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The European Union, subnational mobilization and state rescaling in small unitary states: a comparative analysis

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ABSTRACT

This special issue addresses the impact of the European Union (EU) on subnational mobilization in small unitary states. Located at the intersection between varied contributions from the literatures on multilevel governance and Europeanization, it offers a new theoretical framework to account for state rescaling processes in small unitary states. By means of a comparative analysis of eight small unitary states, this collection shows that the impact of the EU on state rescaling processes is filtered through domestic mediating factors which can lead to three possible outcomes: (i) decentralization, (ii) recentralization or (iii) no change. It concludes that ‘hybridity’ is the most appropriate concept for capturing the compound nature of the European polity, in which local and regional tiers of government have secured new opportunities for influencing policies and making autonomous decisions. These impacts are conditioned by nuanced domestic mediating factors without challenging the overall dominance of the nation-state.

KEYWORDS European Union; subnational mobilization; state rescaling; hybridity; small unitary states

The European Union, subnational mobilization and state rescaling in small unitary states: is there still scope for a new research agenda?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the European Union (EU) emerged as a political opportunity structure allowing subnational authorities (SNAs) to escape domestic constraints in policy-making, subnational mobilization became an unmistakable feature of European politics (Marks and McAdam 1996; Mazey and Richardson 2001; Princen and Kerremans 2008). The notion of a ‘Europe of the Regions’ had been present in certain strands of European federalism already since the 1960s, but the starting point for the contemporary emergence of Europe as a political opportunity structure for

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SNAs was the European structural policy developed in the 1980s, whereby reforms in structural funds gave regions a real voice in policy-making (Hooghe 1995; Hooghe and Marks 1996; Marks and Hooghe 2004). The introduction of the principles of subsidiarity and partnership with the Treaty of Maastricht and the growing institutionalization of the European polity in a federal direction (Loughlin 1996a) additionally contributed to the consolidation of this trend. According to some of the more exaggerated interpretations of this scenario, nation-states were destined to be replaced by regions of various kinds. For some authors, the age of globalization and the complex interdependencies among states indicated that the nation-state was in decline or even disappearing (Ohmae 1995). In Europe, some argued that both the EU and the regions were 'squeezing' the nation-state. The state, caught in the middle, saw its power diminished from above by the EU (Jones and Keating 1995; Börzel 2005) and from below by subnational authorities (Marks et al. 1996).

Perhaps the most fruitful concept to emerge from these contributions was that of 'multilevel governance' (Hooghe and Marks 2001); indeed, a veritable 'academic industry' has developed around this idea. Although few if any serious academics believed that the state would wither away, the regional phenomenon was definitely here to stay. At the very least, regions were becoming political actors in their own right, alongside the state and the (then) increasingly powerful European institutions. Marks summarized and clarified these developments with his seminal concept of multilevel governance – or, as Hooghe later described it, a 'Europe *with* the regions' (Hooghe 1995; Hooghe and Marks 1996); other authors (and regional activists) contended that, in a federal Europe, regions would serve as a kind of 'third level' of European government similar to the German federal system (Bullman 1996; Christiansen 1996; Loughlin 1996a, 1996b; Jeffery 1997, 2000).

In the EU, the idea of a 'Europe of the regions' (Jeffery 2002) prompted subnational authorities to seek some kind of institutional representation within the EU. These efforts seemed for a time to bear fruit: the Maastricht Treaty, for example, allowed for the creation of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and authorized regional governments to represent Member State interests within the Council of Ministers (Keating, Hooghe, and Tatham 2015). As subnational governments increasingly perceived that resources for regional and local development could be obtained from 'Brussels', the number of regional offices in the European capital mushroomed. At times, depending on the constitutional territorial set-up of the state (unitary, decentralized or federal), regions conducted their own 'para-diplomatic' activities with – or sometimes without – the consent of central governments (Hooghe and Marks 1996; Jeffery 1997; Aldecoa and Keating 1999; Marks, Haesly, and Mbaye 2002; Tatham 2008, 2010; Rowe 2011). At the domestic level, the reforms of the structural funds in the 1980s and the adoption of the principles

of partnership, programming and additionality also motivated the participation of SNAs in the new EU cohesion policy administration system. The principle of subsidiarity also called for action at the lowest political level, favouring SNA involvement in the policy process. However, despite this vast mobilization and various efforts towards the institutionalization of regional interests, two decades of research (as published in the journal *Regional and Federal Studies*, among others), have produced scant convincing theoretical or empirical evidence that either the 'bottom-up' or the 'top-down' subnational mobilization encouraged by the EU has challenged the overall dominance of the nation-states.

Indeed, although the multilevel governance (MLG) approach has shed new light on the dynamics of network governance in multilevel polities, it has been unable to advance either the theoretical conceptualization or our practical understanding of subnational engagement in the EU (Moore 2008a; Pitschel and Bauer 2009). In other words, the MLG concept has not produced any theory of subnational mobilization. Although it is undeniable that the EU has contributed to the erosion of the capacity of the state to monopolize all relationships between its constituent territories and the outside world, we still lack a theoretical account that can fully sustain why the EU has not led to the fading away of the nation-state as an institution or a concentration of power (Keating 2008, 630). As a result, contrary to early expectations, skepticism towards the EU has increased across most of the EU's regions, both old and new (Elias 2008; Keating 2008; Moore 2008b; Colino, Molina, and Hombrado 2014; Tatham 2014), and state-centric approaches (regional influence mediated through the central executive) have become the dominant strategy – though not the exclusive one – for regional mobilization in the EU (Swenden and Bolleyer 2014, 383). Additionally, although country case studies seem to concur that the EU affects federal and regionalized states differently than unitary states (Börzel 1999; Schmidt 1999; Marks et al. 1996; Keating, Hooghe, and Tatham 2015), there is neither an over-arching theoretical narrative (Fleurke and Willemsse 2007, 70; Loughlin, Kincaid, and Swenden 2013) nor an encompassing comparative analysis that can capture the heterogeneity of the state rescaling processes that occur following the accession of small unitary states' membership to the EU. Thus, keeping in mind the theoretical and empirical lacunae found in the literature, the aim of this Special Issue is to offer a new theoretical framework which will account for the impact of the EU on state rescaling processes in small unitary states during the implementation and pre-legislative phases of the EU decision-making process. Whilst the former is more 'top-down' and takes place at the domestic level; the latter is more 'bottom-up' and takes place at the European arena.

To this end, the issue offers a systematic comparative analysis of eight small unitary states, including old and new member states with distinctive regional/local levels of authorities. It features contributions that will concentrate either

on 'bottom-up' (Portugal), or 'top-down' processes (Finland, Greece and Estonia) or on both (the Netherlands, Ireland, Sweden and the Czech Republic). The focuses of the papers vary from a broad overview of how SNAs mobilize to promote their interests to a more specific analysis of particular policies (e.g. regional policy and/or cohesion policy).

The shortcomings of the literature on subnational mobilization in small unitary states

With regard to the theoretical relevance of the major contributions in the literature, multilevel governance approaches and Europeanization studies are most pertinent. The MLG approach, one of the first to focus on the role of subnational actors in the European policy process, has proven to be highly productive, both conceptually and empirically, whereas the Europeanization literature provides more refined tools of analysis to explain institutional change. Notably, the MLG approach has only described sub-national mobilization, but it has not developed a clear explanation of the phenomenon (De Rooij 2002, 448). As suggested by Jeffery (2000, 3), the contributions of MLG scholarship must be complemented by a more systematic consideration of domestic factors in order to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding the catalysts of subnational mobilization. In this respect, probably the most interesting theoretical contribution of the Europeanization literature is the concept of 'mediating factors'. More concretely, within the vast literature on Europeanization, the analysis of centre-periphery relations has primarily shown that the EU has caused some convergence among the member states, but that its impact is strongly mediated by pre-existing domestic factors (Bursens 2007, 119; Bursens and Deforche 2008; Bauer and Börzel 2010). As noted by Risse and his collaborators, in cases of high adaptational pressures, the presence of facilitating factors is crucial for the degree to which domestic actors adjust to Europe (2001, 9). In a similar vein, scholars from the fields of regionalism (Jeffery 1997; Keating, Hooghe, and Tatham 2015) and multilevel governance (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Bache and Flinders 2004) have also argued that the impact of the EU on subnational mobilization – as well as the extent to which it induces state rescaling processes (Keating 2013) – is very much dependent on mediating domestic factors, also termed intra-state factors (Jeffery 2000, 3).

On the empirical side, most major studies, however, have focused either on federal or regionalized states – such, as Belgium (Bursens 2007), Germany (Jeffery 1997) and Spain (Börzel 2002a; Bourne 2003), or on large unitary states with legislative or non-legislative regions such as the United Kingdom and France (Kassim 2003; Schmidt 2003). Small European unitary states have been relatively neglected in this regard; when studies have considered them, the research agenda has largely been confined to single or

small-N comparative analysis (Kettunen and Kungla 2005; Fleurke and Willemse 2006, 2007; Kettunen and Kull 2009; Tatar 2011; Kull and Tatar 2015; Oikonomou 2016) or to an East/West comparison (Sturm and Dieringer 2005; O'Dwyer 2006; Pitschel and Bauer 2009; Scherpereel 2010). However, small unitary states are worth examining in their own right, in part, because of their size, which in this research will be understood in terms of their population (the case studies here have population size ranging from 1.3 million to 16.5 million). Although a small population might be predicted to correlate with relative homogeneity, thus lessening the necessity of differentiated territorial governance, regional responses to the EU within these states have in fact been variable and sometimes even contradictory.

Building on the conceptual division between 'regulatory' (i.e. influence-seeking) and 'financial' (i.e. fund-raising) mobilization proposed by Callanan and Tatham (2014), Oikonomou (2016, 85) argued that the Greek regional offices were unable to exert influence due to a strong national presence and the limited scope of competences falling under European responsibility, primarily cohesion policy. Constraints on human and financial resources also contributed to their inability to succeed. Currently, only one liaison office is still in operation, primarily owing to a coalition-building strategy that was established between municipalities in 1996. Between 1999 and 2006, three Greek regions attempted to establish their representation, but failed because of a dearth of financial and human resource. In the case of the Netherlands, De Rooij (2002) showed that the EU has had either a constraining or an enhancing effect on Dutch municipalities due to differences in resources and leadership styles. Similarly, at the domestic level in the same country, Fleurke and Willemse (2006, 2007) concluded that the European influence has been concurrently constraining (at the provincial level) and enhancing (at the municipal level) due to differences in size, the amount of European funding received and the scope of SNAs competences falling under European responsibility. In a similar vein, in the case of Estonia, Kull and Tatar (2015) argued that the EU has scarcely had any effect on the adjustment of local-government structures due to a robust centralist path dependency in policy-making and difficulties in capacity-building (namely, lack of technical skills and the inability to develop long-term plans) and a strong fiscal centralization.

In sum, all small European unitary states – both old and new – have felt the pressure to decentralize but the outcomes across the states are significantly varied (Fleurke and Willemse 2006, 2007; Kull and Tatar 2015). However, most studies to date have failed to deliver a systematic account of the mediating domestic factors that can support these heterogeneous influences of European membership on state rescaling processes in the two phases of the EU decision-making procedure. In this respect, we believe that there is still room for a research agenda which can extend our understanding of this under-researched topic.

Theoretical framework and key concepts

Against this theoretical and empirical backdrop, this Special Issue seeks to bone existing theoretical attempts to explain the indirect impact of Europe on top-down and bottom-up subnational mobilization in small unitary states. The MLG approach provides the foundation for this collection, as it acknowledges the growing role of sub-national actors in European decision-making in a system of continuous negotiation between European, national and sub-national governments (Bache and Flinders 2004, 3). In a complementary fashion, the Europeanization literature supplies the bridging concept of 'mediating domestic factors' which will establish the missing link between MLG and the grand theories of European integration as set out by neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. In other words, this bridging concept will allow us to confirm the gradual seizure of the central state's monopoly on policy-making by subnational actors, and it will provide us with the missing explanation for why national governments remain 'the most important pieces of the European puzzle' (Hooghe and Marks 2001, 3). Finally, in order to resolve the theoretical challenge, the concept of 'hybridity' proposed by Loughlin (2009, 68) will enable us to operationalize the overall neutral impact of the EU on national state sovereignty. This idea will also permit us to fully capture the compound nature of the European polity, in which local and regional tiers of government have effectively gained new influence on the decision-making process, albeit conditioned by nuanced domestic mediating factors. Overall, through the use of this hybridity, we wish to demonstrate that the EU has affected national state sovereignty, but that the overarching impact can be described as a shift from the primacy of a hierarchical, top-down, 'principal-agent' model of government to one that is characterized (*op.cit.*) by a tendency towards the absence of hierarchy (although has not totally disappeared). However, this does not mean that the new (non-hierarchical) model has replaced the old (hierarchical) one. Rather, there is now a preponderance of a 'hybrid' European type of state, in which the old and new models co-exist in widely varying combinations, broadly in accordance with nuanced mediating domestic factors, though without threatening the centrality of state governments.

With regard to the mediating factors identified in the literature, the contributions are numerous but fragmented, complicating attempts to provide systematic accounts. The vast majority of scholars emphasizes the role of structural factors (Jeffery 1997, 2000; Sturm and Dieringer 2005). These include the quality of intergovernmental relations (that is, the extent to which SNAs are embedded in formal and informal domestic networks), the legal-constitutional powers of SNAs (their level of authority) and the level of fragmentation of subnational structures. A fourth structural factor concerns the perceived 'legitimacy' of SNAs, which can be identified as being

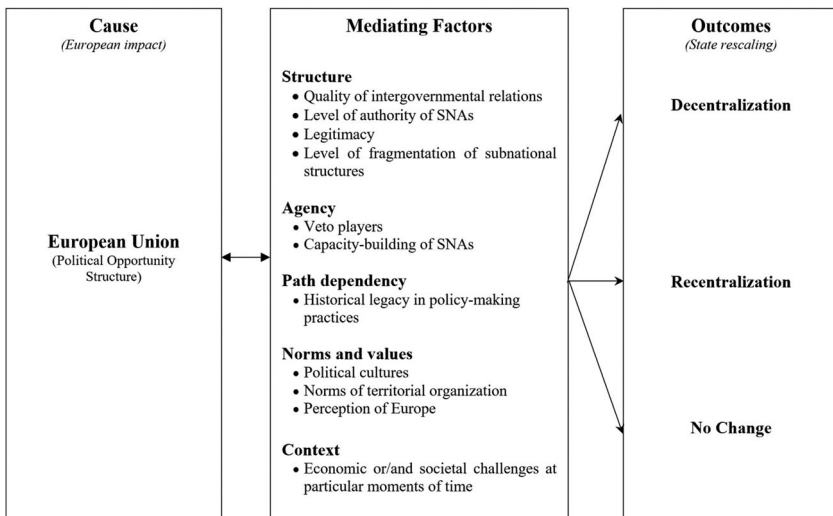
democratically (if SNAs are elected bodies); politically (if SNAs have the competences to decide) or culturally rooted (if SNAs represent firmly established civil societies or/and cultural identities).

A second group of factors relates to the importance of agency. In this broader category, Risse and his collaborators (Risse, Cowles, and Caporaso 2001) have stressed the different levels of empowerment of actors and learning processes, whereas others have considered veto players in the political system that can be linked to changing political preferences due to party competition between national and subnational levels of governments (Pitschel and Bauer 2009) or to changes in governments (Vink 2005). More recently, Tatham has added further precision to the role of party politics in dynamics of territorial mobilization in the pre-legislative phase (Tatham 2017). In this regard, we will expect party political incongruence between state executives and subnational governments to increase bypassing and decrease cooperation. Conversely, we will expect party congruence between state executives and subnational governments to reinforce the use of intra-state channels and increase cooperation. Agency can also be framed in terms of the capacity-building (Hooghe and Marks 2001) or the administrative capacity of SNAs to adapt (Jeffery 2000, 14), which emphasizes the importance of political/human/economic resources (De Rooij 2002; Donas and Beyer 2013; Oikonomou 2016) in the pro-active engagement of SNAs in policy-making. These resources can be assessed in terms of a pro-active political leadership using variables such as personal authority, interests and the personal commitment of *notables* in European institutions and in coalition-building strategies (Jeffery 2000, 17). These particular elements have been phrased in various ways by other contributions. Héritier et al. (2001), for example, have similarly underlined the role of executive leadership, though using a different terminology. Likewise, SNAs which possess greater resources are expected to engage more pro-actively in strategies of coalition-building in transnational European networks or associations (Bomberg and Peterson 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2001) and are more likely to establish liaison offices in Brussels.

In addition to the arguments listed above, a third group of scholars has pointed to the relevance of path dependencies (that is, the predominance of historical legacies in policy-making practices), whereas a fourth has instead stressed the role of norms and values (Olsen 2002; Bulmer 2007). In this fourth group of factors, we will highlight the significance of nuanced political cultures in interest mediation – specifically, the ‘consensus-building cultures’ found in pluralist systems, as opposed to the ‘non-participatory cultures’ that are more often present in statist systems (Santiago López and Tatham 2018). Our analysis of this group will also address how the perception of Europe (positive versus negative) can influence state rescaling processes (Börzel 2002b). A final issue considered in the category of norms and values deals with specific norms of territorial organization, namely the option for a

territorial approach to policy-making in opposition to a sectoral approach. Finally, in the fifth and last group of mediating factors, we will examine the impact of changing contextual factors at particular moments in time (Graziano 2003) such as periods of social challenges, prosperity or economic crisis or even globalization.

In general terms, the novelty of this Special Issue is two-fold: theoretical and empirical. These two dimensions will be mutually enriching, as they will provide both theoretical and empirical evidence of state rescaling processes in small unitary states. At the theoretical level, the Special Issue will add further precision to the existing theoretical explanations that are widely dispersed across different bodies of literatures; at the empirical level, it will expand the limited number of studies on small unitary states carried out in this particular field of research. Our theoretical framework builds on the mediating factors that have already been identified in the literature. These factors have been classified into five categories of factors – structure, agency, path dependency, norms and values and contextual factors – which have been further differentiated into sub-categories (see [Model 1](#) below). Moreover, as initially suggested by Bourne (2003), the impact of the EU on state rescaling processes has been divided into three possible outcomes: (i) decentralization (which can be understood as an enhancing effect of the EU on the participation of SNAs in policy-making); (ii) recentralization (which can be understood as a constraining effect on such participation) or (iii) no change (which can be understood as the absence of any impact of the EU on the participation of SNAs in policy-making).



Model 1. Theoretical framework.

In this Special Issue, we expect that the influence of the EU on state rescaling processes will lead to one of several outcomes: 'decentralization', 'recentralization' or 'no change'. We also expect these trends to vary over time and across tiers of governments (local and regional). Finally, we expect the level of authority of SNAs to be the best predictor of SNA empowerment, although secondary mediating factors may be identified as intertwined factors that must not be neglected in the overall picture.

Methods and case selection

For methodological purposes, the EU will be considered as the independent variable in our analysis; state rescaling processes will be treated as our dependent variable. We are fully aware that this clear-cut division is somewhat contested in Europeanization studies, as Europeanization processes are traditionally regarded as two-way streets consisting of mutual interdependencies (Börzel 2002b). As noted by Caporaso (2007, 27), the basic model states that European integration leads to adjustments, but these adjustments are mediated by domestic-level factors (mediating factors) which ultimately explain the heterogeneity of state rescaling processes (centralization, decentralization and no change outcomes). In other words, technically speaking, the model is close-looped: the domestic mediating factors feed back into the process of Europeanization, since these factors interfere in the causal link that can be established between the EU (independent variable) and the state rescaling processes (dependent variables). Consequently, the constraining or enhancing nature of the domestic mediating factors will be considered as the mediating variable that intervenes in the relationship between the EU (cause) and state rescaling processes (outcomes) in the pre-legislative and implementation phases of policy-making.

The countries have been selected on the basis of two relevant criteria: first, they all fall under the category of 'small' in terms of their population, and second, they are all considered 'unitary states' with regard to the level of autonomy granted to regional and/or local levels of governments. This sample of cases will also include two small unitary states with regions that enjoy a special autonomous status¹ (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010, 44), specifically the Portuguese autonomous regions of Azores and Madeira and the autonomous island of Åland in Finland. As a result, this Special Issue will examine both strong and weak regional authorities. By 'strong' regions, we mean 'constitutional regions', or regions with law-making powers, as in the case of the three autonomous regions mentioned above. Conversely, by 'weak' regions, we mean 'administrative regions' that do not possess legislative powers (Moore 2008a), such as our study cases of the Netherlands, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Greece, mainland Portugal, Estonia and the Czech Republic. Additionally, although the regional dimension will be emphasized,

the concept of subnational mobilization will encompass both regional and local tiers of government, since the regional tier is absent in Estonia. Finally, in this Special Issue, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were accepted, provided that they remained within the analytical framework so as to guarantee the analytical coherence of the collection.

Overview of the contributions

The Special Issue consists of eight contributions covering a range of small EU unitary states. These eight contributions can be further divided into regional clusters (Scandinavian, Anglo, Low Countries, Mediterranean, Central and Eastern Europe). In the first group, we consider the cases of Sweden and Finland. In the second group, the situation in Ireland is investigated. In the third group, we examine the Netherlands. In the fourth, we address the cases of Portugal and Greece. Finally, in the last group, we explore the cases of the Czech Republic and Estonia.

In the first contribution, Lidström examines the extent to which the position of the Swedish state vis-à-vis the EU has been mediated by domestic factors since Sweden joined the organization in 1995. This article provides an overview of bottom-up activism, subnational capacity-building and the top-down influence of the EU on conditions at the local and regional levels in Sweden. Lidström argues that the traditionally strong position of subnational authorities in Sweden, its institutional and administrative culture and a favourable economic situation have all affected the EU's impact, enabling local and regional governments to be empowered at the domestic level and to bypass the national state in their relations with the EU. Despite the general empowerment of SNAs in both phases of the EU decision-making process, however, they have not challenged the overall dominance of the national state.

In the second contribution, Sjöblom analyzes the Finnish reform processes and specifies the mediating domestic factors which account for the indirect impact of the EU on subnational mobilization at the domestic level. He argues that although a European understanding of regions is clearly visible in subnational policies, the impact of the EU is strongly mediated by domestic factors, in particular by the interaction between contextual factors, institutional norms and path-dependent developments. Despite extensive territorial and administrative reform processes, the regions have not yet gained influence in their relations with the Finnish state.

In the third contribution, Callanan addresses both the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' effects of the EU at regional and local levels in Ireland. He shows that the experience of Irish territorial governance suggests that Europeanization pressures to adapt in both of these perspectives have been filtered through a wide range of mediating factors including domestic

structures, agency and path dependency, but also norms and values. In addition, the recent economic downturn of 2008 and the arrival of the Troika in 2010 resulted in some financial decentralization but also entailed a degree of functional centralization. Overall, Callanan concludes that Irish subnational mobilization on EU issues has been rather modest and has not threatened the position of the central government. Indeed, the EU has had both decentralizing and recentralizing effects in terms of local government and mild regionalization effects at the regional level.

In the fourth contribution, Groenleer and Hendriks investigate the factors that have promoted subnational mobilization in the Netherlands, leading to the reconfiguration of central-local relations as a reaction to the EU. In particular, they explore the process by which rescaling has taken place in the Dutch case, with 'the region' seeming to gain in importance, as well as the specific combination of historically-institutional and situationally-functional factors that (in addition to the role of political actors) have driven this process. Updating and complementing previous studies on the Netherlands (De Rooij 2002; Fleurke and Willemse 2006, 2007), Groenleer and Hendriks show that interactions with the EU have led to 'decentralization' and 'recentralization' at the domestic level, as well as to 'decentralization' and 'no change' in the European arena. However, factors of a mainly domestic nature have played a crucial role in the foreground, whereas the EU, serving as a force of change with regard to subnational mobilization and the reconfiguration of central-local relations, has remained in the background.

In the fifth contribution, Antunes and Magone provide an in-depth analysis of the mediating factors that explain how Portuguese regional entities – the five deconcentrated Regional Coordination and Development Commissions (CCDRs) in mainland Portugal and the autonomous regions of Azores and Madeira – have engaged in the EU for national bypassing. By means of a comparative analysis, and applying a bottom-up approach, their article demonstrates that institutional structures, agency and contextual factors are the most relevant factors in explaining the two distinctive strategies of Portuguese regional mobilization in the EU. They conclude that, in both cases, the EU has not challenged the central state; however, whereas the CCDRs have remained on the margins of the European system of multilevel governance, the autonomous regions of Azores and Madeira have succeeded in full participation. These findings corroborate the conceptual division between the 'financial' and 'regulatory' forms of territorial mobilization proposed by Callanan and Tatham (2014).

In the sixth contribution, Hlepas investigates the Greek case, privileging a top-down analysis. He argues that Greek response to European integration and its effects on domestic governance has not been a linear process over time. Indeed, the EU has promoted both decentralization and recentralization trends, but these opposing territorial dynamics can only be fully understood

in the light of multiple mediating factors ranging from institutional structures (level of authority of SNAs) to agency (veto players), norms and values (administrative culture and perception of Europe), path dependencies (historical legacies in policy-making) and contextual factors of either prosperity or economic crisis. He concludes that although we can identify a certain weakening of state influence in subnational governance between 1981 (when Greece joined the EC) and the first years of the economic crisis, the dominant role of the national government has not truly been challenged.

In the seventh contribution, Lysek and Ryšavý scrutinize the Czech Republic's two distinct levels of SNA – regions and municipalities – through both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. They argue that European pressures for institutional and political change have largely been mediated by agency factors (veto players in the political system and SNAs' capacity-building) at the regional level, and by institutional/normative factors (limited scope of authority and fragmented municipal structures) at the municipal level. The authors show that the regions experienced both recentralized and decentralized forms of EU Funds management that was mirrored by bottom-up mobilization in Brussels accordingly. Overall, they conclude that at the regional level, empowerment has been very modest and has varied over time, but at the local level, European Regional Policy has helped to empower the fragmented municipalities (albeit only temporarily). These findings confirm the general assumptions of Fleurke and Willemse (2006, 2007). Lysek and Ryšavý conclude that despite evidence of mild regional and local empowerment in both phases of the EU decision-making process, the Czech state has remained the main gatekeeper, which suggests an overall neutral impact of the EU on state rescaling processes.

In the eighth and final contribution, Sootla and Kattai analyze the Estonian case, arguing that the impact of the EU on devolutionary trends at the domestic level has been modest or even non-existent. These conclusions confirm the findings of Kull and Tatar (2015). According to Sootla and Kattai, this outcome is largely due to institutional/normative factors (limited authority of SNAs and fragmented local municipalities), agency factors (local veto players resisting the influence of the EU and even reinforcing state authority in a recentralization tendency) and path dependencies in policy-making (which restrict the participation of the local tier in central-local relations). Thus, in the Estonian case, multiple legacies from the pre-democratic period have played a more salient role than pressure to adapt coming from the EU.

Finally, building on the conclusions of the eight articles in this collection, in the final contribution, the editors compare and contrast the eight individual chapters, linking these contributions to the wider framework that was set out in this introduction. They close this Special Issue with an overview of key findings and the consequences for the idea of a 'Europe of the Regions' in small unitary states.

Note

1. According to Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel (2010, 44), special autonomous regions differ from asymmetrical regions in that their statute is sui generis: they are exempt from the country-wide constitutional framework, and they receive special treatment in the constitution and in statutory law. Examples are Åland (Finland), Greenland and the Faroe Islands (Denmark), and the Azores and Madeira (Portugal).

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