional roads). The Act further distinguishes between local roads (under the administration of municipalities) and special-purpose roads.

The Czech self-governing regions own the regional roads. However, the region is not the direct administrator within independent competence; it only ensures proper road conditions through spending. The direct administrators of these roads are the municipal authorities with extended powers under delegated competence (*obce s rozšířenou působností*, ORP). The regional office decides whether roads are categorized as second or third class, as well as their exclusion, with the consent of the Ministry of Transport; therefore, the authority to decide on the categorization of roads does not fall under independent competence.

The autonomous decision-making of the regional self-governing bodies is thus limited only to the approval of priorities for financing the construction and repair of the roads in the given class categories by the central power. Furthermore, in the case of the regional roads that transect a region’s territory, the regional authorities cannot affect their basic plans.

Within the South Moravian Region, there are 124 kilometres of motorways (3% of the national total), 449 km of first-class roads (10%), 1480 km of second-class roads (33%), and 2480 km of third-class roads (54%) (South Moravian Region, 2006). Many roads of regional importance fall outside its autonomous decision-making authority (as well as all railways and waterways). The motorways D43 and D52 were mentioned earlier. The list also includes the following first class roads: Znojmo – Moravské Budějovice – Jihlava (I/38); Znojmo – Pohořelice – Brno (I/53); Mikulov – Břeclav, Břeclav – Hodonín – Veselí nad Moravou (and on to Olomouc via Otrokovice) (I/55); Slavkov u Brna – Kyjov – Veselí

nad Moravou (I/54); and Rosice – Třebíč (I/23). Only less important roads of lower regional (district) significance remain.

4.3. Regional public transport

The policy area of public transport involves the provision of transport services within a region. In the Czech Republic, regional transport is distinguished from supra-regional transport (inter-regional coaches, express trains etc.) which is the competence of the state level, and local transport (urban public transport) which is the competence of local authorities (Act No. 194/2010 Coll. on public services in passenger transport).

The regional self-governing bodies decide the parameters of the transport services they order. Within the limits set by national regulation, they can also decide on the fare tariffs applied to the means of transport (buses, trains). The self-governing regions may also own regional transport vehicles.

Within the coordination of various types of regional transport, the regions can establish a so-called Integrated Transport System (*Integrovaný dopravní systém*, IDS). Subsequently, individual municipalities in the region can register in the IDS. The South Moravian Region became a pioneer of IDS. The South Moravian IDS (called IDS JMK) has been successfully built over several stages since 2004 and currently covers not only the entire region but places outside its territory in the neighbouring regions, including Lower Austria (IDS JMK, 2020). Some regions have no IDS since it is difficult to connect geographically and infrastructurally heterogeneous areas (Hampl, 2005).

One of the major manifestations of IDS is a unified ticketing system. For a long time, the domain of regional tickets was mainly bus transport (and urban public transport). Recently, several regions, including the South Moravian Region, have also started to demand regional tariffs for rail transport, specifically at the end of 2019, when a new schedule came into force (Sůra, 2019).

Ensuring regional transport services by self-governing regions consists mainly of coordinating transport connections. The regional political authority decides on prioritizing selected transport connections through financing or effectively cancels them by refusing financial support. It is mostly such autonomous political decision-making that directly impacts the lives of the region's inhabitants.

At the same time, the regions are not obliged to provide interregional transport. The existence of such connections depends on the agreement of the authorities of individual regions on joint financing. A region can decide to maintain a transport connection without reaching this agreement.

One illustrative example of an endangered regional transport connection is the bus line connecting Brno and Dačice with stops in Jemnice, Moravské Budějovice, Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou and other places. The problem with this relatively busy line is that it leads from the territory of the South Bohemian Region (Dačice is located in the historical territory of Moravia, but as a result of the administrative reform of 1960, found itself in the South Bohemian Region) via the Vysočina Region to the South Moravian Region. The Vysočina Region subsidized the approximately half-century-old line for some time. In 2019,

the Vysočina Region decided to cancel the subsidy. The South Moravian Region then refused to maintain the line on its own, a policy maintained by the current South Moravian government continues (South Moravian Region, 2022b). A private company renewed this connection for a short time, but due to the introduction of unfavourable conditions on the part of the Vysočina Region, it eventually cancelled the line.

There is a discussion about establishing a state office that would coordinate interregional transport. This would lead to serious interference in this area by the central power. The complications of railway transport due to the wave of regional tariffs and entrance of private carriers into the market strengthened this proposal. The creation of the position of a national coordinator for public transport is mentioned in the approved government plan for public transport for the period 2020–2025 (Ministry of Transport of the Czech Republic, 2020).

4.4. Regional hospitals

The policy area of regional healthcare involves ensuring the functioning of regional hospital facilities and the selection of their directors. Within independent competence, self-governing regions do not decide on the internal functioning of the regional hospitals (Act No. 372/2011 Coll. on Healthcare). As with regional roads, it is only a matter of prioritizing financial investments in individual facilities.

The transfer of hospitals formerly administered by deconcentrated district offices to the self-governing regions was one of the most significant elements of administrative reform at the turn of the millennium in the Czech Republic. At the same time, the financing of regional hospitals is by far the most expensive item of regional budgets, including in the South Moravian Region (2021b).

The regional hospitals consist mainly of facilities of district significance. The main regional or supra-regional hospitals, i.e. teaching hospitals, are administered by the state government. This applies to the South Moravian Region, where the University Hospital Brno and the St. Anne University Hospital Brno are out of reach of the political decision-making of the regional authorities.

For example, according to a central government proposal, both teaching hospitals were to be merged into one institution. However, each facility provides somewhat different health services, and the efficiency to be gained was arguable. Moreover, the situation in Brno is not unique in the Czech Republic; Prague has six teaching hospitals. The regional government disagreed with the plan (both in 2013 and 2020), although deciding this issue is not within its competence. It still expects the existence of two separate hospitals in its Conception of Healthcare (South Moravian Region, 2020a).

4.5. Social services

The area of regional social services involves ensuring the functioning of individual contributory organizations established by a region, including the selection of their leaders.

This applies to specialized care institutions, such as homes for the elderly or sheltered housing, and providers of social services, including care service. The internal functioning of social service organizations does not fall under independent competence (Act No. 108/2006 on Social Services).

In providing social services, regions depend significantly on state (or EU) subsidies. Regions contribute only about ten percent to the financing of social services. According to the political authorities of the regions, there is a lack of funds for the proper financing of regional social services, including the provision of salaries for social workers (Institute for Social Policy and Research, 2019). This also significantly narrows the space for autonomous political decision-making.

The South Moravian Region is the direct founder of several organizations in the field of social services (in 2021, there were 28 of them) (South Moravian Region, 2020b). In most cases, these are homes for the elderly. The organizations established by the region do not include, for example, the Kociánka Centre in Brno, a major provider of social and health services for people with disabilities, which is under the national government's administration.

One of the major changes after the end of the administrative reform at the turn of the millennium was the establishment of the Labour Office, whose tasks include helping the unemployed to find work. This area of social services was completely excluded from regional decision-making. In addition, contact workplaces of the Labour Office are organized according to the former administrative districts (Labour Office of the Czech Republic, 2022).

4.6. Secondary schools and special educational facilities

This area includes the administration of secondary schools, colleges, special schools, language schools, elementary art schools and special educational facilities, such as leisure centres and children's homes. Universities do not belong to the competencies of the regions, and the state government administers them.

Similar to the other areas of independent competence, regions are responsible for the functioning of these facilities, including the selection of headmasters. The internal running of schools established by the self-governing regions, including defining the basic curriculum and paying salaries, is overseen at the state level (Act No. 561/2005 on Education).

The self-governing regions are significantly dependent on state subsidies in this area, too. At the same time, this area is one of the most expensive items for regional budgets (South Moravian Region, 2020b). The largest number of organizations established by the regions is schools and educational facilities (South Moravian Region, 2020b).

The decision-making of the regions on establishing a new regional school is not completely autonomous. Its establishment must be approved by the Ministry of Education. In the South Moravian Region, this applies, for example, to the current plan to establish a Montessori lyceum in Brno (South Moravian Region, 2021a).

4.7. Regional cultural institutions

The regions' independent competence also includes the administration of regional cultural institutions. Culture is understood here as art, preservation of monuments, traditional culture and libraries. In this area, too, the responsibility is primarily to ensure the functioning of institutions, selecting directors as well as supporting individual projects and events (e.g. Act No. 20/1987 on Preservation of Monuments).⁴

A large number of funds invested in regional culture do not come from regional budgets but rather from the state budget (South Moravian Region, 2020b). Furthermore, many important cultural institutions or projects have a supra-regional character and do not fall under the competence of the regions, leaving only institutes of district significance (South Moravian Region, 2020b). Typical examples include traditional culture and historical research since the regional borders do not respect ethnographic areas or historical lands.

In the South Moravian Region, some institutions bear the adjective 'Moravian', which refers to the historical continuity of Moravia – such as the Moravian Land Museum, Moravian Land Archive, Moravian Land Library, Moravian Gallery, and Moravian Cartographic Centre. The latter is part of the National Technical Museum in Prague; the others are under the administration of the Ministry of Culture. All these institutions belong to the state administration, as well as most local monuments (National Heritage Institute, 2022).

4.8. Coordination of the operations of municipalities

The independent competence of the regions also includes coordinating the operations of municipalities. This area is related to the coordination of territorial development, which is associated with the hierarchical system of spatial planning in the Czech Republic. The municipal authorities have to harmonize municipal territorial development plans with the ZÚR.

Furthermore, the governor of the region (*hejtman*) has the right to force the mayor of a municipality to call a municipal council meeting. If a regional representative attends the meeting and requests to speak, the request must be granted (Act No. 128/2000 on Municipalities).

The regional council can also decide to provide a specific subsidy to the municipality. The regional financial committee then carries out the control of the use of the funds. Within this area, there is a certain space for the superiority of the regional level over the municipal level. At the same time, however, such funding is strongly linked with delegated competence and obligation. For example, consulting territorial development plans with municipalities is mandatory for regional authorities, and cannot be considered independently.

As a manifestation of the autonomous coordination of the operations of municipalities in the South Moravian Region, the adaption of the South Moravian Region Tourism Development Programme can be mentioned. Based on this document, the Tourist Authority –

South Moravia was established, within which the region cooperates financially with the municipalities (Tourist Authority – South Moravia, 2022).

4.9. Crisis management

This area involves management of extensive crisis situations. The regional governor has the right to establish an emergency committee. However, it is only an advisory body without real power, serving in particular to receive recommendations for coordinating rescue and recovery work carried out by the components of the deconcentrated rescue system. The emergency committee can only be established as a result of the declaration of a state of emergency, which is a competence of the national government, not the regions (Act No. 240/2000 Coll. on Crisis Management).

For example, concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, an emergency committee was established in the South Moravian Region after the state of emergency was declared. There was a clear contrast between the limited opportunity for autonomous decision-making by the regional self-governing bodies and the broad competencies of state institutions, especially the Ministry of Health and the regional public health office (cf. Act No. 94/2021 on the Covid-19 Epidemic). An attempt to develop a regional vaccination strategy was made in several regions. However, this was a reaction to the government's inability to present a coherent national strategy in time rather than a manifestation of autonomous political decision-making (Czech Press Agency, 2021).

4.10. Regional development

Finally, regional territorial development as such should also be included among the policy areas. The term 'regional development' is vague, as used in legal and official documents. At the same time, the development of a territory is a constitutional right (and, at the same time, an obligation) of the Czech self-governing regions (Act No. 129/2000 on the Regions). This vagueness allows the self-governing regions to include a wide range of phenomena in their autonomous decision-making, albeit only in the form of financial investments (except for the ZÚR).

The South Moravian Region intervenes in this area through contributory organizations and participation in interest groups. The Moravian Science Centre is closely related to the VIDA! science amusement park, which also supports scientific research. The region is also a member of the Regional Development Agency South Moravia, Tourist Authority – South Moravia, and the South Moravian Innovation Centre (South Moravian Region, 2022a).

In addition, the area of environmental protection is associated with regional development (Pokorná et al., 2022). However, the space for autonomous decision-making of the regions is significantly limited. The self-governing regions do not establish any regulatory institutions in this area by their independent competence (Act No. 114/1992 on the Protection of Nature and Landscape). On the contrary, the state administrates most of the

environmental protection institutions, ranging from national park administrations to the Agency for the Protection of Nature of the Czech Republic, which administers protected landscape areas, the Czech Environmental Inspectorate, and state water management enterprises.

The self-governing bodies of the South Moravian Region cannot make autonomous decisions in relation to the Podyjí National Park (which is entirely located within the region's territory) or other protected areas. It can only financially support individual projects or consider environmental aspects within spatial planning.

5. Conclusions

The analysis presented the real manifestations of regional politics in the Czech Republic, using the example of the South Moravian Region. According to the results, this region does not seem to deviate from the other regions of the country. Rather, thanks to its socio-economic strength, the regional assembly can utilize well some managerial tools, namely IDS. In the institutional sense, only Prague remains a 'deviant' region, combining the status of municipality, region and the capital city (metropolitan region).

Attention was paid to individual policy areas belonging to the independent competence of the Czech self-governing regions. The theoretical section pointed to the minimal regulatory powers and pre-eminence of economic discretion in the form of deciding and prioritizing financial investments. The assumption was that the regional political representatives have very limited possibilities for autonomous political decision-making.

This main hypothesis was confirmed, although the overall assessment needs to be specified. First of all, it is necessary to consider the fundamental differences between the individual areas of independent competence (for an overview, see Table 2).

The only instance of regulatory administration is related to spatial planning (specifically, the approval of the ZÚR). However, the decision-making of the regional political representatives is not fully autonomous in this area since it is subordinated to a certain extent to the state level at which the PÚR is approved. In the other policy areas, the position of Czech regional self-governments resembles the role of a financial director, who autonomously decides on the priorities of financial investments, and not the role of a direct administrator. Moreover, the Czech self-governing regions suffer from insufficient funds, and many decisions are driven by the will of the central authority, which decides on granting subsidies.

Furthermore, the Czech regional self-governments chiefly make decisions about institutions of lower regional or district significance. This corresponds with the fact that after the major administrative reform at the turn of the millennium, key institutions remained mainly under the administration of the state, leaving only particular institutions or elements under the administration of the abolished district offices (Act No. 157/2000; cf. Cogan, 2018). In this light, the Czech self-governing regions resemble enlarged copies of the former district offices (cf. Yoder, 2013, pp. 99–104).

Table 2: Policy areas of the Czech regions and the character of decision-making

Policy area	Independent competence of the self-governing regions	Possibilities for autonomous political decision-making
Spatial planning	Adoption of the ZÚR (norm-setting)	Creation and approval of the regional development plan, limited by the governmental plan
Regional roads	Maintenance of second and third class roads	Prioritization of financial investment in roads of lower regional significance
Regional public transport	Coordination of regional public transport	Ordering transport services, setting fare tariffs (within the bounds of state regulation)
Regional hospitals	Administration of regional hospitals	Prioritization of financial investment in hospitals of lower regional significance; selection of directors
Social services	Administration of specialized care institutions and provision of social services	Prioritization of financial investment in specialized care institutions and social services (including care service); selection of directors
Secondary schools and special educational facilities	Administration of secondary schools, colleges, special schools, language schools, elementary art schools and special educational facilities (e.g. leisure centres, children's homes).	Prioritization of financial investment in institutions; selection of headmasters
Regional cultural institutions	Administration of regional cultural institutions	Prioritization of financial investment in cultural institutions of lower regional significance and projects; selection of directors
Coordination of the operations of municipalities	Coordination of territorial development	Forcing municipalities to harmonize municipal territorial plans with the ZÚR; forcing the municipal authority to call a municipal council meeting
Crisis management	Coordination of rescue and recovery work	Establishment of an emergency committee as an advisory body (after the declaration of a state of emergency by the state government)
Regional development	Development of a region's territory	Financial investment in projects concerning regional development (vaguely regulated); participation in interest groups

Source: Author.

The main objective of this article was to introduce a new approach to researching Czech regional politics. The findings from the basic analysis can serve as a framework for more detailed analyses focused on individual policy areas, which could also involve in-depth interviews with interested persons to give a more detailed picture of the policy-making processes. A comparison of the Czech regions (whether partial or complete) based on this analytical framework would bring new data and test the theory used here, although no substantial influence on the basic theoretical knowledge is expected.

A more detailed examination of the relations between the regional and other levels can provide important knowledge, too. For example, Ryšavý et al. (2015, p. 149) point to the strong personal connection between the regional and municipal levels in the Czech Republic. The mandates of regional representatives are often obtained by the mayors of

large municipalities, for whom the region is a kind of a service organization. This fact corresponds with the conclusion that the self-governing regions, in their actual functioning, resemble a hybrid between the former Czech district offices and a full-scale higher level of self-governance.

There is no general theory of regional politics which would define what policy areas or competencies inherently belong to the regional level or the other levels; or that properly distinguishes between higher and lower regional levels. Heinelt and Bertrana (2011) apply a conception resembling the lower regional level. However, they work with the concept of the 'second tier of local government'. The compared cases include, for example, German districts – the *Landkreise* (a tier between *Länder* and municipalities). Given the findings of this article, the Czech regions might fit in this category.

The consideration of these internal levels of regional politics can contribute to overcoming the problem of its substantial heterogeneity. Furthermore, the distinction between the regulatory and fiscal natures of the given competence is necessary, as was shown in detail in the case of South Moravia. A specific challenge relates to states with mixed administration, where it is necessary to differentiate the specific role of regional self-governments and the state administration. Besides the Czech Republic, this applies, for example, to Austria, where many policy areas fall under mixed competencies (Bußjäger, 2015).

Endnotes:

1. For simplicity, the proportions of the most shared tax items are given. Some items correspond to a different percentage. The tax revenues are unevenly distributed to individual regions, ranging from 3.7 to 13.7 per cent of the total amount; the distribution does not correspond to size of the population (Act No. 243/2000 Coll., on Budget Allocation of Taxes and its Amendments).
2. Aggregate data for 2021 and 2022 are still missing.
3. Aggregate data for 2022 are still missing.
4. In the Czech Republic, there is no single Act on public cultural institutions.

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