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**Cooperating or bypassing the Member State?  
The paradiplomacy of the Visegrád regions in Brussels**

Master's Thesis

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Year of defence: 2021

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

Prague, 31th of July 2021

Łukasz Ignacy Poloczek

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Łukasz Ignacy Poloczek". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and 'P'.

## **Bibliographic reference**

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## **Abstract**

More and more attention is paid in the academic debate to the issue of sub-state entities, represented by regional governments, as partially independent actors of international politics. This phenomenon, referred to as paradiplomacy, is particularly visible in the European Union, where since 1980s regional governments have been mobilising to gain direct influence on the shape of European politics. A regional government that acts as an agent of European politics may or may not be actively supported by its central government. This thesis tries to investigate the relationship between the direct representations of the Visegrád Group regions in Brussels and their respective national Permanent Representations. In the first chapter, I discuss the theoretical issues related to regional mobilisation in Brussels by referring to the work of researchers who deal with multi-level governance in the context of the European Union. In the second chapter, I present and justify the choice of research design, case studies, and semi-structured interviews as the main source of obtaining data necessary to answer the research question. In the third chapter, I included the analysis of the obtained information, and in the fourth chapter, the conclusions drawn from it. This research shows that direct regional representations to Brussels are, in the case of centralised Visegrád countries, dependent on the help and assistance provided by the national level representation. On the other hand, cooperation between regional and national authorities may be strongly influenced by the internal political conflict in these Member States.

## **Keywords**

Paradiplomacy, regional mobilisation, multi-level governance, regional offices, cohesion policy, Visegrád Group, European Union, region, party politics, political conflict

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## List of abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CoR	Committee of the Regions
EC	European Commission
ECs	European Communities
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUREGHA	European Regional and Local Health Authorities
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investments
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
REGLEG	Conference of European Regions with Legislative Power

## Introduction

In political science, regions and cities draw more attention lately as actors of international politics. In the globalised world, self-governed sub-national units have acquired a sense of agency that makes it possible to look at them as distinctive actors of international relations (Keating, 2001). Constituent parts of both federative and unitary states engage in different sorts of externally aimed activities, referred to in the academic literature as *paradiplomacy*.

The term *paradiplomacy* was initially coined by researchers focusing on the Northern-American federalism and referred to externally aimed foreign activities conducted by constituent units of the federative states (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990). The prefix *-para* refers to the parallel character of the regional governments' diplomatic actions to the diplomacy pursued by the central government (Aguirre, 1999). In the 1990s, *paradiplomacy* also gained popularity in research concerning European federative states, Member States of the European Union (EU) (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999). Nevertheless, the attempts of the unitary states' regions also have been a subject of analysis. Prundera (2005) carried out a comprehensive analysis of the foreign activities of Japanese regional governments. In the case of the EU, Le Galés and Lequesne (1998) used the conceptual framework of *paradiplomacy* for researching the foreign activities of the French provinces. The external activities of unitary states' regions are still an area to study in the context of their *paradiplomatic* activities, as pointed out by Raś (2016).

Kuznetsov (2015, p. 140) listed the following principal ways of how *paradiplomatic* activities are institutionalised: a) establishment of a particular department responsible for the conducting foreign relations of the constituent unit, b) the opening of permanent subnational offices in foreign countries, c) official visits of regional authorities to foreign regions, d) participation in international events also within the official delegation of their central government, and e) participation in multilateral, regional networks and working groups. However, regions can have various motivations for pursuing foreign contacts. In theoretical considerations about *paradiplomacy* this issue was addressed by Keating (2001), who pointed out a problem arising when trying to define an interest subnational constituencies may have and how it can potentially coincide with the interest pursued by the central government. Keating (2001) also argued that due to the dependency between regional and central authorities varying greatly worldwide, it is difficult to theorise about an interest

of a subnational unit. Bearing in mind the theoretical problems indicated above, Cornago (1999, p. 40) attempted to capture the phenomenon of paradiplomacy by proposing a broad definition:

“non-central governments' involvement in international relations through the establishment of permanent or ad hoc contacts with foreign public or private entities, to promote socioeconomic or cultural issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their constitutional competences”

In the EU, the conditions created by the process of European integration allowed for the regional and local actors to pursue externally aimed activities on an unprecedented scale. The shift of power from national governments to the supranational bodies resulted in the subnational authorities looking for channels to be present at the decision-making centre. Brussels became home to almost 200 delegations established to represent the regional interests directly to the EU institutions and gather information on the EU legislation. Thus, the city has become the world capital of paradiplomacy, and the EU has become somewhat of a laboratory for studying this phenomenon (Curylo, 2019). Although regional offices are not the only means through which the third-level actors, i.e. sub-state governments, try to influence the decision-making in the EU multi-level polity, they undoubtedly remain the most visible and, as this study shows, effectively meet the needs of the regional stakeholders.

Since the 1990s, the regional mobilisation at the EU level has become a subject of considerably comprehensive research. Scholars, however, focused primarily on the paradiplomacy of the regions of the “Old Europe”, leaving the regions of the countries that joined the EU after 2004 as a somewhat uncharted territory. The regional paradiplomacy of the Central and Eastern European regions constitutes a gap in the literature, even though they seem to have a big incentive for being present in Brussels as they benefit greatly from the cohesion policy (Hagemann, 2019).

This thesis attempts to look at the paradiplomacy of the Visegrád regions in Brussels through the prism of cooperation between regional and national tiers. This cooperation, as I will show in the following chapter, is of great importance for the operation of regional representations to the EU. In the first chapter, I will present the review of relevant literature on regional mobilisation in Brussels and the multi-level governance theoretical framework, explaining why regions decide to pursue paradiplomatic activities at the centre of the EU decision-making. The methodological procedure: the geographical focus, the choice of case studies, and the qualitative research design will be presented in the second chapter. In the empirical part, I will present and interpret the data

obtained from the semi-structured interviews conducted for the purpose of this thesis. It will allow for answering the research question posed at the beginning of the following chapter. Finally, in the last chapter, I will draw conclusions on the functions the regional representations of the Visegrád regions perform in Brussels, the scope of cooperation between the regional offices and respective permanent representations, and the main factors influencing this cooperation.

# **Chapter I: Research problem, literature review, and theory**

## **1.1 The research problem and research question**

Recent studies show that the cooperation with the central governments, present in Brussels mainly through the Member States' permanent representations, is one of the premises of the successful regional paradiplomacy (Tatham, 2016; Beyers *et al.*, 2015). According to Tatham (2016) different factors can influence the scope of cooperation between the regional and national tiers at the EU level, with the level of decentralisation, the size of regional representations, and internal party politics being the most important. In some cases, cooperation can be disturbed and negatively impact the operation of the regional representations. The regional representative can also attempt to bypass the central governments in areas where their interest is not in accordance with that of the national government. Investigating the relations between the representatives of sub-state entities and national governments in Brussels can, therefore, shed light on the question of the alleged actorness of the sub-state governments in both international, and European politics.

This research aims to investigate the paradiplomacy of the Visegrád regions in Brussels by asking the following research question:

*To what extent the representatives of the Visegrád regions in Brussels cooperate with their respective permanent representations?*

In the following paragraphs, I will present the context in which the research question posed above is set. First, I will define the basic concepts necessary to understand the nature of the regional engagement on the EU level, such as region, paradiplomacy, and the regional mobilisation. This will allow to introduce the multi-level governance theoretical framework as the main tool explaining why regions of the EU Member States pursue activities aimed directly at supranational institutions.

## **1.2 Region as a primary unit of analysis**

Political and economic sciences commonly use the region as a unit of analysis, and its designation differs significantly depending on the discipline. In the context of research on multi-

level governance, European regional policies, paradiplomacy, and regional mobilisation in the EU, the term “region” usually refers to the highest branch of the regional government, directly under the national government. In their work on regional mobilisation and multi-level governance, Hooghe and Marks (2010, p. 6) adopt the following definition of the region:

“coherent territorial entity situated between the local and national levels with a capacity for authoritative decision making”

The paradiplomacy scholars use a very similar definition of the central unit of analysis. Kuznetsov (2015, p. 22) proposes a following definition in his work attempting to synthesise research on paradiplomacy:

“region is defined as the territorial and administrative unit on the first level of authority after the central government in both federal and unitary state system”

For the purpose of this thesis, I adopt the same definition of region, as the two mentioned above. These regions usually coincide with level 1 (Belgium, France, Germany, Bulgaria) or level 2 (e.g. Spain, Greece, Poland, Italy, Sweden) of the European Nomenclature of Territorial Units (NUTS). The justification for the use of such a definition of a region is the fact that it is the highest level of local government authorities that is usually responsible for managing funds obtained under the cohesion policy, and in the case of highly decentralised or federated states, also the implementation of part of European legislation (Braun, 2018). The regional authorities also are responsible for actions aimed at direct or indirect influencing the European decision-making, e.g. by establishing their direct representations in Brussels. Different authors use different names for such understood regions in their works, while the designate stays the same. For example, in Hooghe and Marks’s (2001) pioneer work on multi-level governance in the EU, regions were referred to as “sub-national authorities” Tatham (2016) uses the term “sub-state entity”

### **1.3 Regional mobilisation in the EU**

Regional mobilisation in the context of the European Union can be understood as an unprecedented increase in the interest of regional authorities in decision-making processes

at the level of EU institutions (Hooghe, 1995). As it will be shown in the next subchapters, this interest is reflected in a variety of activities undertaken by regional authorities within their existing formal possibilities and beyond them. To define precisely the nature of regional mobilisation, it seems necessary to point out how the regions try to be present in Brussels. Hooghe and Marks (2001, pp. 81—93) list the following ways in which the regions of the Member States try to influence the course of policy-making at the EU level. These are: establishing representative offices in Brussels, establishing contacts with other regions and joining transnational groups, using formal means in order to influence ministerial delegations in the European Union, e.g. participation of representatives of regions in meetings of the Council of the European Union (Council), activity in the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), and establishing contacts with officials of the European Commission (EC). These activities are coordinated mainly by regional representations to Brussels, the role of which will be explained in the following paragraphs. At the same time, as externally aimed and serving the representation of regional interests, these activities fall under the definition of paradiplomacy. Since the 1990s, Brussels became the theatre of paradiplomacy conducted on an unprecedented scale (Soldatos & Michelmann, 1992).

The beginning of the regional mobilisation dates back to the cohesion policy reform in 1988. It caused a sudden increase in the interest in the European decision-making of the regional authorities of the Member States of the ECs. The reason for this reform was the significant change that took place inside the EC after their enlargements to the countries of southern Europe. Spain, Portugal and Greece were much poorer than the existing Member States, and some regions of these countries were structurally backward compared to their northern European counterparts (Brunazzo, 2016). The budget of the cohesion funds was then increased twice, and the procedures for allocating funds within them were changed (Hepburn, 2016). A more significant role was assigned to the Member States, which were to negotiate the scope of financial aid with the Community institutions. As it was of utmost importance to the regional authorities, some regions have decided to set up their own representations in Brussels, mostly called regional offices, in order to be closer to the decision-making centre. At the same time, attempts were made to give the regional authorities a broader influence over European funds negotiations and a broader representation in Brussels (Hepburn, 2016). It resulted in a partial victory of the advocates for the more extensive regional engagement. In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty allowed some of the representatives of the federative states' regions to participate in the Council meetings. In 1994, the CoR was established as an advisory body and a platform for regional and local representatives. The rise of regional involvement in Brussels had not gone unnoticed by the

academic circles, resulting in the increasing research on regional mobilisation and multi-level governance. This branch of scholarship has undergone a significant change from the early 1990s to the late 2000s. As I will try to show in the following paragraph, moving the emphasis from the *Europe of the Regions* concept to the one of the *Europe with the Regions* reflects this change.

The notion of the *Europe of the Regions* was first introduced by R. A. Rhodes (1973). Rhodes concept predicted that European integration process would result in a gradual federalisation of the European Communities (ECs) and that regions would gain more autonomy and power within their states over time. *Europe of the Regions* gained significant attention from both political scientists and regional officials, appearing with the highest attendance at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1996, Loughlin argued that the postulates of the *Europe of the Regions* will be quickly implemented with the subsequent amendments to the EU treaties (Loughlin, 1996a).

However, even despite an unprecedented regional mobilisation in Brussels, a wave of decentralisation in the Member States and timid steps towards giving regions greater participation in decision-making, the concept of the *Europe of the Regions* has been criticised for being merely an example of wishful thinking. Hepburn (2008) argued that the main reason for the failure of the idea of *Europe of the Regions* was in its very assumptions. Too much attention was given to the dubious hypothesis that regional authorities will always seek greater autonomy. As Hepburn (2008) points out, regional governments and regional political parties have lost interest in further opting for decentralisation over time. Possible federalisation would not respond to the needs of the regions, for which the possibilities given to them by the EU legislators are more than enough to pursue their interests (Elias, 2008). Piattoni (2009) called the idea of the *Europe of the Regions* naïve, proposing instead the concept of *Europe with the Regions*, which would reflect better the nature of the involvement of regions in the EU seen as a multi-level polity. The *Europe with the Regions* is based on the subsidiarity, and allows the regional and local authorities to engage on the supranational level, but does not include a promise of federalisation (Shakel, 2020). In the next subchapter, I will present how the multi-level governance theoretical framework aims to explain the phenomenon of regional mobilisation in Brussels.

#### **1.4 Multi-level governance**

The conceptual framework of multi-level governance (MLG) has its roots in research conducted by Hooghe and Marks. In their work, they focused primarily on the increase in the activity of regional authorities in the field of European politics (Hooghe, 1996; Hooghe & Marks 1995; Marks, 1993). These studies lay at the heart of the concept of the European Union as a multi-level governed polity that the authors put forward in 2001. When looking at the EU as a multi-level polity, three levels sharing power and influence on shaping political activities and legislation in Brussels need to be taken into consideration: supranational, national and subnational (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Adding the subnational variable to the equation was a novelty. The existing theories attempting to explain the European integration focused principally either on supranational institutions (neo-functionalism) or national governments of the respective Member States (liberal intergovernmentalism). The main difference between the concept put forward by Hooghe and Marks and these theories lies in the fact that in the MLG, neither the supranational nor the national level have a clear advantage in shaping integration processes and the character of the EU.

The concept of MLG is a way to incorporate the phenomenon of regional mobilisation, observed since the beginning of the 1990s, into a broader picture of the entire process of European integration. While the preceding works on regional mobilisation and more broadly paradiplomacy within the EU were descriptive attempts to grasp the phenomenon of regional mobilisation, the multi-level governance perspective attempted to explain the reasons for this mobilisation and include it in a broader discussion on the nature of European integration. Thus, the perspective proposed by Hooghe and Marks became influential in the theoretical debate aimed at explaining the mechanisms of the European integration as a whole.

In the book mentioned above (Hooghe & Marks 2001), the authors put forward a hypothesis that the main reason for a significant increase in the interest of regional authorities in influencing political processes at the supranational level is the fact that national governments give away more and more power to the EU institutions, which results in the decision-making processes being shifting to Brussels. Therefore, regional governments were forced to look for channels to get directly to the EU institutions to maintain their influence and be present when political decisions are undertaken (Hooghe & Marks 2001). At the same time, since this mobilisation is usually the fruit of a grassroots initiative by regional authorities, the Member States, i.e. the central

governments, do not have complete control over how the third level connects with the first level, the supranational institutions.

### **1.5 Cooperation between the regional and national tiers at the EU level**

However, it does not mean that regional authorities bypass central governments as a rule. The reality seems to be much more complicated. “Bypassing” or carrying out “conflicting paradiplomacy” towards the central government seems to be only one of the extremes on the scale of activities undertaken in Brussels by the third-level regional and local actors. The MLG theoretical framework, initially solely focused on the interactions between the regional and supranational tiers of the EU. In recent years, more attention has been given to the role of the national governments, which can or cannot support the efforts of its regional representations in Brussels. Keeping in mind that regions in Brussels mobilise on their initiative, some researchers point out that these efforts can be more effective if they are actively backed up by respective permanent representations (Beyers *et al.*, 2015). Recent study shows that regional authorities are more likely to cooperate with their national governments to meet their goals (Tatham, 2016).

This cooperation can take up various forms, and its nature often relies on what the regional representation is trying to achieve. For the purpose of this study, the cooperation means that regional representations in Brussels are in contact with the permanent representation of their countries, and that the permanent representation provides the regional offices with necessary assistance. As this study will show, the Visegrád regions’ representations in Brussels highly rely on the cooperation with their permanent representations for performing their basic functions. In some areas of their operation, like gathering information on the course of the EU legislation, the cooperation with permanent representations seems to be indispensable. However, the relations between the regional and national representations should rather be seen as fitting on some kind of a scale. Complete lack of cooperation, or even hostility, and close cooperation are two extremes. As this study will show, the regions of the Visegrád Group Member States might be ascribed to the different points on this scale.

As mentioned in the introduction, Tatham (2016) lists three principal factors that could influence the cooperation: a) level of decentralisation of a Member State, b) size of a given representation, and c) the internal party politics. As this study will show, in case of the unitary states of the

Visegrád region both factors play an important role. Firstly, the relatively low level of decentralisation of power makes the regional representation more dependent on the cooperation with the permanent representations, and much smaller in terms of their size in comparison to their highly-decentralised states' counterparts. Second, in the case of Poland and Hungary the cooperation between the national and regional tiers in Brussels is highly influenced by the ongoing political conflicts in these countries.

## **1.6 The MLG as a theoretical tool**

Since its introduction in 2001, the concept of MLG has become the subject of discussion in the political science academic circles, especially among researchers interested in European integration and regional mobilisation. Among the most controversial aspects of this debate, and at the same time the most relevant to this study, were the doubts whether the multi-level governance could constitute a theory for future research, and if it entails the necessary explanatory power.

The criticism is concerned primarily with an accusation that the MLG as presented by Hooghe and Marks takes too much from the already existing theoretical assumptions, mainly of neo-functionalism. Therefore, as Jordan (2001) notes, it does not constitute a new integration theory per se. This criticism also underline that in the multi-level governance framework, the very importance of the third level, and the alleged agency of the regional authorities in Brussels are excessively overestimated (Jordan, 2001).

More moderate voices in this discussion pointed to the fact that the multi-level governance does not constitute a new theory explaining European integration, but rather can be useful in providing the theoretical basis for explaining the phenomenon of regional mobilisation at the EU level. Georg (2005) attempted to place the concept of multi-level governance in the context of the dispute between neo-functionalism and intergovernmental liberalism — the two main theories aiming to explain the phenomenon of European integration. He noted that early works by the authors on the spill-over theory mention that the EC could form alliances directly with regional authorities. Multi-level governance is seen here as having its intellectual roots precisely in the neo-functionalist tradition of European integration theory, and as such it constitutes a proposition of its reinterpretation. Therefore, George argues that it is possible to formulate hypotheses within

the EU's MLG framework, especially when it comes to the growing regional interest in taking an active position in European integration process, the sign of which is the regional mobilisation.

Regional mobilisation can take various forms and regional authorities have different channels to reach out the supranational institutions at their disposal, both formal and informal. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, regional tier in Brussels uses three main means to be present and have its voice heard at the EU decision-making centres: establishing their own direct representations, participating in transnational regional networks, and working in the CoR (Hooghe & Marks, 2001).

Undoubtedly, one of the most visible manifestations of the regional mobilisation are the representative or information offices established by the EU Member States' regional authorities in Brussels. English local authorities and the German *Länder* were the first to establish their representation offices in Brussels in 1984, marking the beginning of regional mobilisation (Marks *et al.*, 2002). Their numbers grew from 53 in 1993 (Nielsen & Salk, 1998), 160 in 2002 (Marks *et al.*, 2002), to 200 in 2013 (Donas & Beyers, 2013). As mentioned above, the subsequent establishment of offices for many other European regions was related to the reform of cohesion policy and the creation of the European Union. The regional offices in Brussels seem to be playing a dual role.

On the one hand, they perform promotional and informational functions, promoting the region and looking for contacts with other representative offices. They also coordinate the regional engagement in transnational networks (Greenwood, 2011). They gather information on the courses of the EU legislation and inform their regional governments about the development that may prove significant to them.

On the other hand, they serve as a tool for representing the interest of the group that the European regions represent, and many authors studying the phenomenon of these offices point to their lobbying function. Greenwood (2017) points to establishing regional offices and creating transnational regional networks as the two most visible tools for representing territorial interests in the European Union. Here, similarly as in the case of the multi-level governance and paradiplomacy, the primary assumption is that regions have their own defined interest, not always matching the interests of their respective Member States, and the actions undertaken on the European level serve the purpose of pursuing their interests. At the same time, there is a significant variability in the goals and scopes of regional offices. The scope of their operation and the functions

they are able to perform depends on the possibilities they were given by the respective constitutional framework, with a significant difference between the centralised, unitary (France, Poland), highly decentralised (Spain) and federative (Germany, Belgium) Member States (Tatham, 2006).

Subsequent enlargements brought about new dynamics to the issue of regional offices. All the countries that joined the EU after 2004 are centralised, unitary states (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010). However, the regions of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) should be keenly interested in a direct representation of their interests in Brussels, since they are structurally less developed than their Western counterparts. Thus, they should have a greater incentive for regional mobilisation, including in particular emphasising their presence by establishing regional offices and establishing contacts with other regions of a similar profile.

Despite this, only 39% of the regions of the new Member States had their regional offices in Brussels at the beginning of the last decade (Donas & Beyers, 2012). The differences mentioned above result in the fact that only a minority of regional offices trying to directly influence political decision-making, while the rest are mainly involved in fundraising activities (Tatham, 2008). For regions of moderately decentralised countries, these offices act as a kind of liaison, reducing the distance between European institutions and a given region and its people. Paradoxically, as Greenwood (2011) observes, regions with less defined competencies in paradiplomatic activity may allow themselves to have much more freedom in undertaking various activities, while regional offices of highly decentralised and federal states have strictly defined functions and tasks.

Regional, transnational groups are yet another form of attempting to influence political processes at the EU level. They bring together regions with a similar profile or trying to pursue similar interests (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). The most active transnational networks are: Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, Assembly of European Regions, Association of European Border Regions, and Network of Major European Cities (Pasquier, 2006). Particularly noteworthy is the Conference of Regions with Legislative Power (REGLEG), which brings together regions of federal states with greater constitutional powers than in unitary states (Cole & Palmer, 2011). Among the main reasons for setting up this group was the conviction that the existing possibilities of representing the federative units were not satisfactory, nor under the CoR, nor with the formal possibility of participating in the Council meetings. Regions also ally in *ad hoc* joint initiatives that are aimed at solving a particular issue.

As this study will show, the Visegrád regions studied were more likely to join such *ad hoc* initiatives than the established networks of more general profile.

In the literature on the regional mobilisation in Brussels, the CoR is very often indicated as an institution that did not meet the expectations and needs of regional and local authorities (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2010). The CoR is a collective advisory body with no right of legislative initiative, and its primary function is to issue opinions on legislative projects in the areas important from the point of view of regional and local authorities. These opinions can, but do not have to be taken into consideration by European legislators. In addition, the CoR undertakes a number of further initiatives to promote and support the regional tier of the EU. It currently consists of 329 members, nominated by the central governments of the Member States and elected by the Council. Although its *raison d'être* is to represent regional and local authorities, it has no prerogatives other than advising, including the lack of legislative initiative.

The latter fact is most often referred to as the reason for criticism of this body in the regional mobilisation literature. Nergelius (2005) warned that subsequent enlargements could even further weaken the CoR, because after such joining of the representatives of other countries it could be more challenging to work out a common position. Nergelius (2005) also noted that the new Member States, i.e. those that joined the EU after 2004, do not have a tradition of regionalism. Jeffery (1997, p. 46) pointed out that CoR did not meet the expectations placed in it; it is even called “dissatisfied with its own role in the EU architecture”. The author draws attention to the fact that in the second half of the 1990s it was widely believed that CoR would gain more power over time, but the reality later verified these hopes. Jeffrey (2005) also noted that regions with greater autonomy, especially those within federal states, have given up CoR activity less effectively in favour of creating transnational cooperation networks that associate only regions with high autonomy. Hooghe and Marks (2001) evaluated the CoR in a similar manner, additionally pointing to the lack of skills and the possibility of shaping debates on issues that are important for the CoR itself. The dissatisfaction with CoR as a platform for representing regional interests resulted *i.a.* in the establishment of regional offices in Brussels (Greenwood, 2011). For this reason, this study is focused primarily on the operation of the regional offices of the studied regions.

## 1.7 Looking at paradiplomacy through the lens of the MLG

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, paradiplomacy is somewhat of an umbrella term describing external activities undertaken by subnational branches of government in both federal and unitary countries. Despite the existing literature on the paradiplomatic activities of certain regions, currently there are not any well-established theoretical frameworks that would cover all regions conducting externally aimed initiatives (Alvarez, 2020).

It is mainly because regions as actors of international relations make up a very diverse group, with different motivations as to why they conduct externally aimed paradiplomatic activities. The EU makes up a theatre of paradiplomatic activity on an unprecedented scale and some authors refer to it as a “laboratory of paradiplomacy” (Curyło, 2019). In this particular case, the paradiplomacy of the EU Member States’ regions could be explained by the assumptions of the theoretical framework put forward by Hooghe and Marks and later reinterpreted by other researchers. The regions of the EU Member States pursue paradiplomacy in Brussels, trying to be present at the EU decision-making process because national governments have given away a significant part of their power to the supranational bodies of the EU.

However, there are opinions under which paradiplomacy and multi-level governance should not be used in one context, let alone used interchangeably. Kaiser (2005) argues that paradiplomacy is principally understood as the regions’ involvement in international relations, while MLG refers to different layers of territorial governance within one polity. Dickinson (2014) points out to the fact that they differ both in practices and perspectives, and their conflating is not helpful for either of them. At the same time, Dickinson does not reject the possibility of using both the MLG and paradiplomacy framework as complementary or parallel to each other.

The main doubt is to be to what extent the actions taken by the regions in Brussels can be considered international. Due to its transnational character, one cannot forget that the EU is a *sui generis* international organisation. In the context of this work, regional mobilisation takes place within the EU, regions from different Member States establish their direct representations in Brussels, and European integration is the main incentive for the regions to undertake actions in this field. However, the critical notion is that the activities the regions undertake, also or mainly in the European context, are directed externally. These activities aim to reach out to the other actors of European politics: the supranational bodies and other regions, as in the case of international

networks, or the other Member States. Scholars researching MLG and paradiplomacy both use the exact same definition of the region, and also they refer to the same kind of activities, e.g. establishing representations and seeking contacts with other constituencies. Bearing this in mind, regional mobilisation in Brussels seems to fit within the conceptual framework of both paradiplomacy and multi-level governance. Despite the possible inaccuracies resulting from the simultaneous use of both of these perspectives, in most works on regional mobilisation, they appear both, and often scholars use them interchangeably. Dostál (2017) sees the development of the multi-level governance framework as one of the three main branches of how political science approaches paradiplomacy worldwide. In fact, in the EU context, the theoretical assumption of the MLG, i.e. that the third-level seeks direct channels to engage with the supranational institutions, seem to explain the Brussels paradiplomacy of the Member States' regions. Therefore, it seems justified to refer to the mobilisation of the Visegrád regions at the EU level as paradiplomacy, and to use the multi-level governance as the main theoretical tool, providing explanation as to why they pursue these activities.

## **Chapter II: Research design and methodology**

In this chapter, the research procedure will be explained, in order to find an answer to the research question posed in the previous chapter. The structure of this chapter is as follows. In the first subchapter, choice of the geographical focus, the regions of the Visegrád Group countries, will be presented and justified. It will be supported by two main arguments: first, the Visegrád regions, and more broadly the “new Member States” regions, appear to be still somewhat neglected in the context of regional mobilisation and the paradiplomacy literature; second, due to their structural historical backwardness and the enormous benefits for these regions from cohesion policy, the Visegrád regions seem to have a particular incentive to find ways to engage with the European decision-making. This subchapter will also outline the economic situation of the regions of Visegrád countries over the last twenty years, their position in the political system of these countries (including, in particular, the legal possibilities of undertaking their own foreign activities), and the scale of their presence in Brussels. In the second subchapter, I will present the methodological procedure in detail: selection of case studies, the time frame, and data collection methods: analysis of the content of official documents, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees of the Brussels regional offices of selected regions.

### **2.1 Geographical focus: regions of the Visegrád Group countries**

This research proposes a closer look at the regional mobilisation of the regions of the Visegrád Group countries in Brussels. The Visegrád Group is a political and cultural alliance of four Central and Eastern European countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. There are various reasons why the adoption of such a geographic focus may be valuable for the study of the Brussels paradiplomacy. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the works on regional mobilisation so far, regions from the so-called new Member States appeared much less frequently than their counterparts from western or southern Europe. Although in some comparative studies on regional activity in Brussels and cohesion policy there were examples of regions of countries that joined the EU after 2004 (Wyn Jones & Scully 2010; Piattoni & Polverari, 2016), they were in a minority compared to the case studies of the regions of the other EU Member States.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a small scale of the research on paradiplomacy of the regions of the Visegrád countries. It is difficult to state unequivocally why the Brussels activities of these regions

were generally less frequently discussed in the subject's literature. One of the possible explanations for the low interest of researchers is the smaller scale of decentralisation of power in these countries than in some Western European countries. The other explanation could be the lack of a tradition of regionalism in these countries, dating back to the times of highly centralised communist states, where a structure of self-government similar to the Western European did not develop until 1989 (Nergelius, 2005).

The local government reforms and changes in the territorial division of post-communist countries made them similar in this respect to some Western European countries. In all four Visegrád countries, there are regional, self-governed units of the top-level administrative division, just below the central administration. While performing very similar functions, they bear different, traditional names. Poland is divided into 16 voivodships (*województwa* in Polish), the Czech Republic into 13 regions (*kraje* in Czech), Slovakia into seven regions (*kraje* in Slovak), and Hungary into 19 counties (*megyék* in Hungarian). The capitals: Prague, Bratislava, and Budapest constitute separate administrative regions. Warsaw is the capital of both Poland, and the Mazowieckie voivodship.

Polish voivodships coincide with the European NUTS-2 units. The exception is Warsaw, which has been separated as a distinctive NUTS-2 region from the Mazowieckie voivodship. The administrative regions of other countries are NUTS-3 units. For the NUTS qualifications, larger NUTS-2 units have been established within them, associating a greater number of regions, which, however, do not have any regional government administrative functions.

Although none of the countries that joined the EU after 2004 is a federative one, they are decentralised to a different extent. Greenwood (2017) places Poland, similarly as France, somewhere in the middle on the scale of decentralisation of the EU Member states. Czech Republic and Hungary are here marked as countries of a "low" level of decentralisation, while Slovakia is even less decentralised.

The position of the studied regions within their Member State government structure, with a special emphasis on competencies in pursuing externally aimed activities, will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs. Interviews with representatives of selected regions showed that the lack of legal basis of actions is not a significant obstacle for their activities. One of the interviewees shared that regional representations operate in a kind of a legislative "grey zone" (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021). It could be an additional

argument in favour of using the theoretical framework of MLG proposed by Hooghe and Marks, which did not pay much attention to the legal status of regions, as opposed to more recent work which attempts to look at the multi-level polity of the EU from the perspective of legal analysis (Panara, 2015).

The regions of unitary states undertake paradiplomatic actions in Brussels on a wide scale regardless of having much fewer legal possibilities than the federal states' units. The willingness to gather information and lobby in various areas of European decision-making, including cohesion policy, seems to encourage regional authorities to pursue action in areas where their competencies have not been clearly defined. In the case of the "new" Member States regions, this seems to be of particular importance as these countries were and still are less developed economically. As will be shown below, the regions of the Visegrád group are also diversified within these countries, but it is possible to show some common characteristics.

What seems worth emphasising, this delay does not date back only to the times of the communist rule. Historically, the states of Central Europe have always been economically and socially underdeveloped compared to Western Europe. None of the attempts to catch up undertaken by the elite of these countries has been successful. The industrialisation and social changes of the nineteenth century, the efforts of the governments of weak states of CEE in the interwar period, and the forced modernisation of the first communist governments did not bury the gap between the East and the West in Europe.

As indicated by Szűcs (1983) and Polish historians (Sonowska, 2019), the roots of this backwardness date back even earlier to the late Middle Ages. As a "semi-periphery" in the perspective of Wallerstein's worlds theory, the countries of the region were locked in a kind of vicious circle of underdevelopment towards the West (Berend, 2005). Despite the overall backwardness of the CEE Member States, there were some noteworthy exceptions. Historically, there were Bohemia proper, Upper Silesia and North Moravia, which were heavily industrialised in the 19th century. A robust industrial centre was also Łódź, one of the largest light industrial centres of the Russian Empire and one of the leading centres of Polish industry until the 1990s (Cudny, 2012). Czechoslovakia was one of the most developed economies in the world in the interwar period (Kohout, 2012). Upper Silesia, which, after the plebiscite in 1921 and the uprisings of Polish nationalists, was divided between Poland and the Weimar Reich, was one of the two largest industrial basins in Germany at the eve of the WWI, along the Ruhr region (Naumann,

1916). The accession to the EU and taking an active part in European integration process resulting therefrom were a historic opportunity for unprecedented economic development and overcoming historically conditioned differences in the opinion of many (Master, 2014). Undoubtedly, one of the essential tools of this process is the European cohesion policy mechanisms, of which these countries have become one of the biggest beneficiaries.

At the time of accession to the European Union, the gross domestic product (GDP) of Poland was 206 126 million euros, 83 753 million euros in Hungary, 96 554 million euros in the Czech Republic and 34 757 million euros in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>. Countries that in the previous decade underwent a transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy — often carried out in the paradigm of neoliberalism — struggled with many economic and social problems. The collapse of many industrial plants and the liquidation of state-owned farms caused the problem of unemployment. In 2004, the unemployment rate in these countries was still considerably high. In January 2004 the unemployment rate exceeded 20% in Poland<sup>2</sup>. The reaction to this was a radical increase in economic immigration, especially from regions with a worse economic situation. Countries struggling with economic problems did not invest in projects of social importance and in infrastructure, which was then unsatisfactory. Even nowadays, these countries are enormously diversified regionally in terms of economic development. In the case of Poland, the notion of the the so-called Poland A and B is still alive. Poland B, comprising of the eastern and less urbanised regions of the country, has a large share of employment in agriculture in the overall employment structure.

Similar differences can be found in other Visegrád countries. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary the differences between the capital and provinces are evident (Postránecký, 2010). It does not mean that metropolises in these countries are not beneficiaries of European funds. As will be shown in the next chapter, they are also of particular importance for the Visegrád capitals. Although migration trends remained at a similar level, especially for Poland and Slovakia, the Visegrád countries experienced unprecedented economic development in the last two decades, one of the main drivers of economic integration and funds with the EU. It finds reflection in the economic data. Fifteen years after the accession, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and

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<sup>1</sup> According to the data available on the website of EUROSTAT. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NAMA\\_10\\_GDP\\_custom\\_1096020/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NAMA_10_GDP_custom_1096020/default/table?lang=en) [retrieved: 20.05.2021].

<sup>2</sup> According to the data available on the website of the Polish Central Statistical Office. <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/bezrobocie-rejestrowane-i-iv-kwartal-2004-r,3,2.html?contrast=default> [retrieved: 20.05.2021]

Slovakia, and Hungary had GDP at 497 842, 135 941, 210 927 and 89 357, respectively<sup>3</sup>. The unemployment rate has been the lowest among EU Member States in the year preceding the COVID-19 pandemic (Bieszk-Stolorz & Dmytrów, 2020).

Despite the concerns about the possibility of falling into the so-called middle income trap (Myant, 2018), being part of the common market has contributed to economic success and an increase in the population's standard of living. The funds transferred to the Visegrád regions under the cohesion policy are of great importance here (Grycuk & Russel, 2017). The EU funding made it possible to significantly improve public infrastructure and stimulate the activity of private entities, which can apply for funding under them. Many researchers point to the crucial role of the European funds in the regional development of the CEE Member States (Heller, 2010; Hagemann, 2019). It was especially valuable in less developed regions compared to the rest of the territory of these countries (e.g. the Poland B or the poorer regions of the remaining Visegrád countries) and regions where the economic transformation resulted in the decline of the former state-owned light and heavy industry. Only in the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) approx. 77.6 billion euros was allocated to Poland, 22 billion to Poland, 21.9 billion to Hungary, and 14 billion to Slovakia. These funds are managed and distributed within operational programs that the regional branches of the government partially control.

This, and the willingness to monitor and lobby for individual legislative solutions, make the regional authorities feel the need to be present in Brussels and undertake paradiplomatic activities to pursue their interests. At the same time, as mentioned above, the differences within the same countries are not without significance. For the most impoverished regions, fundraising under the cohesion policy is a fundamental issue reflected in the interviews. The issue of the economic situation of selected regions will be discussed in the following subchapter.

The Visegrád Group countries are unitary countries with, as mentioned above, a stronger or weaker level of decentralisation. The regions of these states do not have autonomy in conducting their own foreign policy, as is the case with some federal states. The legal acts based on which these regional government units were established poorly define the legal possibilities of undertaking international activity by them.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the data available on the website of EUROSTAT. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NAMA\\_10\\_GDP\\_\\_custom\\_1096020/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/NAMA_10_GDP__custom_1096020/default/table?lang=en) [retrieved: 20.05.2021].

In the case of Hungary, *The Local Government Law* provided for counties a possibility to associate with other self-governments, including international ones, and to join international organisations for regional and local self-governments (National Assembly of Hungary, 1990). Another legal act - *The Act On Local Government* of 2011, did not regulate the possibility of foreign activities by county and city authorities with county rights at all (National Assembly of Hungary, 2011). The situation is similar in the case of other Visegrád countries. In the case of Slovakia, the laws regulating the foreign competences of self-government units directly under the central administration refer only to the possibility of establishing relations with other units of local self-government (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2001), similarly to the Czech regions (Chamber of the Deputies of the Czech Republic, 2000). The authorities of Polish voivodships have the possibility of establishing cooperation with their foreign counterparts and of participating in international associations of local government units. They are also obliged to prepare and adopt documents setting out the priorities and directions of their foreign cooperation (Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 1999).

The weak legal basis of the foreign competencies of the Visegrád regions does not mean that they act against the law when undertaking actions in the international or supranational arena. Many paradiplomatic activities undertaken by regional authorities, consisting precisely in establishing contacts and cooperation with regions of other countries, including countries outside the EU, seem to fall within the scope of their competencies.

Combining the perspective of multi-level governance with para-diplomacy, the European level is not fully understood as a space of international politics. It is much more of an area of *sui generis* paradiplomatic activity. Organisational units responsible for representing the interests of regions in the EU are most often part of the offices exercising executive power in the region. Not all regional authorities choose for information or lobbying purposes in the EU measures that fall within the definitions of para-diplomacy referred to in the previous chapter.

According to the public data provided by the CoR, out of 57 sub-state units in the countries of the Visegrád Group, one Hungarian (only Budapest has a separate representation in Brussels), four Czech regions, four Slovak regions, and thirteen Polish voivodships have their offices in Brussels (European Committee of the Regions, 2020). Therefore, undertaking paradiplomatic efforts is strongly favoured by Polish regions, while maintaining a permanent office in Brussels is much less

prevalent in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The almost complete lack of regional offices of the Hungarian regions can undoubtedly be explained by the fact that the Hungarian counties, which are the highest degree of self-government division in this country, are much smaller than their Polish, Czech and Slovak counterparts. In the Czech case, despite the initial establishment of offices in Brussels, many regions decided to change their strategy and entrust the representation of their interests to, for example, professional lobbying companies, as in the case of the Moravian-Silesian region (Moravskoslezský kraj, 2020).

This study focuses only on regions with regional offices, which are organisational units of the board or government of these provinces. Some of the regional offices, e.g. the Pomorskie voivodship regional office, have a different legal person and are associations in which both local government authorities and, for example, associations of local entrepreneurs and other stakeholders are active (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021). It is motivated by the fact that only conducting this type of activity, entirely directed by the political management of a given region, allows, in the light of the theoretical assumptions adopted, to draw conclusions about political cooperation or its lack in the case of regional and central authorities of a given country.

## **2.2 The choice of case studies**

The thesis focuses on those regions of the Visegrád Group countries that have undertaken paradiplomatic activity to open and run a regional office in Brussels. There are currently 22 regional offices representing the interests of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary to the EU institutions (European Committee of the Regions, 2020). The formula of the master's thesis would not allow each of these regions to be taken into account, and due to the adopted methodology, the key to the study was the consent of the office employees to conduct an in-depth interview. Hence an attempt was made to collect information from as many regions as possible, which would represent, on the one hand, the regional diversity of the Visegrád Group (in the economic and political sense; the work focuses on richer and poorer regions with different political affiliations). Moreover, it is a comparative multiple-case study design (Bryman, 2012). Importantly, selecting more than one case is not motivated by the desire to collect an appropriate sample but by showing to what extent regions of individual countries cooperate with central governments at the European level. As Yin (2014) pointed out, the motivation for conducting a case

study with a higher number of cases should be the will to replicate, and not the belief that a more significant number of them will positively impact the final external validity of a given scientific research.

The choice of case studies was motivated, on the one hand, by the desire to explore the issue of cooperation between regions and central governments in the most varied circumstances possible. Despite some typical characteristics of the regions of the Visegrád Group countries, outlined earlier, which is caused by the general economic and social backwardness of the countries of CEE. In order to investigate the scale of cooperation between the regional and central government at the European level, Polish, Czech and Hungarian self-government regions were selected. The Slovak regions were not included in this survey because their representatives did not respond to requests for in-depth interviews, which, as will be explained in the following paragraphs, are indispensable to gather information on the phenomenon in question. Among the Polish voivodships, as mentioned, the most active para-diplomatic activities in Brussels, this study covers the following voivodships: Łódzkie, Lubuskie, and Podlaskie. One of the interviews also concerned the activities of East Poland House, a joint initiative of the voivodships of eastern Poland, the territory of which mostly coincides with the area of the previously mentioned *Poland B*. These are the voivodships of Warmia and Mazury, Podlaskie, Lubelskie, Świętokrzyskie, Podlaskie and Podkarpackie. Joining forces by regions from one country is a popular strategy among European regions when pursuing actions in Brussels. The interviews corroborate the presumption that such joint actions make up an effective strategy, as stated by the representative of the Podlaskie voivodship:

“The regions of Eastern Poland really benefit from the establishment of the East Poland House. The joint initiative translates into a real added value because of the bigger budget, and larger expert base” (Official from the East Poland House in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

Two Czech regions included in this study adopted a somewhat similar strategy. Since 2013, representing the interests of the Pardubice country in Brussels, falls into the tasks of the Pilsen regional office, based on an appropriate agreement (Official from the Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels 2021, personal interview, 13.04.2021). The only Hungarian self-governing county covered by this study is the capital county of Budapest, because it is also the only Hungarian region with its own representative office in the capital of the EU. The set of cases selected for the study is diverse but not randomly assigned. They represent various features characteristic of

the regions of the Visegrád group. They include regions with an agricultural profile, with underdeveloped industry (Lubuskie, Eastern Poland, Pardubice), traditionally industrial regions (Pilzno, Łódzkie) and large urban agglomerations (Łódź, Budapest).

### **2.3 The adopted time frame**

The adopted time perspective is the period from 2018 to the beginning of 2021. The adoption of such a time frame is for two reasons. First, in 2018 and 2019, local government elections were held in Poland and Hungary, respectively. These elections brought changes in the political affiliation of some regions. In Budapest, for example, the election was won by the coalition opposing Viktor Orbán, and the county has become the only Hungarian self-government at the regional level not controlled by Fidesz. In Poland, the election results gave the ruling coalition, the United Right (pol. *Zjednoczona Prawica*), a majority in another two voivodships. At the same time, one of the initial assumptions when developing the research design was the suspicion that along with the change in the political affiliation of a given region, the staff responsible for conducting foreign activities also partially changed. As will be shown in the next chapter, this was not the case for all regions covered by the study.

The second premise for the choice of this time frame is the fact that a new EU financial perspective has been prepared and negotiated in recent years. For the regional representations, as reflected in the interviews, it was a time of increased activity. Some interviews even indicated that gaining information and lobbying in the context of this new perspective was the main activity of some regional offices in recent years.

### **2.4 Data collection: semi-structured interviews and primary sources analysis**

Although the main source of information were the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. To a certain extent, the analysis of the relevant primary sources: official reports and other documents issued by regional government bodies also played an important role, mainly for preparing the questions for the interviews. The content of these documents, indicating the scope of activity of the regional offices and the details of their activities, allowed, together with the literature mentioned in the review literature, to properly formulate the questions asked later in the interviews. Of course, most of the documents did not directly refer to the alleged

cooperation of the regional offices with the country's permanent representations, but some of the information contained therein was valuable.

Bearing in mind, however, that running a regional office is not the only form of undertaking activities at the European level in Brussels, it should be emphasised that these documents concerned only the activities of the offices mentioned above. As Tatham (2016) notes, interviews are the essential research tool in studying the paradiplomatic activity of European regions. It is because official documents are not always detailed, and often their content does not fully reflect the meanders of the activities undertaken by the regional offices. Additionally, the reports in Hungarian were beyond my reach due to the language barrier. Interviews with employees of regional offices, or more broadly, public administration involved paradiplomatic activities in Brussels, allowed, on the other hand, to obtain more accurate and detailed information, both on the general activities of regional offices and paradiplomacy, as well as and on specific projects undertaken by the respective representations.

The semi-structured interviews also seem to be an appropriate way of obtaining data for the subject of this work for another reason. The regional offices in Brussels carry out various activities and perform different functions for regional governments, which was reflected in the literature review and the interviews conducted for this study. This diversity also determines cooperation with representatives of the central government.

The semi-structured form of the interviews allowed for the free formulation of additional questions depending on the threads resulting from specific conversations. Therefore, it was possible to adapt the interviews to the conditions and context that varies from region to region. The interviews were conducted in Polish, Czech and English. The set of questions was developed primarily based on the literature on MLG and paradiplomacy, in such a way as to outline the context in which cooperation between regions and the central government is concerned. As some of the information provided seemed sensitive, due to the fact that it concerned directly the interviewees' working environment, I decided not to disclose their personal data, after prior consultation with them.

During the interviews, the first questions touched upon the scope of activities of regional offices, what functions they perform and how they contribute to representing the interest of regions. The following questions concerned manifestations of regional mobilisation of these regions at the European level other than the regional offices themselves — mainly through representation

in the CoR and participation in transnational regional networks. The answers to these questions were valuable for determining the scale of paradiplomatic activity of the regions under study, as they could complement the information contained in official documents. Subsequently, the following questions raised the role of regional offices' cooperation with permanent representations in carrying out their duties. The interviewees were also asked to indicate whether, to their knowledge, cooperation between a given region and its Member State in Brussels is of a more cooperative or conflicting nature. Another question concerned the issues that determine this cooperation, mainly the problem of the political affiliation of regional authorities. The last question was about the hypothetical situations where the interests of the regions did not coincide with the interests pursued by their Member States. Based on the interviews and —to a lesser extent— the content analysis of the relevant documents, the next chapter attempts to find an answer to the research question posed.

## **2.5 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Notably, the interviews for this work were exclusively conducted online, using software that allows for audio/video connection: Microsoft Teams and Skype. This form of interviewing was chosen due to the pandemic crisis caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The restrictions suspending the freedom of movement of people between EU Member States made it difficult to conduct in-person interviews with representatives of regions from different countries.

Travelling within the Visegrád countries (Białystok is almost 650 km away from Zielona Góra, the capital of the Lubuskie voivodship) would also involve high risk of contagion. At the time of writing the thesis, the regulations in force advised against or even forbade moving between regions. The global epidemic has forced many researchers who intended to use interviews as a methodological tool to switch to a remote mode of conducting them. As La Iacono (2016) indicated, online interviews should not be treated as qualitatively worse than those conducted under traditional conditions. Paradoxically, the remote operation may positively impact the quality of research carried out in this way. In a specific way, the pandemic "normalised" and popularised the online interviews, which due to their nature are much easier to organise logistically: they do not require financial expenses related to, for example, travelling, and demands much less time both for the researchers and the interviewees (Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Jowett, 2020). These advantages make it possible to conduct interviews that would not be possible under normal circumstances.

Thus, in the case of this study, the situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for the inclusion of more cases in the research design. The greater easiness of organising interviews via the Internet made it possible to consider the examples from as many as three countries and seven regions. Under normal circumstances, traditional interviews would probably be the preferred form. However, including a similar number of case studies would be much more difficult.

## **Chapter III: Findings**

In this chapter, the issue of relations between regional representations and the EU Member States' permanent representations will be presented against the background of the overall activities of regional offices in the period from 2018 to 2021. First, Polish voivodships will be analysed, then the county of Budapest, and then the remaining two Czech regions. The information gained during the semi-structured interviews will serve as the base for the analysis, with the primary sources, mainly reports, playing a complementary role. In the following chapter, the conclusions resulting from the analysis will be presented. The emphasis will be put on the issue of cooperation or the lack of it. Where it is possible, the reasons for such a state of affairs will be discussed in the context of the theory of MLG and the EU regional mobilisation.

### **3.1 The Lubuskie Regional Office in Brussels**

According to the reports from 2018 and 2019, the main activities of the office included monitoring European policies in the context of the ongoing negotiations on the MFF 2021-2027 and sector policies under the cohesion policy (Sejmik Województwa Lubuskiego 2018, 2019). The office was also involved in organising events as part of the European Week of Regions and Cities. Other office activities included the organisation of study visits of delegations of regional authorities, especially in the context of Interreg activities. The office also conducted information activities, participating in meetings organised by the EC (Sejmik Województwa Lubuskiego, 2019). Although these documents do not contain information on possible cooperation with central government bodies (e.g. the Permanent Representation of Poland to the EU), thanks to the information obtained during the interview, it will be possible to state that it is vital for the Lubuskie regional representation and the rest of the regions.

Thanks to the information obtained during the interview with an official from the regional office, it is possible to indicate in more detail how these priorities of foreign cooperation are implemented and, most importantly, in which areas the regional representation of Brussels is active. As indicated in chapter one, the main tasks of Brussels regional offices are: information gathering, different promotional activities, and lobbying to shape EU legislation. The Lubuskie Regional Office focuses mainly on the first of these functions. In addition, it is about following what projects are

currently being prepared in Brussels and what consequences and opportunities they may bring for the region. As the interviewee stated:

“We mainly monitor and inform regional authorities about what may happen, what is being planned and how we can react to it” (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021)

As for the EU policy area, which is a priority for the office’s activities, it is still the cohesion policy. In the last three years, the most important of the projects was the negotiated MFF 2021-2027. As for the promotional function, the Lubuskie office has mostly given it up. As the interviewee underlined:

“When it comes to the promotional activities, we have been moving away from it for some time. We assume that we have been present in the EU as a voivodship for several years, and we no longer need to introduce ourselves to everyone. It is not a crucial task at this point. There are many more important things” (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021)

The Lubuskie Regional Office engages in lobbying less frequently and only under certain conditions, i.e. most often by joining forces with other regions in ad hoc initiatives to solve specific problems or achieve specific goals. My interlocutor expressed the opinion that Polish regional offices are not yet prepared to undertake independent lobbying activities similar to this undertaking, for example, by more resourceful and staffed offices of some Western European countries. However, this is due not only to the fact that the offices of the Visegrád regions are smaller but also because lobbying for a specific proposal should start at a very early stage of long legislative processes. As the interviewee stated:

“It is not always possible to draw the attention of stakeholders in the region to the fact that the lobbying should start at a particular moment in order to be successful. [...] Not all of us in Poland are aware of how this process should look like, how to proceed” (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021)

The mentions about the partial lack of interest of stakeholders in the region will also appear in the following subchapters on the representations of Polish voivodships. It does not mean, however,

that the regional representation is not involved in lobbying at all. For example, the joint action of more regions in a joint initiative aimed at lobbying against the plans of European decision-makers to limit resources under the cohesion policy only to underdeveloped regions in the following financial perspective has proved to be an effective tool. The initiative *A strong renewed cohesion policy for all regions* (Regions for Cohesion) was launched by the representatives of Lower Austria in 2016, but activities within its framework continued in later years and were successful. It shows how vital European funds are still for regions from different EU Member States.

When it comes to cooperation with a permanent representation, the representation of the Lubuskie voivodship considers it very important, especially when negotiating the new financial perspective. The Permanent Representation plays a critical role in the aforementioned gathering of information on European legislative processes and the negotiation of specific projects. It has a regional policy department that should provide valuable information to regional representations. As my interlocutor pointed out, the Polish Permanent Representation organised meetings with representatives of the regions on its initiative for many years. The number of meetings to which representatives of the Lubuskie voivodship were invited has decreased recently. However, it cannot be unequivocally stated that this change is because the office represents the voivodship governed by a coalition made up from opposition parties. The interviewee also stated that the Polish Permanent Representation does not refuse information based on a different political affiliations. In general, when asked about the relationship between the Polish Permanent Representation and the regional representation, the interviewee replied that:

“There is cooperation, sometimes maybe loose cooperation. I would not say that our relations are anyhow conflicting” (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021)

Undoubtedly, an interesting topic for this work is the lack of consent to the attempts by the Polish government to establish an additional, centrally managed operational fund to allocate funds from the cohesion policy. As mentioned, Polish voivodships are responsible for managing money from European funds under the so-called *regional operational programs*. Although they are already financed under the regional programs, the proposed new operational programme was intended to target small urban centres. Its creation would reduce the overall amount of money transferred to the regions and reduce the influence of regional authorities on the distribution of funds. Hypothetically, the United Right government could direct funds to centres run by representatives of this party. As

will be shown later, other representatives of Polish regions were of the opposite opinion. It raised many doubts among regional decision-makers, not only of the Lubuskie voivodship. As the interlocutor mentioned:

“It was not understandable to us as these small centres can already apply for funding from regional programs. They are not excluded, and these would not be additional measures. From our perspective, the government’s initiative was not understandable. Its motivation was not clear” (Official from the Lubuskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 17.04.2021)

A similar thread of disagreement with the centralisation process emerged in response to a question about identifying situations in which the interest of the region represented by the office did not coincide with the interest represented by the central government. In the end, the EC did not agree to the creation of an additional operational program for Poland. Nevertheless, Polish government supported the EC’s proposal to create a joint INTERREG program for all regions of a given state border. In the Polish-German border, on which the Lubuskie voivodship is located, this would mean combining three programs into one. The rotating secretariat of such a combined program would most likely be moved to Warsaw, and regional authorities would probably lose control over it.

### **3.2 The Łódzkie Regional Office in Brussels**

The regional office representing the Łódzkie voivodship in Brussels is very active in the field of economic promotion. One of the regional representation goals is to “increase the international economic rank of the Łódzkie voivodship” (Sejmik Województwa Łódzkiego, 2010). It seems to constitute a real bridge between the stakeholders, i.e. local entrepreneurs, interested in co-financing from European funds or in other matters regulated at the European level. The office cooperates with the University of Łódź. The regional office also supports economic entities interested in operating on the markets of the Benelux countries, e.g. by helping to promote the export offer of selected enterprises.

In 2018, the regional representation participated in international events, such as Brussels Design September, where efforts were made to show the region as a place with rich traditions of industrial design. In addition, the offers from entrepreneurs from the Łódzkie region were promoted at over

12 fairs and conferences, not only in Brussels but also in other Belgian cities and the Netherlands (Sejmik Województwa Łódzkiego, 2018).

The Łódzkie voivodship was also represented at events aimed to promote regional development, such as the European Week of Regions and Cities. The voivodship is very active in transnational networks, e.g. in the European regions toward Circular Economy or the project *Water reuse policies advancement for resource efficient* (AQUARES). As part of these initiatives, consultations are carried out, most often in the business-administration-science triangle, between representatives of various regions (Sejmik Województwa Łódzkiego, 2019). Their aim is to develop common positions in specific areas and to share their experience in given fields.

In an interview with an official from the Łódzkie regional office, the transnational networks were once again indicated as the most effective notion for lobbying. This promotional activity was continued in the following years. In 2019, the regional representation once again chaired an international partner consortium that organised a debate on the energy transition in cities as part of the European Week of Regions and Cities.

Unfortunately, there is not much information in the available documents on following the development of European legislation or the direct representation of the region before the European institutions. Nevertheless, the region's representation seems to be highly active in the economic sphere, distinguishing it from other regions included in this study, at least in the light of the available information. Despite the possibilities of pursuing successful lobbying, the Łódzkie regional office does not engage often in such activity. As the interviewee pointed out, referring broader to the activities of Polish regional representations:

“In Poland, this broadly understood regional lobbying does not function. In Poland, in the early 1990s, a Washington-type transformation took place. The democratisation process was carried out in such a way that certain principles were presented to us, and they were incorporated. However, it was mostly about the so-called formal institutions, and in the meantime, there has been no change in informal institutions. These informal institutions decide about the shape of social activity in each territory. [...] There is a deficient level of dialogue in Poland and a very low level of representation. Organised lobbying of enterprises is only now being born, and only in Warsaw. If there is no such thing at the regional level, at the municipal level, at the national level, then we

cannot wish it to happen at the European level” (Official from the Łódzkie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 05.05.2021)

However, in the interview, cooperation with the permanent representation was indicated as essential for the office’s work. To illustrate this relationship, the interlocutor used the metaphor of a road along which the Permanent Representation puts border stones, and the regional representation scatters sand on it. Therefore, how the regional representation operates should always complement the activities undertaken by the national government, and follow the direction set by the Polish Permanent Representation. As the interviewee stated:

“Throughout my ten years in Brussels, I constantly believe that there is no point in having a regional representation if its activities are not consistent with those of the Permanent Representation” (Official from the Łódzkie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 05.05.2021)

At the same time, the interviewee emphasised that the activities that the Łódzkie office undertakes in cooperation with the government representation mainly concern the issue of European funds and cohesion policy, i.e. a small part of what the regional representation is interested in:

“Effective lobbying is the remaining 99% of the EU’s GDP, the benefits of the common market. The government and the Permanent Representation in the context of regional policy focuses on this one per cent, which is the EU budget” (Official from the Łódzkie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 05.05.2021)

The issue of the scale of political cooperation between the second and third level, or its determinants, is not the clue of the activities of the regional representation of the Łódzkie voivodship. The interviewee denied the possibility of a hypothetical situation in which the interest of the region would conflict with the interests pursued by the central government in Brussels:

“It is difficult for me to imagine such a situation in the case of Poland. [...] I cannot imagine that there would be such a possibility that such a contradiction would arise” (Official from the Łódzkie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 05.05.2021)

At the same time, for the representative of the Łódzkie voivodship, the internal Polish party politics and the ongoing political conflict are not crucial for the cooperation with the permanent

representation. However, the interviewee admitted that having the same political affiliation between the regional and central government might stimulate the regional office's activity and positively impact the effectiveness of fulfilling the tasks given to them by the regional authorities.

### **3.3 The East Poland House and the Podlaskie Regional Office in Brussels**

Collecting information on what is happening in Brussels and passing it on to regional authorities is also the primary responsibility of the Regional Office of the Podlaskie voivodship and, more broadly, the joint initiative of the East Poland House, which coordinates the Brussels activity of representatives of five voivodships before European institutions. The office also deals with tourist and economic promotion of the region. The activities of the Podlaskie voivodship representation, together with the East Poland House, mainly include promotional activities in the economic and touristic spheres and monitoring the development of European legislation.

As part of the joint operation, the East Poland House prepares reports summarising the course and directions of changes in European policies, important from the point of view of the interests of Eastern Poland (Podlaskie Regional Office in Brussels, 2018). Lobbying activities are undertaken mainly by the East Poland House. It consists mainly in participation in consultations, sending positions on critical issues to various actors of the European politics and building personal contacts and relations with employees of the EC and other institutions. An example of building relationships are various formal and informal meetings and events organised by the East Poland House, to which representatives of Brussels institutions are invited. In addition to networking, however, lobbying opportunities are very limited, on the one hand, by staff shortages and, on the other hand, by a lack of understanding of regional stakeholders for how lobbying in Brussels works. As the interviewee admitted:

“In order to lobby, you have to be provided with guidelines by the employer. The regional offices are staffed by one, two or a maximum of three people. I cannot be an expert in everything. Here we collide with the wall. Our voivodships are in no way prepared for lobbying. The problem is also a poor command of the English language” (Official from the Podlaskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

To show how unaware the regional stakeholders are about the possibilities of lobbying in Brussels, the interviewee recalled a situation, when the voivodship authorities lost the opportunity to engage in lobbying. A representative of the voivodship authorities resigned from participating in a working group established by the European Regional and Local Health Authorities (EUREGHA) transnational network, which was to advise the EC on the issue of e-health due to an insufficient command of English.

“An employee of the regional government volunteered to participate. The added value of its participation would be high. It could have an impact on the solutions recommended by the EC. However, it turned out that the person did not know the English language at a sufficient level and withdrew from it. So there are lobbying opportunities, but we are not able to take advantage of them” (Official from the Podlaskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

The interviewee pointed to one specific example of the involvement of the Podlaskie regional office in lobbying. It was when the new directive on Tobacco was discussed, and there are large tobacco plantations in the voivodship. However, it was an initiative of one of the big cigarettes producers. It was this company that organised a meeting with decision-makers on this matter in the office, not the regional stakeholders or the voivodship’s authorities.. As my interlocutor admitted:

“Lobbying on the tobacco directive looked like this: a company came to me with know-how, money, people and a proposal to organise a meeting in the office. The regional authorities have not done anything about it. And such cases can be multiplied” (Official from the Podlaskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

Cooperation with the Permanent Representation was indicated as very important also for the activities of the Podlaskie regional office. The interview also underlined the role of the representation as a source of information on the course of European legislation and policies. This information is simply not available to the regional representations elsewhere. Moreover, permanent representation serves for the regional offices a kind of intermediary in lobbying, as this is the only access to the Council they have. As the interviewee pointed out:

“Lobbying opportunities are limited for us. The only way to access the Council is through Permanent Representation. This cooperation is essential. The employees of the Permanent Representation have simply means that are not available to us. We cooperate intensively, even

though there are many vacancies at the moment, there are definitely fewer people working in the Permanent representation right now” (Official from the Podlaskie regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

This is confirmed in the documents cited above. The employees of the Permanent Representation also take part in meetings organised by the East Poland House. However, it should be emphasised that most of these voivodships are ruled by the United Right coalition. The interviewee stated that access to representatives of the central government and assistance and cooperation in achieving their goals was limited for some voivodships. Eastern Poland voivodships cooperate with government representatives, but this cooperation is strictly conditioned by political affiliation.

“In Brussels, you can feel that the regions governed by the opposition are treated less favourably by representations and the Embassy” (Official from the East Poland House in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

When asked about the impact of the issue of the political affiliation of the voivodship authorities on cooperation with government representatives in Brussels, the interviewee representing the East Poland House stated that:

“It has an impact. However, it only started when Law and Justice took power. I have not noticed such situations before. Now, I just do not get it. After all, we all represent Poland. [...] As a representative of the voivodship, I should be now careful about the political affiliation and to whom I am allowed to talk to. Smaller administrative units where the mayor is from a different political party [other than those forming the United Right coalition] do not receive support from the voivodship. Offices that do not have the same political affiliation as the government have nothing to look for in a permanent representation” (Official from the East Poland House in Brussels, personal interview, 24.04.2021)

When asked about the situations in which the voivodship authorities would lobby against the state’s general interest, represented by the central government, the interviewee from the Podlaskie region office said that it would be a breakneck and the Podlaskie regional office is not involved in it.

### **3.4 The Regional Office of Budapest in Brussels**

Budapest is a county and, at the same time, a European statistical region. As the capital and a city with county rights, it represents the level of local government that is directly under the Hungarian central government. In the case of Budapest, lobbying is one of the office's main activities, especially recently, when the prospective MFF was negotiated. Since the change in the regional government of the Hungarian capital, one of the new management goals has been to strengthen and expand the representation of the city in Brussels in order to have the most significant possible impact on decision-making. As the interviewee pointed out:

“We aim to convince the European decision-makers to improve the access of regional and local authorities to European sources” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

City representatives mainly lobby for the MFF, but also engage in lobbying for initiatives such as Connecting Europe and the Green Deal. Activities are directed at the problem of how to increase regional access to EU funds. This lobbying involves, among other things, drafting positions on a given issue. This concerned operational programs, the sustainable foundation of the cohesion policy, and actions were taken as part of the European Urban Initiative so that cities could use the money from the Just Transition Fund. The representation of Budapest was involved in organising the conference, allowing for direct contact with European institutions: the Council or the EP. As a result, specific draft amendments have been prepared. As the interviewee noted, this was a departure from the usual way of lobbying, which is at most about presenting one's position:

"We decided that the most effective way of presenting our view will be to provide the relevant European decision-makers with the already prepared proposition of amendment. It proved successful” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

As with the other projects mentioned, finding partners in the form of other European regions has proven to be crucial for the success of this initiative:

“From the very beginning, we had a solid relationship with the other four Visegrád capitals. Beyond the Visegrád level, we also reached out to other cities from all over Europe. The group was very

diverse, representing a variety of the European cities. We had very constructive discussions with KE” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

Lobbying for European funds is extremely important for the city. Especially recently, when, on the one hand, the pandemic negatively affected the city's budget, and on the other hand, the government of Viktor Orbán took many measures to limit the funds for the Hungarian capital:

“The government launched a war against the city of Budapest. There were heavy cuts in funding of the city. Also, the government cut the city's resources by reforming the taxes collected by the city. [...] That is why we need direct funds from the EU. We need to actively engage in lobbying in Brussels because the central government, even during the pandemic, uses every tool available to make the city's life as difficult as possible. We need funds to be able to invest in social projects, social housing, sustainability and decarbonisation” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

As the interviewee pointed out, it is difficult for Viktor Orbán’s government to accept a situation in which another power centre, not controlled by Fidesz, decides about the disposal of European funds. It is due to the fact that the ruling party uses European funds to strengthen its political power, and these often go to partners and oligarchs who are close to Orbán. In addition, the pro-government media criticise actions taken by the authorities of Budapest at the European level:

“Our lobbying activities are presented in the media as acts of betraying the country and the nation” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

At the same time, the government wants to prove that the new government consisting of the Hungarian opposition politicians mismanage the city. The Hungarian government seems to be acting to the detriment of the city's citizens in many cases. For example, as the interviewee pointed out, Viktor Orbán’s government refused to allow the Budapest authorities to take out a loan from European Investment Bank to purchase trolleybuses as part of efforts to decarbonise public transportation in the city.

Similar actions may pay off politically for Fidesz. Hungarian prime minister sees the current mayor of Budapest as a potential rival who may threaten Viktor Orbán’s position in future elections as the leader of the united opposition. As in the case of the previously discussed offices, an essential task

of representation is to gather information and monitor legislative processes and negotiations on specific policies to be passed on to decision-makers in the capital. The permanent representation could play a crucial role in fulfilling this task, as stated many times before. However, cooperation with permanent representation does not exist at all. As the interviewee said:

“Cooperation is not possible. There is simply no contact. There is no friendship over the frontlines. The permanent representation of Hungary is in fact, the permanent representation of Fidesz” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

When asked how he would assess the relationship between the city’s representation and the representatives of the central government, the interviewee indicated that:

“The relationship is very conflictual. It is very harmful for the operation of the Budapest representation to Brussels. It significantly undermines the ability of the Member State to represent its interests truly. There are certain things on which we could agree, but in such circumstances, it is not possible” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

Therefore, the Budapest Representation has limited access to information, in particular these from the Council meetings. The reason for this is the political affiliation of the Hungarian capital's authorities. At the same time, this state of affairs reflects the internal, strongly polarised political situation in the country:

“The different political colour of the city is the reason [for lack of cooperation]. There is no single professional question because everything is politicised. [...] It is rooted in the Orbán’s concept of illiberal state. The goal is to centralise the country extremely. It is a tool to ensure that he and Fidesz will always be in power” (Official from the Budapest regional office in Brussels, personal interview, 16.05.2021)

### **3.5 The Regional Office of the Pilsen and Pardubice Regions in Brussels**

Since 2012, the representation of the Pilsen region, itself existing since 2004, also represents the regional authorities of the Pardubice region in Brussels, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Based on what the annual reports indicate, one can conclude that the representation of the regions in Brussels engages greatly in activities aimed at promotion of the region. Nevertheless, many of the office's duties consist of following the development of legislation, movements, and plans of various European institutions (mainly EC and EP). The office also organises meetings of local decision-makers with representatives and employees of different European institutions.

Promotion of the region included, among other things, organising cultural events, such as art exhibitions and meetings with scientists from the region (under the name "Science Cafe") and promoting the cultural and economic aspects of the region at various regional events (Week of European Cities and Regions). The reports contain professional and detailed analyses of funds' development direction related to cohesion and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In 2018, the regional office informed the authorities about the meetings on the future of cohesion policy, about the expected priorities of the cohesion funds and the CAP (Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels, 2018) in the future financial perspective and decisions taken by European institutions in this context, and about the course of visits by the Czech prime minister and other Czech officials to Brussels.

The office's attention was also devoted to the above-mentioned issue of plans to reform the cohesion policy to cover less developed regions. There was information about the lobbying initiative against this decision (Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels, 2018). The office also informed about changes in key positions in the EC or the CoR and the prospects of filling various positions by Czech officials. It is worth noting that the reports contain both official and informal information. In 2019, the representation continued its promotion and information gathering activities.

The report shows that they were similar to those from last year. The office informed about further developments in the constantly negotiated multi-year financial perspective, emphasising funds under the cohesion policy (Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels, 2019). The reports also include proposals for participation in various projects in the following years. The documents do not contain explicit information about lobbying attempts made directly by the office or even the

will to influence European legislation in this way. The information contained in the report was confirmed in the interview. The office has recently been successful in actively lobbying for funds for Czech municipalities under the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI).

While according to the position of the Czech government represented by the Czech Permanent Representation, the lack of participation of Czech cities in this program was allegedly because of a lack of interest, the regional representation did successfully seek direct contact with the EC to present its opposite arguments. The problem resulted from the conditions that the Czech Ministry of Regional Development had applied for funding (Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels., 2019). As an example of successful lobbying, joint regional initiatives were also pointed out, e.g. the previously mentioned Regions4Cohesion or Regions for Recovery, established to express and emphasise the role of the third level in the negotiations of the European Reconstruction Fund. At present, however, the regions do not belong to any permanent transnational networks. As the interviewee pointed out:

“Transnational networks are often too large, and the regions associated have different, often contradictory interests. There are more efficient ways to spend money” (Official from the Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels 2021, personal interview, 13.04.2021)

The interviewee indicated that cooperation with permanent representation is a crucial element of fulfilling the objectives of the regional office. As in the other regions under discussion, permanent representation is a valuable source of information for the representation of the Pilsen and Pardubice regions. As the interviewee pointed out, this cooperation is vital due to the small constitutional competencies of the regions of unitary states:

“There are diametric differences in access to the legislative process between regions of unitary states and regions of federal states. Our partners from Bavaria, who have a large office representing the Land in Brussels, are also a good source of access to information for us” (Official from the Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels 2021, personal interview, 13.04.2021)

When asked how, in practice, it happens that a regional representation has to actively defend the interests of the region if the actions of the Czech Republic in Brussels would be contrary to them, the interviewee replied that this is the clue of their work:

“This is what our work is all about. As the representatives of the regions it is our responsibility to guarantee that the voice of the regional and local will be heard, also in situations where the national government seems not to be taking our views into consideration, like in the case of the recovery fund” (Official from the Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels 2021, personal interview, 13.04.2021)

In the case of the Czech Republic cooperation with the state representation seems to be proceeding without any significant problems. It is not affected by the domestic political situation, or at least not to the extent comparable to Poland or Hungary.

“There is no easy answer [to the question about the influence of political affiliation on cooperation in Brussels]. Sometimes it is better to work with one government and a little worse for others. It depends on specific politicians. Their party affiliation is of secondary importance” (Official from the Pilsen and Pardubice regional office in Brussels 2021, personal interview, 13.04.2021)

## **Chapter IV: Conclusions**

### **4.1 The functions of the Visegrád regional representations in Brussels**

Identifying the area of operation of specific regional offices was necessary to determine how, and if at all, they cooperate with their permanent representations. Regarding the scale of operation of Brussels regional offices, the interviews conducted for this research project seem to confirm what the authors dealing with the regional mobilisation have already indicated. Out of the mentioned functions of offices, which were indicated in the first chapter, the most important seems to be the informational and promotional functions in the studied cases. It is also worth noting that, in line with the methodological remark of Tatham (2016) cited in the second chapter, the interviews turned out to be a much richer source of information about office activities than the primary sources quoted in the previous section. As for the information function, it follows the development of EU legislation and policies, particularly in areas of importance to the interests of a given region. In the interviews conducted, the most frequent topic was the cohesion policy and funds, of which a given region could become a beneficiary. It seems to confirm the hypothesis put forward in the methodological chapter that regions of the structurally less developed EU countries have a special incentive to undertake para-diplomatic efforts in Brussels.

The statement that the cohesion policy is treated as a priority by the regional representations appeared in each interview. For the oppositionist authorities of Budapest, knowledge of the availability of funds seems an almost existential issue with the county deprived of central government support. The regional authorities are also informed about the development of legislation, the entry into force of which would have a potential impact on the region, e.g. in the case of the Tobacco Directive.

At the same time, the key to performing the information function in cooperation with the appropriate permanent representation. It is the permanent representation that is the source of information on the issues discussed at the Council meetings and ongoing negotiations on the most important issues for the regions. In recent years, the most critical issue has been the new MFF, which found reflection in the interviews. The lack of cooperation with the permanent representation, which will be discussed later, makes it very difficult for the regional representations

to fulfil their informational function. As for the promotional function can be concluded from the analysis of interviews, and the primary sources, that it should be understood twofold.

On the one hand, it is promoting the region, its history and culture. In this sense, one can speak of promoting the region as a potential tourist destination and increasing awareness of the regional diversity of the EU. Promotion understood in this way remains one of the functions of the offices, but the interviewees did not refer to it as being of any significant importance. The representative office of the Lubuskie voivodship departs from this type of activity, assuming that it belongs to the competence of other institutions, e.g. state touristic agencies. Besides, the promotion of regional entrepreneurship, i.e. economic promotion, plays a vital role in the operation of the Visegrád offices. The Łódzkie voivodship office has been very actively involved in promoting regional business entities in recent years. Brussels is seen here as the EU's decision-making centre and as a continental business hub. The Łódzkie voivodship, for example, tries to promote the region economically not only in Brussels but also in the entire Benelux region.

Although in most cases the documents lack information about specific situations, the interviews conducted show a complex picture of the lobbying activities carried out by Visegrád regions. Undoubtedly, this research confirmed that there is much space for regional representations where they can try to influence the course of European legislation. However, regional authorities from the Visegrad countries do not always succeed in lobbying. As the interviews showed, very often, they are not able to seize an opportunity.

Two reasons for this can be formulated on the basis of the conducted interviews. First, they are not staffed enough. It was indicated as the reason in some of the interviews. Regional offices in the discussed cases mainly consist of one to three employees. Lobbying often requires expert knowledge in a narrow field depending on the issue concerned. It definitely distinguishes Visegrád regional offices from those regional representations of the Western and Southern European regions with higher competencies in pursuing their own policies. Second, in some cases, local policymakers and private sector stakeholders do not seem to recognise the opportunities and opportunities of lobbying. The Polish voivodships studied could serve as examples here. In all three cases included in this study, the problem of the insufficient interest of regional stakeholders was raised.

Nevertheless, the interviewees pointed out the presence in the EU's decision-making centre and monitoring the development of the European legislation to be at the core of the informational

function their representations have in Brussels. To this end, cooperation with the respective permanent representations plays a crucial role, as the interviews showed. Budapest, and Polish regions ruled by the opposition, make up a very interesting case where this cooperation is disturbed. The present authorities of Budapest are aware of the benefits coming from having their voice heard at the supranational level, and the political conditions in Hungary strongly determine the operation of the Budapest office. The authorities of the Hungarian capital actively lobby through their office in various institutions, including the EP. Nevertheless, due to the lack of cooperation with permanent representation, Budapest is deprived of the possibility of monitoring and having its voice heard in the Council. In the interviews, a similar problem seems to be disturbing the operation of Polish regional offices.

To conclude, when it comes to lobbying conducted by individual offices, internal factors such as size, stakeholders' interest, and the party political situation in the Member State strongly limit its scope. There are, nevertheless, conditions in Brussels for the Visegrád regions to engage in lobbying. Contrary to lobbying carried out on their initiative, the activity of the offices often aims to coordinate participation in two types of joint regional initiatives: permanent transnational networks, which bring together regions with a similar profile, and *ad hoc* alliances, set up to achieve a specific goal. An example of such an alliance can be the aforementioned Regions for Cohesion initiative. Some of the regions studied took part and succeeded in changing the decision-makers' stance on how the cohesion funds should be distributed in the next MFF. Undoubtedly, participation in collective regional initiatives is essential for the Visegrád regions and, perhaps, partially compensates for the lack of lobbying opportunities for the individual offices.

Participation in *ad hoc* alliances was assessed in the interviews as more effective and less costly than participation in permanent transnational networks. Nevertheless, collective initiatives are the primary means of influencing European legislation for the Visegrád regions and contacts with the Permanent Representation. It should be emphasised that they are a measure independent of cooperation with the central government. Most of the interviewees did not say that they also serve as means of "bypassing" national authorities. To some extent, Budapest seems to be the exception. The ideological split between the authorities of the Hungarian capital and the Hungarian government was clearly emphasised, which is reflected in the county's share in transnational networks with a progressive profile

## **4.2 Cooperation between regional offices and their respective Permanent Representations**

The interviews conducted confirmed the opinion expressed in the previously quoted publications on third and second level cooperation in Brussels. This cooperation is a very important factor for the successful performance of most of the functions of regional offices. The permanent representations play a crucial role here, as they can share information necessary from the point of view of a given regional government with regional officials, and act as a kind of intermediary in contacts with the Council. In this sense, this cooperation seems to have an impact on the lobbying function of regional representations. In terms of promotion, both in tourism and economy, cooperation with a permanent representative office does not seem to play a significant role; although theoretically, it might, for example, provide regional representative offices with venues for promotional purposes, and the permanent representation officials can participate in the promotional events the regional representations organise.

For the Czech regions — Pilsen and Pardubice —, represented in Brussels by a joint office, the cooperation was good and did not raise objections. The situation looks different in the case of Polish voivodships. Cooperation between the East Poland House and the Polish permanent representation is intense. As for the other two voivodships studied, the Lubuskie and Łódzkie, the interviews showed that they cooperate but with a lower frequency than before (i.e. before the United Right took over power on the national level). In order to have a complete picture, it seems necessary to juxtapose the information obtained during interviews with two representatives of the regions ruled by the opposition with what was said in the interview with one of the representatives from the East Poland House. The representatives of the regions ruled not by the United Right were said to "have nothing to look for in the Polish Permanent Representation since the 2016" (Personal interview with the official from the East Poland House in Brussels 2021).

In the interview, the representative of the Lubuskie voivodship emphasised that the frequency of meetings with the Polish permanent representation has decreased in recent years. Perhaps this statement was a delicate attempt to underline that after the Law and Justice party took power in Poland, cooperation deteriorated. Also, in the case of Budapest, there is no contact, and, therefore, no cooperation whatsoever, between the county's representation and the Hungarian permanent representation. The county authorities do not cooperate with the Hungarian central government at the European level at all.

This study focused on the unitary states' regions, where the devolution of power is on a similar level and investigated. As shown in the second chapter, regional governments in the Visegrád Group countries have minimal possibilities of pursuing foreign activities. Having no solid legal basis could be a reason why the scale of these activities is much smaller than those of their counterparts that are units of federative states, which reflects, for example, the smaller number of officials employed. Nonetheless, the interviews showed that it makes the regional representations more dependent on cooperation with respective permanent representations, which provide them with necessary information on the directions of the EU legislation, serve as an intermediary for the contacts with the Council, and can engage in a variety of activities aimed at promoting the region. It is the case of the events organised by the East Poland House, or the Czech regional offices, where the officials from permanent representations participate as guests or experts.

In the case of the Visegrád unitary states, the regions do not have any formal possibility to raise their voice and present a view or pursue an interest that would lead to a situation where regional authorities could "bypass" the central government by addressing the supranational institutions directly. Most of the time, regional representations act in line with their central governments. This study shows, however, in certain situations having an established office in Brussels helped the regional authorities with pointing out issues in which what the national government was doing was not by the regions' expectations. That was, for example, the case of the Polish regions trying to prevent the government from creating a new operational programme that would be outside the control of the regional self-government, or in the case of the Czech government complicating the receipt of funding under the recovery plan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, one can see that operation of a direct representation in Brussels proved useful for the regions.

In the case of Budapest, the regional representation is trying to show a completely different picture of Hungary from what the Orbán government represents. The county's office emphasises the activities aimed at promoting the rule of law and sustainable development. Having no contact with the Hungarian permanent representation whatsoever, Budapest has to rely on other means available to its regional representation, like direct lobbying in the CE (i.e. drafting proposals), participating in transnational networks, and lobbying at the EP. As in the case of the Polish regions ruled by the opposition, performing the informational function is much more difficult for Budapest because of the ongoing political conflict in this country.

### **4.3 Party political incongruence as the factor determining the cooperation**

Bearing in mind that the relatively low level of decentralisation seems to make the regional representations more dependent on the cooperation with their permanent representation for performing their duties, it seems necessary to point out the internal party politics as a factor determining this cooperation. Among the regions studied in this research, the opposition parties formed the regional governments in the Lubuskie and Łódzkie voivodship, the Pilsen region, and the Budapest county. This research shows that in the case of the Polish and Hungarian regions studied, the party political incongruence between the regional and central governments highly influences cooperation. It has a significant negative impact on the operation of the regional representation to Brussels. Regions where the parties in opposition to Fidesz and Law and Justice form the government, are in a worse situation than the regions where the ruling parties in Hungary and Poland also control the regional branch of government. They are deprived of the possibilities to obtain valuable information on the course of the EU legislation and lobbying through the permanent representations in the Council. However, it is not the same in the Czech Republic. As the example of the Pilsen and Pardubice regions showed, the cooperation with the Czech permanent representation is not disturbed by the internal party politics.

The influence of the party political incongruence on the paradiplomacy of the Visegrád regions in Brussels is interesting compared to the research conducted on cooperation between regional and central governments in Western European Member States. Tatham's study of the French, British and Austrian regions (2016) showed no significant impact of the internal party politics on the cooperation between regional and national tiers. This research shows that the nationalist governments of Poland and Hungary put the political parties' interests over the interests of these countries' regions, making it more difficult for the regional governments to benefit from the operation of their regional offices in Brussels. Undoubtedly, it shows that investigating the mobilisation of the Visegrád regions can contribute to a better understanding of the nature of the Brussels paradiplomacy in recent years.

### **4.4 Paradiplomacy of the Visegrád regions and the multi-level governance**

The information obtained during the interviews confirms the basic theoretical assumptions of the multi-level governance framework. Interviewees have repeatedly confirmed that the main

reason regional authorities engage in paradiplomacy at the EU level is the willingness to keep abreast of decision-making processes in Brussels and, if possible, to influence them. It is the case of all the regions studied, regardless of the political affiliation of their regional governments. Visegrád regions established their direct representations also to react when what the central government pursues threatens their interests.

Budapest's case of the opposition government shows that the possibility of direct contact with the EU institutions and other European regions is essential in a situation where the local government is in open conflict with the central government. Being present in Brussels allows the county to look for alternative funding sources and look for partners for pursuing a progressive agenda that is not welcome in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. The representatives of Polish regions did not explicitly express the role of their regional offices in this particular regard. However, there are indications that in some Polish regions, the situation may be similar to that known from Budapest. The extent to which party political incongruence influences more Polish regional representations seems to require further study.

The problems that the process of European integration faces in the last decade led Hooghe and Marks to put forward a hypothesis that the future of the EU has become somewhat uncertain. The post-functional perspective they proposed points out that it is no longer possible to unequivocally believe that the integration process would accelerate. The subsequent crises prove that it can take the opposite direction, i.e. they may trigger a slow process of disintegration (Hooghe & Marks, 2008). According to the mentioned authors, the popularity of the right-wing nationalist parties in some Member States and their particular stance on European integration is one of the reasons why the EU could disintegrate. The Fidesz party, and parties making up the United Right coalition in Poland, are among the parties that Hooghe and Marks mark as anti-European in this regard. In the post-functional perspective, what makes leaders like Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán different from other EU politicians is that they perceive European integration as beneficial, mainly in terms of economy, but at the same time do not hesitate to blantly use anti-European rhetoric for political gain when the opportunity arises.

The situation is similar in the case of regional mobilisation, where the Hungarian and Polish governments support their regions only when it does not threaten their political position on the internal political scene. Nationalist right-wing politicians are therefore able to go so far as to sabotage the Brussels paradiplomacy of those regions where it could weaken the opposition

regional government. Internal political conflicts, as Hooghe and Marks (2020) recently observed, would probably lead to strengthening the EU as a multi-level governed polity.

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