

(IN)CONSISTENCY AND (IN)EFFICIENCY OF THE CZECH REGIONAL POLICY IN THE 1990's

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Abstract: The article firstly focuses on development of inter-regional disparities in the Czech Republic under the transition. Secondly, the scale of Czech inter-regional disparities in the rate of unemployment is compared with those of the EU countries. On the basis of analytical effort performed on the NUTS II, NUTS III and NUTS IV levels the conclusion is derived that contrary to the common perception the Czech Republic suffers from sizeable regional disparities. The second part of the paper is devoted to critical examination of the current status of Czech regional policy and its interconnections with the EU cohesion policy. Finally, some solutions to present problems are suggested.

Key words: disparities, regional policy, European Union, NUTS regions

1. DEVELOPMENT OF INTER-REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC UNDER THE TRANSITION

The Czech Republic entered the transformation period as a country with relatively minor inter-regional disparities. This was the result of strong equalization policy pursued under communism. Nivelization policy was quite effective but very inefficient and leading towards more and more overt lagging behind the west European countries in the sphere of societal development. Small inter-regional disparities at the beginning of the transition, unusually low rate of unemployment, proclaimed neoliberal policy rejecting state intervention into the economy are the main reasons why regional policy was at the very bottom of the list of governmental priorities in the first half of 1990s (Blažek,

1999). However, shortly after the beginning of transformation processes, the inter-regional disparities swiftly emerged and grown further on the basis of the whole complex of interconnected factors such as economic structure, industrial and entrepreneurial tradition, geographic position, educational structure, development of technical infrastructure and the state of environment (Blažek, 1996, Hampl 1999). Nevertheless, those days government of the Czech Republic did not pay sufficient attention to gradually accumulating regional problems and did not launch any relevant regional policy.

Since the middle 90s, the situation has started to change profoundly. The rate of economic growth plummeted and reached even negative values, the rate of unemployment more than doubled between December 1995 and December 1998 and in several districts reached levels calling for serious concern (i.e. more than 15%). Important developments occurred also on the Czech political scene (gradual fading of once very fashionable neoliberal doctrine). In the same time, the pressure stemming from the EU has increased considerably (for more see e.g. The Opinion of the European Commission on the Czech Republic, chapter on regional policy, EC, 1997). Changing economic and political situation in the Czech Republic is having strong regional impacts. Therefore, in the next section, the development of inter-regional disparities will be outlined.

In January 1999, after a period of difficult negotiations, an agreement between the Czech Republic and European Commission on the delineation of the hierarchy NUTS regions was reached. In the EU, the NUTS regions are used as a comparative basis in the sphere of policy of economic and social cohesion and for statistical purposes. In the Czech Republic, according to this agreement, 8 NUTS II regions and 14 NUTS III regions were defined. The Czech districts (77) are considered as regions NUTS IV. In respect of the fact, that the Czech Republic (with the likely exception of Prague) will be in the next EU programming period (2000-2006) considered as Objective 1 region, the most important level seems to be NUTS II used for definition of this category of assisted regions. While the criterion for eligibility for support according to Objective 1 is the level of per capita GDP in PPS over last three years (should be less than 75% of the EU average), the size of inter-regional disparities is most frequently measured on the basis of unemployment. More specifically, the size of inter-regional disparities in the unemployment rate is by EUROSTAT most often measured by the weighted standard deviation (WSD). The standard deviation is weighted by the size of the NUTS II regions which is measured either by the number of economically active population or by number of inhabitants. For calculations is used the following formula:

$$Sd = \frac{\sqrt{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})^2 n_i}}{\sum n_i}$$

where

x_i is the rate of unemployment in region i ,

\bar{x} is the average rate of unemployment

and n_i is the size of the region expressed by number of inhabitants.

The rate of unemployment fluctuates within the calendar years with certain regularities. Therefore, most often the data for unemployment related either to April or to December are used due to the fact that in none of these months the rate of unemployment reaches its maximum or minimum values. Official delineation of NUTS regions in the Czech Republic allowed to calculate "backwards" the development of inter-regional disparities on the basis of these relatively comparable regions. The calculation is based on the rate of unemployment in December of respective years and the size of the regions was expressed by the number of inhabitants. Figure 1 depicts the development of weighted standard deviation on the level of NUTS II regions, NUTS III and NUTS IV regions in years 1991-1998.

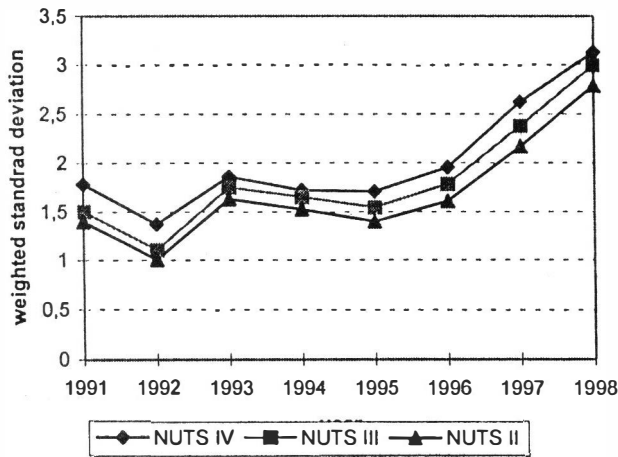


Fig. 1 Development of inter-regional disparities in the Czech regions NUTS II-IV measured by weighted standard deviation
Source: Blažek, Severa (1999)

After some fluctuations in the first half of 1990s, the curves illustrate a steep increase of inter-regional disparities since 1995. The scale of disparities depends obviously on the number of units (regions) used in analysis. Therefore, not surprisingly, the smallest disparities were found on the level of NUTS II regions (8 units) while the largest ones on the level of districts (77 units). However, given the large variance in the number of units on particular NUTS levels, the differences in disparities are surprisingly small. An alternative view can offer calculation of the coefficient of variation (calculated as weighted standard deviation divided by the average rate of unemployment). This helps to eliminate even sizeable differences in the average rate of unemployment between different years or different countries. Time series of coefficient of variation for all three levels of NUTS regions are provided in Figure 2.

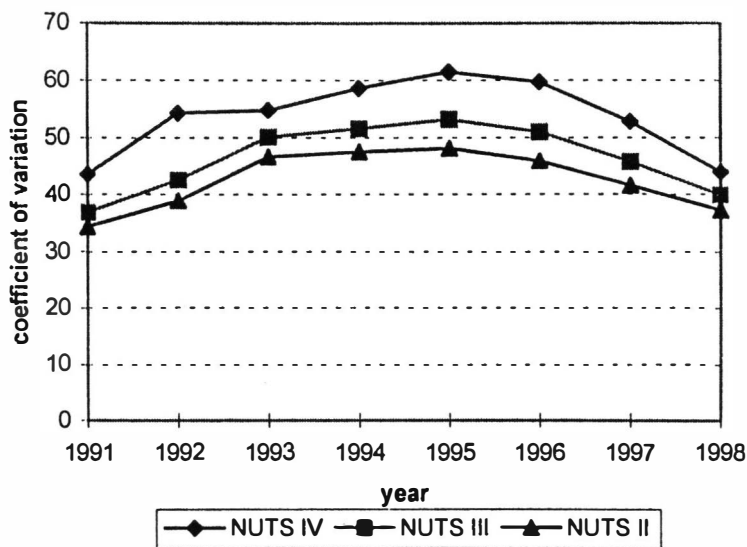


Fig. 2 Development of inter-regional disparities in Czech regions NUTS II-IV measured by weighted coefficient of variation. Source: Blažek, Severa (1999)

The curves captured in Fig. 2 suggest that if inter-regional disparities are measured by coefficient of variation, one receive quite different picture. Fig. 1 depicts inter-regional disparities as measured by the weighted standard deviation, which express both the rate of unemployment and the size of disparities. Therefore, the standard deviation expresses the seriousness of unemployment problem in affected regions. On the other hand, the coefficient of variation used in Fig. 2. captures firstly an increase of inter-regional variation in the first half of 1990s followed by the decrease since 1995. This is a consequence of the significant increase of an average rate of unemployment in the second half of 1990s. Moreover, the coefficient of variation is highly sensitive when average values (in this case of unemployment) are close to zero.

Nevertheless, with regard to the aims of regional policy, a more relevant is the scale of social and economic tension which is given by both the average rate of unemployment and the size of regional disparities. This "seriousness" of the unemployment is better captured by the standard deviation. Similar result could be obtained by simple deduction of the minimum rate of unemployment in one of the regions, from the maximum value. This disparity (measured in percentage points) has more than doubled since the beginning of the transition. Consequently, from comparison of Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 one can derive that regional disparities had been swiftly increased already in the first years of the transition (see the increase of coefficient of variation between 1991-1995 in Fig. 2), but they become a serious problem only later, when the average rate of unemployment increased significantly and in several regions reached levels calling for serious concern (see Fig. 1, capturing significant increase of standard deviation since the mid-1990s).

The values of standard deviation and of coefficient of variation could be compared with those of the EU countries.

Table 1 Inter-regional disparities in the rate of unemployment according to NUTS II regions in the EU countries (year 1997) and in the Czech Republic (year 1998).

Country	Rate of unemployment (%)	Weighted standard deviation	Coefficient of variation (%)	Number of NUTS II regions
Austria	4,4	1,1	25,4	9
Belgium	8,9	3,7	41,4	11
Finland	14,8	2,7	18,1	6
France ¹	12	2,5	21,1	22
G. Britain	7,1	2,3	31,7	35
Germany	9,8	4,3	43,7	38
Greece	9,6	2,4	24,8	13
Italy	12,3	7,8	63,3	20
Netherlands	5,2	0,8	14,9	12
Portugal	6,7	1,8	26,9	7
Spain	21,1	5,7	27,1	18
Sweden	10,4	1,7	16,6	8
Czech Republic	7,5	2,8	37,2	8

Source: The data on the EU countries were published in the 6th Periodic Report on the Social and Economic Situation in the Regions in the Community, Brussels, 1999 rate of unemployment for The Czech Republic was obtained from The Ministry of Labour, own calculation of measures of variation.

Note: Ireland, Denmark and Luxembourg are not shown in the table as their territory consists of single NUTS II region only.

¹ Všechny údaje se týkají Francie bez zamofských území

Despite the fact that the Czech Republic ranks in comparison with many EU countries rather among smaller ones, it can not be sustained that the inter-regional disparities within the Czech Republic are negligible. On the contrary, according to disparities in the rate of unemployment on NUTS II level, the Czech Republic would rank on the 5th place according to the standard deviation and on the 4th place according to the coefficient of variation. On the other hand, the Czech Republic does not suffer from such huge regional problems like some other transforming countries (e.g. Upper Silesia region in Poland or the polarity between Budapest and mostly rural rest of the Hungary). For more detailed account of regional disparities and their trends in these countries see e.g. Tomeš, Hampl, 1999, Lodkowska et al, 1996 and Horváth, 1997. Similarly, some of the EU countries also struggle with relative backwardness of some of their regions. In some of these regions, even partial illiteracy still exists. Therefore, the regional disparities in the Czech Republic are considerable but in comparison with other countries (both the EU and the other transition countries) are not of extreme nature. Consequently, for the Czech regional policy follows, that it should not become a cornerstone of the government policies, but on the other hand, the role of regional policy should not be underestimated.

2. CZECH REGIONAL POLICY IN THE PRE-ACCESSION PERIOD

After relatively long period, when the situation in the Czech Republic had been distinctive from the other transition countries by significantly lower rate of unemployment, it is now clear, that this "exception" is for a long time (if not for ever) away. Currently, in the Czech Republic, there are districts with about 15-20% rate of unemployment and micro-regions suffering from even higher rate of unemployment. The rapid (and still continuing) growth of unemployment in the recent years has eliminated one of the most important reasons for marginalization of regional policy in the Czech Republic. This is because it is just the rate of unemployment, which is the most frequently used for justification of regional policy and for delineation of assisted areas. Therefore, for the first time, a real space opens up for the Czech regional policy.

The second important incentive for a more active approach toward regional policy is provided by the ambition of the Czech Republic to join the EU. In the EU, policy of economic and social cohesion receives a high priority (see e.g. Artis et al, 1997 or Molle, 1997). Moreover, the EU offers considerable amounts of pre-accession aid (programmes ISPA, SAPARD and especially PHARE 2000). The allocation of support from these sources depends also on the progress achieved by the particular candidate countries in the sphere of cohesion policy and in the reform of public administration.

Though both these stimuli are substantial, both of them are partially misleading. In the case of an increase of unemployment rate, which is, in accordance with the expectations accompanied by deepening of regional disparities (see Fig. 1 above), the roots of the increase are predominantly of non-regional nature (institutional, legislative and ethical failures). Therefore, the regional policy can, in the very best case, help to mitigate the worst consequences, but it can not eradicate roots of the problem.

Even more controversial is the influence stemming from the second stimuli, i.e. the encouragement and pressure emanating from the EU. There are several reasons for this:

1. According to the European Commission, the whole territory of the Czech Republic represents one problem region which is (with the exception of Prague) internally almost undifferentiated. Consequently, the narrowing of the gap separating the Czech Republic from the EU average is considered as a principal problem. This fattening view was developed mostly due to rigid application of the standard indicator used for delineation of the EU Objective I regions (less than 75% of the EU average of GDP/per capita in PPS over last three available years). In the Czech Republic, the regional GDP is still calculated by an imprecise method "from the top" (i.e. by the transposition of sectoral contributions to the national GDP to the regions). In addition, the latest available data relates to year 1996 when there was different economic situation. Moreover, the regional distribution of GDP (with a bit of exaggeration) is of almost random nature, influenced for example by the location of power plants. Consequently, the north-west Bohemia, which is the most affected region in the Czech Republic with an accumulation of serious economic, social and ecological problems, is scoring relatively well on this indicator. This method based on the regional GDP

supports the nation-wide approach and favours large-scale projects implemented on central level.

2. The EU delineates lagging regions on a different hierarchical level than the Czech Republic. In the EU, the Objective 1 is defined on the basis of the data for NUTS II regions, the definition of the Objective 2 is based on NUTS III regions. These regions are for the Czech Republic rather large, and averages for these regions can easily hide distinctive intra-regional disparities.
3. The EU frequently changes the "rules of the game". Relatively often, there are different problems in communication with European Commission. One of the reasons is the fact that the responsibility for the pre-accession support (programme PHARE) rests with DG IA, while in the perspective the most important body will be DG XVI (responsible for the cohesion policy financed from the Structural Funds and from the Cohesion Fund). Both DGs require meeting their criteria (i.e. both for PHARE and for Structural Funds). In practice, this proves difficult as both support systems are regulated by different Council Regulations. There are differences, for example, in terms of required decentralization of implementation system, in the size of projects qualifying for support etc. There are also cases of setting different deadlines for submission of required programming documents and differences in specification of their content (e.g. so called "small" and "large" Regional Development Plan). Accordingly, European Commission in cases publish guidelines (which should be closely respected) too late with regard to the deadline set for submission of the documents requested from the candidate countries. Example of rather rigid approach of the European Commission was the screening of the chapter on regional policy which took place in April 1999 though it was generally known that the new Structural Funds Regulations for programming period 2000-2006 will enter into force shortly afterwards. Consequently, it was decided that in September 1999 a new round of screening, focused on new Regulations it will take place. This obviously means additional burden for candidate countries in the time when the works on the first drafts of the Regional Development Plans (RDP) culminate. The RDP European Commission expects to receive from candidate countries at the end of October 1999. For a wider context of problems in the relation between the EU and candidate countries see Eatwell et al, 1998.

On the top of these problems, there are obvious complications given by unclear time - table of the EU enlargement.

However, in any case, I do not want, by stating the above mentioned problems, to deny the obvious fact that the majority of the problems rests with the Czech Republic.

These problems concern firstly the poor horizontal and vertical co-ordination of different Czech bodies and subjects, though it is just this sphere where probably, the largest improvement has been achieved in 1999. The level of awareness of both professionals and wide public has also improved significantly. Another group of problems accompanies the building of the proper institutional and monitoring system for implementation of the cohesion policy. Last but not least, there are difficulties with preparation of programming documents. These problems are ranging from conceptual

problems like whether focus the strategy on narrowing the gap between the Czech Republic and the EU or on fighting with growing internal regional and social disparities, through missing strategy of some individual sectors, lack of multi-annual budgeting of public budgets, unknown absorption capacity to missing regional level of self-government, unclear criteria for selection of partners, lack of experience with evaluation and monitoring (esp. selection of indicators, quantification of targets and missing consideration of alternative strategies).

Related problem is connected with the fact that the Czech Republic has to prepare RDP but as a candidate, country will receive only limited support. Therefore, on the basis of submitted RDP, the European Commission will decide which sectors and regions will be considered as the priority for pre-accession support. However, if one compares focus of the pre-accession programmes with the priority axes of the EU cohesion policy (tab. 2) it can be reasonably expected which spheres will be selected for a priority pre-accession support.

Table 2 The priorities of the pre-accession programmes

Priority axis of the EU cohesion policy	Pre-accession program
1. Infrastructure and environment	ISPA
2. Development of human resources	PHARE 2000
3. Support of business environment	PHARE 2000
Development of multifunctional agriculture and rural development	SAPARD

Consequently, it seems likely, that on the basis of prepared RDP, the development of human resources and the support to business environment will be selected as pilot priorities for the pre-accession aid. However, due to limited amount of pre-accession aid, even within these spheres only selected priorities and measures will be supported. Therefore, it is vital that especially these two parts of RDP will be meeting fully the requirements of the respective Council Regulations.

Since the year 2000, several Czech NUTS II regions will hopefully be selected for the implementation of the pilot regional development programmes (ROP). Currently, the first ROP for North-West Bohemia was already completed and submitted to the European Commission. Another two ROPs (for Ostrava region and Central Moravia region) are nearing their finalization. The selection of the north-west and Ostrava regions as priority areas is due to the cumulation of social, economic and ecological problems in these regions indisputable. In the case of Central Moravia region, there are two main arguments. Firstly, there is an argument of continuity as in this region a pilot micro-regional project has been already implemented. Secondly, this region is suffering from huge internal disparities. This region on the one hand commands strong centres with large potential for further development (esp. Olomouc and Zlín), on the other hand some peripheral areas ranks among the most backward micro-regions in the Czech Republic. Obviously, the final decision rests with the European Commission.

The selection of pilot regional and sectoral operational programmes and especially their mutual integration is of high importance (and high sensitivity) because obvious problem emerges: "What to do with programming documents and already built structures in sectors and regions which will not be selected as priority regions?". One has to take into account that preparation of Regional Development Plan (including 8 regional and 6 sectoral "consultation documents" which will form chapters of RDP) required extraordinary activity of many bodies and involvement of many professionals, administrators and of the public. All sectors and regions will have their programming documents and even special implementing and monitoring structures but no resources for the implementation of programmes. Consequently, in cases of these sectors and regions which will not be selected for the support since the year 2000 there is a danger of feelings that the energy of all these people was wasted and the real possibility of losing momentum of preparatory activities for the EU cohesion policy.

One of the possible solutions might be selecting areas of special support in each of the remaining NUTS II regions where a limited support programme (possible with several different measures in order to allow for involvement of remaining sectors) might be implemented. This would enable to test the operation of implementation structures in each NUTS II region, gain further knowledge and make use of increased participation of many local and regional actors. However, the selection of priority areas might prove difficult, esp. in cases where one NUTS II region consists of several future self-governing regions.

The advantage of this solution would be a possibility to test a wider spectrum of measures, especially in relatively new spheres of support, such as the business environment and the development of human resources. (There is relatively more experience with investment into technical infrastructure among local and regional actors). Another possibility is horizontal, but limited support of one priority of ROP in all NUTS II regions.

Serious and already chronic problems are caused by the non-existence (and delay in preparation) of regional level of self-government (for more see Illner, 1999, Perlín, 1996, for related problems in Slovakia see Slavík, 1998). The competence, financial resources and other basic parameters of the new regions are still not legally defined. This also hinders the division of priorities among sectoral (horizontal) and regional. This division is important for preparation of RDP, which is a framework document that will be further developed into more detailed sectoral and regional operational programmes. Even if sectoral ministries will be ready to decentralize considerable amount of priorities and measures, there is a question who will manage preparation and implementation of regional priorities and measures. Existing preliminary structures (Regional Co-ordination Groups and Regional Monitoring and Management Committees) are not yet supported by professional secretariats. Consequently, implementation of sectoral programmes seems easier, better prepared and more transparent.

Therefore, it can be summarised, that despite the fact that there are good reasons to develop a more active regional policy, both the Czech economic and political situation and the EU pre-accession aid support rather sectoral approaches than regional ones.

One of the consequences of mutual interplay of needs of Czech regional policy and the EU pressure is also the existence of the whole array of different assisted regions and different support programmes. Individual support programmes are usually suffering from insufficient financial resources and are implemented by different implementation systems. Even in case of "coincidence" in delineation of assisted regions from both sides (i.e. the Czech and the EU) it is very difficult to merge the support programmes because the Czech programmes support different spheres than the EU programmes. There are also important differences in rules of financial management (multi-annual budgeting of the EU versus annual budgeting of the Czech Republic) and other inconsistencies.

Consequently, in the Czech Republic, there exist (or are under preparation) for example, the following support programmes for assisted regions:

- ♦ North-West Bohemia and Ostrava Region (Ministry of Trade and Industry)
- ♦ North-West Bohemia (Ministry for Regional Development)
- ♦ North-West Bohemia, Ostrava region and Central Moravia regions (Proposal of pilot Regional Operation Programmes)
- ♦ Border regions - CBC PIHARE
- ♦ Economically weak regions (Ministry for Regional Development)
- ♦ Structurally affected regions (Ministry for Regional Development)
- ♦ Revitalization of former military training fields (Ministry for Regional Development, Ministry of Trade and Industry)

From this brief overview follows that for example the North-West Bohemia region is supported by at least 5 programmes, each with different priorities, incentives, financial resources, project selection criteria and different time-schedule of assistance. Moreover, several other ministries implement their own programmes in self-delineated assisted areas (for example the Ministry of Agriculture) again with specific objectives, incentives, project requirements etc. In addition, the whole "system" is due to frequent changes rather unstable which limits its effectiveness and efficiency.

3. CONCLUSION - A PROPOSAL FOR THE FUTURE DESIGN OF CZECH REGIONAL POLICY

Both quantitative and qualitative arguments provided above suggest that the main problem of the Czech regional policy is not the question "why?", but rather "how?".

According to the author's opinion, the future design of Czech regional policy should be based on the following principal facts:

1. There is a good consistency between the priorities of the Czech Republic and the priority axis of the EU cohesion policy (i.e. infrastructure & environment, development of human resources and support to business environment). These EU

priorities are sufficiently wide to accommodate all principal needs of the Czech regions.

2. The system of programming and implementation of the EU cohesion policy is by far more advanced than the Czech regional policy. For example the stress put on multi-annual integrated approach, effort to objectivize the selection of projects by evaluation of their contribution to given targets, multiple evaluation of programmes (ex- ante, interim, ex -post), etc.
3. In the perspective of at least next 15 years, the EU resources (firstly the pre-accession aid and later the Structural Funds programmes) will clearly represent the dominant source for the support of regional development.

From these points it can be derived that the Czech regional policy should:

1. Tie up as much as possible with the EU cohesion policy. Integration of both policies should consist especially in drafting programming documents common for both policies, the same project selection criteria, single implementation system and the same time-table of support (this would require change of Czech budget rules).
2. Divide each sphere of support into sectoral or regional. The number of regionally channelled supports should increase according to the reform of public sector, esp. in parallel with the decentralization of competence to the regions.
3. The differences in spatial scale used for delineation of assisted regions between the EU and the Czech Republic can be accommodated by accepting the EU criteria, but enforcing internal differentiation of support within the regions. Acute crises in micro-regions could be solved by using analogy with the EU Community Initiatives (INTERREG, LEADER, EQUAL, URBAN).

This conception of regional policy should be enacted by a Regional Development Act and Acts on decentralization of the public sector.

Finally, some problems might be efficiently solved by an enhanced co-operation of respective responsible bodies of candidate countries, especially of Visegrad countries. According to author's knowledge, there is little, if any, co-operation in the sphere of development of national regional policies of candidate countries and of their adjustments to the EU cohesion policy. Competition wins over co-operation, and the exchange of information, the discussion of problems and their possible solutions are missing.

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Resume

(Ne) konzistence a (ne) efektivnost české regionální politiky v 90. letech

Príspevek je zaměřen na kritické hodnocení české regionální politiky v 90. letech. V první části práce je na základě nově vymezené hierarchie regionů NUTS v ČR (v lednu

1999) vypočítán podle metodiky EUROSTATu vývoj meziregionální diferenciace v České republice a následně je provedeno porovnání se státy EU. Z relativně srovnatelných států EU (Rakousko, Nizozemsko, Portugalsko, Řecko a Belgie) vykazuje větší meziregionální rozdíly než ČR pouze Belgie, což indikuje potřebu aktivní regionální politiky. Přestože se ve druhé polovině 90. let otevřel poprvé reálný prostor pro regionální politiku, neboť došlo k výraznému nárůstu nezaměstnanosti i ke zvýšenému zájmu (i tlaku) ze strany EU o českou regionální politiku, oba tyto hlavní podněty pro větší aktivitu v oblasti regionální politiky působí ve skutečnosti proti ní. Příčiny současných ekonomických problémů ČR jsou v zásadě neregionální, tedy plošné povahy, podobně pojetí politiky soudržnosti EU je výrazně odlišné od české regionální politiky pokud jde o kritéria vymezení problémových regionů, jejich velikost i o používané spektrum nástrojů. Po diskuzi obou těchto problémových okruhů jsou uvedena východiska a navrženy hlavní prvky nové koncepce české regionální politiky. Jejím základem by se mělo stát maximální možné provázání české regionální politiky s předvstupní pomocí EU v oblasti přípravy jednotných, resp. společných programovacích dokumentů, shodných implementačních systémů, podobných kritérií pro výběr projektů a stejného časového rámce pro realizaci podpory, čímž by bylo mj. zajištěno i respektování principu doplňkovosti kohezní politiky EU a posílena absorpční kapacita ČR.