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## **Sub-national Units in Transition: IR Theory and Emerging Actors in a Multi-level Environment**

**Ibrahim Alper ARISOY<sup>1</sup>**

**Semra AYTUĞ<sup>2</sup>**

**Adriano GIOVANNELLI<sup>3</sup>**

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### ***Abstract***

*While European integration has gained momentum following the Treaty of Maastricht, a discourse on “Europe of the regions” has come to the fore, with the presumption that the sub-national units become, or are supposed to become, active dynamics of the integration process. However, this dominant discourse seems to take the “actorness” of sub-national units for granted, without questioning their rather passive position in the face of both national and supranational actors. In turn, this passive position gives rise to a reaction – albeit in some cases reluctantly – from the part of sub-national units. As a matter of fact, the research on which the present paper is based suggests that while their involvement in interaction at both national and supranational levels varies from country to country, and even from one region to another within any given member state, these units tend to “individualize” for certain reasons. Among others, the main factors of individualization are ever-growing competition and devolution of not only competences, but also public finance burdens which forces the sub-national units to act increasingly in individual terms. The paper aims to share some observations on the transformation of these units, focusing on the case of Italy.*

**Keywords:** *European integration, multi-level system, regionalization, sub-national units.*

**JEL Codes:** *F15, F42, F53, F59*

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1 Assist. Prof. Dr., Faculty of Business, Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey, [alper.arisoy@deu.edu.tr](mailto:alper.arisoy@deu.edu.tr)

2 Prof. Dr., Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey, [semra.aytug@deu.edu.tr](mailto:semra.aytug@deu.edu.tr)

3 Prof.Dr. Faculty of Political Science, University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy, [adriano.giovannelli@unige.it](mailto:adriano.giovannelli@unige.it)

## **1. Introduction**

One of the most striking aspects of the European Integration is the fact that the rapidly-changing political structure of the integration process implies and even requires changes in the internal structures of member states. It is also observed that member states' reactions in the face of this challenge differ to a great extent among each other. Nevertheless, the main trend seems to remain the same; i.e. almost all of the members of the EU-15 have undergone a certain process of transformation characterized by devolution, decentralization and even federalization. In this study, this trend is preferred to refer as "regionalization", since its conceptual scope ranges from simple technical reforms in favor of devolution to some radical movements of regionalism.

The process of regionalization implies a certain interaction between different layers of integration, namely local/regional, national and supranational. Although, the impact of European Integration on regionalization is quite obvious, nature of interaction between these layers seem to require further study. The main purpose of this paper is to share some observations on the changing nature of these layers – particularly those at sub-national level – focusing primarily on the case of Italy. However, the comparative approach adopted throughout the study is expected to shed light on the overall features of the regionalization process in the European integration.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

In spite of its effects on inter-governmental, it is observed that the main premises of international relations theory are not sufficiently integrated into the context of European integration [1]. Although multifaceted structure of the European integration requires "multiple models" [2], some scholars argue that in order not to lose the holistic perspective the gaps between these models/approaches should be bridged [1]. Besides, the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between the supranational and intergovernmental dynamics of the European integration [3] also implies the necessity of bridging the theoretical gap between the multilevel-governance based approaches and those based on international relations theory. Although "bridge-building" [1] is far beyond the scope of this study, assessing the basic premises of multi-level governance by means of an actor-based analysis is expected to be helpful for further research.

As a matter of fact, actor-based approaches that take into consideration the position of newly emerging sub-national units in relation to other levels, especially to the supranational one seem to be quite scarce. This scarcity becomes particularly dramatic in the face of the dominant discourse on “Europe of the regions” according to which sub-national units become – or should become – active dynamics of the integration process. It seems that this approach take the “actorness” of sub-national units for granted, without questioning their rather passive position in the face of both national and supranational actors. As a sort of extension of this discourse in theoretical field, multi-level governance approach also implies effective interaction between various politico-administrative levels, namely national, supranational and sub-national.

However, the fact that participation of sub-national units in multi-level policy areas is triggered and maintained by top-down dynamics originating mainly from supranational and to a certain extent national level led some scholars to question the efficiency of multi-level governance approach [4]. Besides, given that even the relationships between the key institutions of the EU itself are still in a state of flux, the multi-level policy-making environment seems even more unpredictable [2] and thus, open to discussion. This setting reaffirms the necessity of actor based analyses focusing on the circumstances and factors that give rise to the emergence of sub-national units.

Departing from this setting, the main question tackled throughout the research on which this paper is based was: “how might the classical IR theory work in a multi-level environment, with particular respect to the newly emerging actors that are supposed to behave in line with their own interests?”. Although the research has focused on Italian experience of regionalization/federalization, the comparative approach adopted throughout the study is expected to shed light on the overall features of the regionalization process in the European integration. As regards the theoretical tools, some variables offered by Jeffery as indicators of “actorness” were taken into consideration, such as constitutional background, existence of mechanisms allowing sub-national units direct access to the supranational platforms and their ability of entrepreneurship [4]. Therefore, after having located the Italian case in European context, the regionalization process will be summarized below with particular reference to these variables.

### **3. Italian Case in European Context**

Being re-organized as an ever-transforming “regional state” [5] following the end of the World War II and being the first Western European state to start the regionalization process, Italy seems as one of the most useful cases offering insights into the nature of regionalization in European integration [6]. Furthermore, given the fact that Italian regionalization gained momentum from the second half of the 90s onwards leading into a “federalizing process” [7] parallels to a great extent deepening of the EU from the same period onwards. As a result of these basic traits, Italy has been referred to as “geopolitics laboratory of Europe” [8].

Although the most decisive phase of regionalization in Italy has started with the so-called “second republic”, its roots are traced back to the formation of Italian Republic following the World War II and even before. As a matter of fact, given the highly fragmented geo-political structure of the peninsula prior to national unification, a federal political organization had always been on the agenda [9]. Following the unification under Piemontese leadership, the choice however was made in favor of unitary state. From then on, federalism/regionalism has almost always been a moot point. To quote from Stemmermann, as a result of the fact that pre-unification Italy’s funeral was not made in accordance with necessary rituals, federalism has been haunting the peninsula since then [10]. This argument, which at first sight seems to differentiate Italy from other Western European states in fact reaffirms the country’s special position as far as the European federalism is concerned. Because territorial frag mentality, roots of which are traced back to the fall of Western Roman Empire and which was at the highest degree in Italy, had always been a common trait in Western Europe. Although differed from each other, each Western European state had a certain degree of territorial frag mentality and national unification procedures brought along elimination of this phenomenon. In consequence, modernization became synonymous with elimination of regional differences [11]; regardless of their formal political structure, almost all Western European states opted for standardization and so did Italy. For this very reason, since as far back as the early modern period, there have always been federalist tendencies in Italy, aiming not only at the unification of peninsula, but also at wider European unity [9]. Needless to say, these tendencies were on the high during the early post-war period [9]. When Italian Constitution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1947, it was partly because of these Europe-wide federalist tendencies that Italy was

remodeled as a regional state. Thus, just like the parallelism between post-Maastricht process and the regionalization wave of the second republic, it was not a coincidence that Italy's reorganization as a regional state was corresponding to the very beginning of the European integration, idealized by founding fathers in line with federal ideas [9]. It was still not a coincidence that the leading figures of Italian federalism from Cattaneo to Spinelli [12] were also in favor of federal Europe. Thus, while the last phase of regionalization/federalization in Italy manifestly reflects the European dimension, a closer look to its early phases also suggests the relevance of wider European context.

At this point, an observation seems to support the paradoxical feature of federalism in both European and Italian contexts. Accordingly, both faces of federalism were characterized primarily by an elite-led approach and it can hardly be argued that they reflected the federalist aspirations stemming from grassroots. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the Republic, Italy had already become a highly unified political entity and the process of socio-economic integration went on throughout the republican period by means of transportation facilities, diffusion of mass media and internal migration from South to North [9]. In other words, while legislator was opting for regional restructuring of the country, national integration was also going on, and paradoxically the most decisive wave of regionalization has started when the country reached the highest level of social, cultural and linguistic standardization [13]. It is true that at the beginning of the First Republic, there were autonomist, irredentist and even separatist movements in bordering regions such as Val d'Aosta [14] and Trentino-Alto Adige (Südtirol – South Tyrol) [15], based mainly on ethno-linguistic divergence, but compared to the rest of the country, their part could easily be classified as negligible. Autonomist tendencies were existent also in the islands, particularly in Sicily, due to the role of local elites. In fact, the two major islands even adopted their own special status prior to the adoption of Italian Constitution, which were recognized afterwards by the Constituent Assembly [16]. It is worth attention that following the founding of the republic, autonomist tendencies in the islands disappeared almost totally, due to local elites' integration into the central administration, central administration's protective approach and economically harmonizing efforts towards mezzogiorno.

In a way, these seemingly negligible centrifugal tendencies during the founding of Italian republic have ironically crucial effects on the formation of

regional administrative structure in post-war Italy. In this context, it is argued that besides euro-federalist tendencies, post-fascist democratization efforts and weakness of the newly reorganized central government, balancing the centrifugal tendencies of peripheral regions – especially those, which ethnically differ from the rest of Italy – played crucial part in the decision of post-war restructuring of the country [16].

#### **4. Milestones of Italian Regionalization**

Consequently, while five regions were given special status (*statuto speciale*), creation of other 15 regions with ordinary status was foreseen by the Constitution. Each region was structured by means of a Regional Council as regional legislative organ to be organized by regional election and a regional government (*giunta regionale*). However, it was again due to the lack of efficient bottom-up dynamics and political consensus that although legally established by the 1947 Constitution, realization of the regional politico-administrative structure took place as late as 1972.

No matter which of the above-stated reasons were more effective on Constituent Assembly's preferences, following points seem to be clear:

- Just like the last phase of Italian regionalization, which paralleled the post-Maastricht period, also its initial phases have to do with the wider European context;
- Except for a few peripheral regions, there was no grassroots claim in favor of regionalism/federalism.

Regional councils of the 15 ordinary regions were elected in 1970 and each council drafted its own status in the following year, which by some is referred to as a sort of regional constitution [17]. Thus, “regional state” which was foreseen by the Constitution has come into force from 1972 onwards. However, in spite of all hopes and enthusiasm, lack of expertise, experience and regional government tradition led some scholars to question the efficiency of these new units [16]. Besides, there was a lack of interest from the part of people [9]. Although a certain process of devolution took place by means of several decrees throughout the seventies, it can hardly be argued that the regional level of government had started to fully function as foreseen by the Constituent Assembly. However, throughout the same period, a certain politico-administrative class has emerged at regional level, which seems to form the

very basis of emerging “actorness” [18]. However, a caveat should be made at this point that the newly emerging regional elite were basically bureaucratic in nature and far from being formed by grassroots dynamics.

The most decisive phase of Italian regionalization started at the second half of the 90s, following the internal political crisis which led to the collapse of political system and referred to as the end of the “first republic” [19]. During this period the so-called Bassanini Laws, named after the then finance minister Franco Bassanini introduced an extensive process of devolution aiming at relieving the central government of its bureaucratic and financial burdens. As stated by their author, Bassanini, the main purpose of these laws, accompanied by a vast wave of privatisation, were to “modernise” the state and leave it with its “core business” [20]. Some crucial aspects of these laws, which directly involve regionalization, are as follows:

- Subsidiarity was introduced as a means of competence and responsibility sharing between different layers of government [21], which is referred to as administrative federalism [20].
- Financing of the services delivered at regional level was devolved to the regions, introducing the “fiscal federalism”.
- In order to facilitate free entrepreneurship, state bureaucracy was simplified to a great extent. This process referred to as “delegificazione” involves deregulation in a wide range of fields.

The reform process gained momentum towards the end of 90s. While the Constitutional Law nr. 1/1999 introduced the direct election of the head of the regional government (giunta regionale), who until then was elected by the regional council, and brought several amendments on the adoption of regional status, the main turning point came along with the Constitutional Law nr. 3/2001. Most of the provisions amending the 5th title of the second part of the Italian Constitution on organization of regions, provinces and communes had already entered into force by means of ordinary laws. Thus in a way, the constitutional reform which brought Italy one step further towards federalism was mostly codification of the previously adopted provisions at constitutional level. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Constitutional Law nr. 3/2001 brought crucial changes in terms of discourse, reflecting a shift of understanding as far as the organization of the state is concerned. This attitude is strikingly reflected by the new wording of the article 114 of the Italian Constitution on organization of the state. Accordingly, while according to the

previous text the republic was divided into (si riparte) regions, provinces and communes, the new wording states that the Republic is constituted by communes, provinces, metropolitan cities, regions and the state [22]. Thus, the state (lo stato) was formulated in a rather narrow sense as the technical apparatus corresponding to the central government and one of the components of the political system itself. This attitude of the legislator which is referred to as the principle of “pariordinazione” (equal order) is interpreted as one of the basic features of the Law nr. 3/2001 [7]. In fact some scholars argue that with this principle, the Law nr. 3/2001 went far beyond the Bassanini laws as far as the “diminishing of the state” is concerned, given that within the context of Bassanini laws, the state was still hierarchically above the regions [16].

Among others, one of the most important provisions of this Law is that it acknowledged involvement of the regions in international relations. Accordingly, as far as the regions’ relations to the supranational institutions and their international trade relations are concerned, central government and the regions have parallel (concorrente) competences. It is also worth mentioning that with this constitutional reform, partition of competences between the state/central government and sub-national units was refashioned. Accordingly, while the competences belonging to regions were enumerated in the previous text of the article 117, the new formulation determined the competences of the central government, the rest belonging to the sub-national level. However, it should be noted that a considerable amount of these fields of competences such as customs, monetary policies, and environmental policies had already been transferred to supranational level by the time Law nr. 3/2001 was adopted. Needless to say some fields of competences are subject to being transferred to the supranational level. On the other hand, some crucial fields of competence which were already devolved to sub-national level and which were subject to deregulation as stated above have been enlarged by means of parallel competence principle. For instance, on the issues such as working life and job security, both central government and sub-national units have competences.

Constitutional reform took place in 2001 is interpreted as a certain phase of an open ended process, which is referred to as “federalizing process” [23]. As a matter of fact, although not directly specified, some crucial components of a federal state organization such as a second chamber representing the regions’ interests at national level were implied by the Law nr. 3/2001. In other words, this law had left some work to be completed later on. Until recently, a draft law



dealing with the “leftovers” of the law nr. 1/2003 including creation of a chamber of regions (senato federale) was on the agenda, however upon its approval by the parliament in November 2005 it was brought to referendum in July 2006 and declined by the Italian people.

Although the factors of regionalization, actors involved in the process and their impact can be identified to a certain extent from the brief account given so far, in order to trace the process with a more analytical perspective, it might be helpful to have a closer look at the factors lying behind this process, hoping to clarify the role and efficiency of certain actors – especially the sub-national ones. As a matter of fact, although the above account on the main stages of regionalization in Italy seems to provide the reader with a rough understanding of to what extent the regionalization/federalization process progressed in Italy, the position of sub-national units themselves are still unclear.

### **5. Factors of Italian Regionalization**

The main factors of regionalization in Italy can roughly be divided into two main groups, namely internal and external. Given the limited space of this paper, these factors will be referred to concisely below, focusing mainly on the points relevant to the basic arguments to be developed in the following section.

#### *5.1 Internal factors*

The main internal factors contributed to the regionalization process in Italy can be divided into three groups, namely structural background, political crisis following the end of the Cold War and regionalist movements. By “structural”, historical and geopolitical factors are intended, which form the background of regionalization process in Italy. As stated above, the key concept summarizing these factors is “territorial frag mentality”. This phenomenon is common to the most of Western Europe but it seems that in Italy its degree was among the highest. However, as stated above, throughout the national integration territorial frag mentality has been eliminated to a great extent. Thus, it is observed that the territorial frag mentality serves rather as a discourse tool for regionalization/federalization than as a genuine factor pressing for structural change. It seems that instrumental use of territorial frag mentality as centuries-old local/regional traditions of Europe is also valid in other regionalization experiences.

As a result of a wide range of internal and external factors for its part, crisis of the political system in Italy which ended with the collapse of pre-Cold War

party system had both triggering and accelerating effects on regionalization. The most apparent impact of the crisis is diffusion of the discourse on federalism. While at the beginning of nineties federalism mainly supported by regionalist parties was a rather marginal – if not totally unacceptable – discourse [24], with the so-called second republic and founding of the new party system, it has become integral part of the programme of main political parties [5]. At this point, it wouldn't be misleading to argue that from the second half of the nineties' onwards, federalism has started to be perceived as a sort of cure-all for a wide range of problems. Some argue that creation of regional level as an alternative area of politics was a strategy of the central political elite [16], which regarded the regional level as an area of maneuver [19]. These second group of factors do not seem to be common in the majority of other Western European countries experiencing regionalization.

As regards the regionalist movements, their direct effect on the process seems to be highly disputable, given their coalition-based hybrid structure, ideological ambiguities [25], lack of sufficient popular support etc. The case of Lega Nord which reflects these traits illustrates this argument to a great extent [25]. Although having achieved a success record especially due to electors' reaction against the collapse of central political system and due to the political vacuum during the crisis period [26], and although having contributed to the introduction of federalism in daily political jargon, Lega Nord could not continue its successes in the long run. Ironically, emerged as a marginal regionalist party with strong separatist tendencies it has turned into one of the system parties.

These arguments suggest that one should be cautious while qualifying the regionalist parties as sub-national actors. As a matter of fact, the case of Italy implies that while central political elite have "created" the regional level as, to quote from Parker "alternative topography of power" [26] regionalist parties utilized the regionalist discourses in an instrumental way so as to play to the center and participate in the government coalitions there. According to this analysis, in both cases the main concern is to gain power at the center.

### *5.2 External factors*

There are two major external factors of regionalization in Italy, which are closely interrelated in terms of consequences, and thus do not totally exclude each other: globalization and European integration. Given the obvious link

between structural transformation process brought about by the “new economy”, changing production styles and decentralizing trends all over the globe [27], it might well be argued that reforms of the nineties brought about by Bassanini Laws reflect the impact of globalization on regionalization in Italy. But as argued above, these reforms were also direct consequences of post-Single Act and post-Maastricht Europeanization in Italy, as has been the case elsewhere in Western Europe [28]. Given the fact that creation of single market brought about the challenge of international competition, entrepreneurship, privatization (as horizontal subsidiarity), rationalization of production, flexibility and deregulation emerged as the key concepts of a new understanding of public administration. Needless to say pressures originating from “Economic and Monetary Union” and “Growth and Stability Pact” were also affective in emergence of these conditions [29]. Thus, above mentioned effects of globalization was felt via European dimension, and while public administration were perceived like business administration, newly emerging sub-national units started to be regarded as the main bases of economic development and competitiveness [30]. Especially competition formed the main impetus of this process, along which not only enterprises but also regions found themselves in growing competitive pressures both within the country and in the EU. This situation is also observed elsewhere in Western Europe, the most striking indicator of which is the German transition from cooperative to competitive federalism [31]. Needless to say, coping with competitive pressures brought about the above mentioned neo-liberal solutions devolving to the sub-national units not only competences but also financial burdens of public services including the primary ones such as health care. With this approach, referred to as “fiscal federalism” newly emerging bureaucratic elites of the sub-national units appear to be left to their own devices, being in a situation which requires them to act autonomously on behalf of their region. It seems that it is this breaking point that these units found themselves in a certain process of individualization.

Needless to say, while central government’s role on regional development EU’s was diminishing, EU’s regional policies and structural funds brought about new perspectives for the regions, leading them to search for EU funding. Consequently, like many other European counterparts, Italian regions started to search for direct contact with EU institutions, particularly with the Commission. At this stage, lack of sufficient and prompt information flow on European programme, funds, calls for tenders and proposals accelerated this process [6]. While Committee of the Regions established as a part of the strategy for

creating “Europe of the Regions” [32] formed one of the major communication channels in regions’ orientation towards Brussels, acting also individually, many among them opened liaison offices in EU’s capital. These offices are referred to as “mini embassies” [18] or “Para diplomatic” representatives [] with a certain enthusiasm and wishful thinking. However, given that their legal status, names and organizational structure highly differ from each other, such an attitude seems to be quite misleading. As a matter of fact, except for certain German Länder, the basic function of these offices is to gather information on EU programme, calls for tenders, proposals etc. and lobbying for EU funds rather than directly involve into the decision making procedures, or negotiations at supranational level [30]. In other words, either individually by means of these offices or collectively by through the Committee of the Regions, although regions involve into an international environment at supranational level, it can hardly be argued that they behave as “international actors” beside national representatives. Besides, sub-national units’ collective participation in policy-making process through official channels seem to be problematic, given the highly technical character of the policy areas coordinated as supranational level, which in many cases require specific expertise. This situation puts the sub-national units in a passive position in the face of their supranational interlocutors, who due to their technical knowledge are referred to as epistemic communities [33].

Although further research might be required for a detailed assessment, it seems that these conditions are more or less common for other regions in the EU. In many cases, created directly due to the requirements of EU regional policy sub-national units seem to be exposed to similar conditions, especially the process of “actorisation” is concerned.

## **6. Conclusions**

The above account of regionalization in Italy, which has considerable common points with other relevant experiences in Western Europe seem to provoke re-assessment of the discourses such as “sub-national mobilization” and “Europe of the regions”. Accordingly, these discourses, which seem to reflect wishful thinking, rather than what actually happens on the ground seem to be challenged by following premises:

- Although regionalization has bases deeply rooted in the history of Western Europe, it is mainly triggered by Europeanizing and globalizing tendencies, rather than bottom-up pressure;
- Rather than sub-national mobilization, it is central governments' and supranational authorities' policies that lead the sub-national units into individualization/actorisation in an inciting – if not practically coercive – manner. Thus, to behave individually seems to become a necessity in order to survive the new politico-economic environment rather than a choice in itself;
- Although the leading discourse imply effective participation of sub-national units' in the European integration, given the prevalence of technique-intensive issues and so-called epistemic communities as their interlocutors at supranational level, their position seems a fortiori passive.

Nevertheless, these observations do not imply total lack of sub-national dynamics in the process. By the time regionalization gained momentum, a certain regional politico-administrative class has emerged. Although peoples' interest in regional structures still seems to be negligible, this flourishing regional bureaucracy becomes the core of “actorness”, which is a matter of degree determined by a range of variables such as existence of mechanisms allowing sub-national units' direct access to the supranational platforms, their ability of entrepreneurship, competitiveness, constitutional background etc. Since this “matter of degree” implies a dynamic process in itself, the term “actorisation” seems useful to denominate the individualization of sub-national units.

To sum up, although it is far from being clear to what extent the sub-national actors become real actors at supra-national level, what seems definite is the fact that a certain process of “actorisation” takes place. Nevertheless, it still remains to be seen whether this externally-initiated process might generate genuine actors behaving on their own interests in such a complex environment and whether they might be able to transform this environment, rather than being transformed by it.

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