

**EXPLORING EUROPEAN POLITICAL SPHERE FOR TRANSNATIONAL
NETWORK ACTIVITIES OF SUBNATIONAL LEVEL**

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ABSTRACT: Transnational networking of local and regional authorities- interaction with their counterparts, higher or lower levels of governments with the intention of cooperation and partnership - can be deliberated as one of the remarkable aspects of EU governance system. In this respect, some denote that these network activities play a facilitating role in the involvement of local and regional authorities in EU governance processes. Further, it can be argued that local and regional authorities come together for purposes such as mutual information sharing, cooperation, joint project development, sharing best practices, lobbying activities, accessing financial resources. These interactions reflect a kind of mobility and visibility for them within the EU political sphere.

This paper aims to explore to a certain extent European political sphere for transnational network activities of subnational level through two substantial dimensions: Brussels representation and EU regional/cohesion policy. In the context of these dimensions, interaction and mobilization processes between subnational level and other levels of governments supposed to be adequately more pronounced and recognizable. The study points out the conclusions that European political sphere for transnational network activities of local and regional authorities could be taken into consideration for more dynamic, encouraging, rewarding, structured and constructive political involvement and engagement of subnational level. Correspondingly, this field should continue to be studied whether political sphere is evolved to be a more conform realm with aforementioned purposes particularly after the end of recent programming periods of regional/cohesion policy.

Key Words: EU Governance, EU Subnational Policies, Transnational Local Government Networks

ÖZ: Yerel ve bölgesel yönetimlerin ulusötesi düzeyde yürüttükleri ağ faaliyetleri – muadilleri, üst ya da alt düzeydeki yönetimler ile işbirliği ve ortaklık amacıyla gerçekleştirilen etkileşim- AB yönetim sisteminin dikkate çeken yönlerinden biri olarak tartışılabilir. Bu bağlamda, söz konusu ağ faaliyetlerinin yerel ve bölgesel yönetimlerin AB yönetim süreçlerine katılımında kolaylaştırıcı bir rol oynadığını ifade edilebilmektedir. Ayrıca, yerel ve bölgesel yönetimlerin karşılıklı bilgi paylaşımı, işbirliği, ortak proje geliştirme, en iyi uygulama paylaşımı, lobi faaliyetleri, mali kaynaklara erişim gibi amaçlarla bir araya geldiği söylenebilir. Bu etkileşimler, AB siyasi alanı içinde onların faaliyetlerine bir tür hareketlilik ve görünürlük boyutu katabilmektedir.

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Bu makale, ulusaltı düzeyi temsil eden yerel ve bölgesel yönetimlerin ulusötesi ağ faaliyetleri için Avrupa'nın sunduğu siyasi alanı iki önemli boyut aracılığıyla belirli yönleri kapsamında incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır: Brüksel'deki temsil ve AB bölgesel / uyum politikası. Zira ulusaltı düzey ile diğer yönetim düzeyleri arasındaki etkileşim ve hareketlilik süreçleri, bu boyutlar itibarıyla daha tanımlanabilir ve belirgin olarak değerlendirilebilir. Çalışma, yerel ve bölgesel yönetimlerin ulusötesi ağ faaliyetlerine yönelik Avrupa siyasi alanının daha fazla siyasi katılıma ve süreçlere angajmana yapılandırılmış şekilde dinamizm katma, teşvik etme ve ödüllendirme boyutlarıyla ele alınabileceği sonucunu yansıtmaktadır. Söz konusu sonuca bağlı olarak, özellikle bölgesel/uyum politikasının son programlama döneminin bitiminden sonra, analiz edilen bu siyasi alanın yukarıda belirtilen amaçlarla daha uyumlu bir zemine kavuşup kavuşmadığının araştırılması faydalı olabilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: AB Yönetişi, AB Yerel Politikaları, Ulusötesi Yerel Yönetim Ağları

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently there is a growing body of literature that refers to a European political sphere emphasizing transnational network activities of subnational level such as local and regional authorities comprising municipalities (cities and towns), councils, counties, districts, boroughs, provincial administrations, metropolitan and regional governments and so on. Networks of local and regional authorities are discussed from the perspective of governance approaches studying frequently in the literature of comparative politics, public policy and urban politics.

Networking with the aim of enriching the cooperation of local and regional authorities at the transnational level, of sharing of experience, and of fostering the collective innovative programs and strategies to corresponding local issues, has emerged as a prevailing proceeding and has started to serve the purpose of subnational level to reach decision-making mechanisms and resources under the encouraging atmosphere catalysed by governance and Europeanization.

In this paper, two correlated aspects are addressed to illustrate European political sphere for transnational activities of local and regional authorities: Brussels representation and EU regional/cohesion policy.

Local and regional representative offices reflect a sort of established and accredited presence of subnational level in Brussels. Interaction with key actors, contributions to the policies and gaining some kind of leverage in lobbying can be deliberated to a certain extent as various reflections of Brussels representation on European political sphere.

On the other hand, regional/cohesion policy addresses the key objectives of the European Union while contributing to the fulfilment of EU priorities. This policy provides many occasions for transnational networking of subnational level as obtaining more than a third of the EU budget. Hence, regional/cohesion policy can eventually deploy changes in the settings of EU political ecosystem as

transforming the representations, democratic practices, values, rules, interests, perspectives, ideas, discourses and even the vocabulary preferences. Beside the globalization, federalism, regionalization, decentralization, deconcentration, devolution, recentralization, regional/cohesion policy can deserve to be discussed in respect of its features and outcomes as enabling subnational level considerably more mobilized and visible throughout the EU political sphere.

Regional policy or cohesion policy, both can be used as synonymous concepts, but cohesion policy can be presumed as more comprehensive than regional policy. Actually the main ambiguity arises from the name of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which constitutes the essential financial resource of these policies and structural funds, and the fact that the most vital starting step regarding the regional policy is the establishment of this Fund. Although the EU regional policy is implied as a policy that is connected with the regions, it constitutes one of the most integral part of the cohesion policy.

Economic and social dimensions are habitually linked to cohesion policy but since the Lisbon Treaty has fleshed out the territorial dimension, another opportunity such a more customized framework for local and regional authorities has been arisen. On account of this, cohesion policy scope of the transnational activities of local and regional authorities is respectively taken into consideration beyond the scopes mainly focused on ERDF operations and actions.

Urban dimension and subnational level can be figured out as one of the underlying scopes of regional/cohesion policy. Issues such as sustainability, economic growth and employment in urban areas, poverty reduction, social inclusion and environmental topics can point to the crossing axes of this dimension. A remarkable part of the projects financed under the structural and investment funds deal with urban development concerns.

It would therefore be practical to mention not only the transnational cooperations but the cross-sectoral, cross-border and interregional ones in the context of regional/cohesion policies. Locally-led strategies, enhanced urban dimension, accredited local and regional authorities, customized networking and capacity-building schemes for subnational level and many similar improvements can contribute to the context of the European political sphere and reconfigure its facets, qualities, dynamics and instruments.

The paper is compiled such that the “conceptual framework” part delineates the approaches to governance networks which are expected to contribute to a better understanding of transnational networking concept and seeks to exchange views

about some substantial notions and assessments related to networks of local and regional authorities.

The “overview of the European political sphere for transnational network activities of local and regional authorities” part has three sub-sections. While first sub-section intends to introduce “system basics” which mainly reflect a multi-leveled governance structures and processes, the second one purposes to gain an understanding of studies and discussions on Brussels representation and offices of local and regional authorities and also their participation in policy processes such lobbying etc. Third sub-section argues respectively EU regional/cohesion policy. This policy, presumably, can be reckoned as one of the most established and comprehensive play in European political sphere, not only for national governments but also for local and regional authorities and non-state actors.

The “conclusion” part reviews the framework provided by the transnational network activities in question. Correspondingly, this part debates attainable and encouraging patterns of the analysis and calls attention to the additional studies which can be entitled to supplementary explorations.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Approaches to Governance Networks

Network theories were frequently referenced in disciplines such as political sciences, international relations, public administration, predominantly after 1990s. It can be stated that network approaches started to draw attention with the theory, method, model and analysis modules offered in the literature mostly in the governance studies of the 21st century. In this context, it can be argued that the approaches to governance networks and therefore to networks of local and regional authorities frequently gained emphasis in the globalization and governance literature with the 1990s.

Based on the effects of globalization, Sassen (2005: 27-43) emphasizes that regional and global network structuring reveals new urban systems and a new geographical design. Basically, a new kind of geography, which includes the concepts of center and periphery, is mentioned depending on the effectiveness in decision making processes and attracting capital, investor and qualified workforce. Castells (2005) underlines the importance of metropolitan / regional networks that include cities for the organization of the space within the framework of the “network society” paradigm.

Held (1995) states that in the highly industrialized democratic societies, the traditional base of political power has shifted, and this ground shift has been consolidated, especially with the noticeable reduction of state power in the economic field. He argues that transformations in telecommunications, transportation and global financial markets are transforming our lives. In parallel with this approach, the rapid circulation and flow of capital, information and

technological innovations accelerate the transformation of the hierarchical organizations. Accordingly, it can be argued that there is an increasing prevalence of what can be called as “horizontal organizations” (Castells, 2010: 176).

In the literature on governance networks, the context of international relations offers a remarkable area of research. There are many paradigmatic changes that try to explain the “new world order” with globalization. According to Rosenau (1998: 28-57), in the new multi-centered world, no one can own absolute power alone; interdependence, proliferation, pluralism and disaggregation can become more effective components of democracy. Supranational, national and transnational governance forms can become a part of this disintegration and redistribution within transnational horizontal networks (Slaughter, 2004: 12-27).

Nowadays, it can be referred to a governance space that reflects the interests of other actors, organizations, cross-border institutions and non-state structures besides a global public sphere that only takes into account the interests of states. In fact, even terminologically, an evolution from the concept of international governance to the concept of global governance can be mentioned (Barnett & Sikkink, 2009: 748).

Risse (2013, p. 440) mentions that the involvement of non-state actors in global politics has glorified by a relatively more normative perspective in early studies. He underlines that recent studies are the ones that can better reveal the scale of non-state actors' problem-solving capacities and effectiveness within the framework of transnational governance.

Eventually, these network structures have evolved into a mechanism for transboundary relations. The rapid proliferation of transnational communication networks can provide a different experience by enabling non-state actors to gain a reputation in the transnational area. Strikingly, starting with the Arab Spring in 2010 and continuing with the social unrests in USA, Chile, Brazil, Greece, Spain, Germany, Turkey and Ukraine; how social mobility and transnational networks did play a role in these processes will likely be discussed for many years.

As Rosenau (1998: 37) depicts in the form of a matrix, some of the network structures find support from the government, while others may fall outside the tight control of the state and put new risks and vulnerabilities on the agenda. These networks can try to control new types of administrative mechanisms by using new influence and pressure channels. This influence, pressure and interaction channels can vary from non-governmental organizations to social movements, and from local to regional structures.

Hafner-Burton et al. (2009: 560) note that networks are considered as a type of organization separated from market and hierarchy models in the perspective of international relations; and they can act as facilitating agents for joint action and international governance.

In the global governance literature, partnership networks can be considered as a new form of governance that bring together countless actors from the government, business and civil society, bridging multilateral norms and local action. Moreover, it can be stated that these networks can bridge the gaps in terms of better governance, better implementation and greater participation dimensions of global governance (Bäckstrand, 2006: 291).

Keck and Sikkink (1999) indicate that network theory should not be regarded as if it were merely the dissemination of liberal institutions and practices in terms of international relations; this theory put emphasis on the processes for mutual sharing and interaction of preferences, identities and policies.

Some argue that it could not be easy to have information and the capacity to control and manage all interactions alone (Castells, 2008: 87; Knill & Lehmkuhl, 2002: 41; Ladeur, 2004: 9) and the role of the state has also been changed with the effect of globalization (Bevir et al., 2003) since globalization deepens and complicates interdependencies (Leach et al., 2007: 11).

In the context of these assumptions; it can be acknowledged that the need for concepts such as partnership, coordination, cooperation, consensus, dialogue, interaction and sharing is intensified (Teisman & Klijn, 2002: 197). Subsequently, it can be evaluated that the concept of governance has started to be included in the scope in parallel with the new structuring in public administration, new principles and radical transformation efforts.

On the other hand, it is cited that the state and bureaucracy become more "fragmented" (Chhotray & Stoker, 2009: 18), and their basic structure and the roles they undertook have become crucial elements of transformation (Loughlin, 2004: 8-22). While the liveliness of market-oriented economies and the expansion of non-state actors' game plan emphasized this new situation (Sending & Neumann, 2006); even if it does not lose its "central" role (Jessop, 2004: 66), the state authority can enter the process of redefinition (Swyngedouw, 2005).

While the state is transforming into a structure with a varied, fragmented, multi-centered composition in one aspect, it can be pointed out that indirect policy instruments are also becoming widespread and this situation emphasizes complex governance systems (Koliba et al., 2010).

Within this framework, modern governance calls for focusing on the development of participation processes. The development of non-state structures and their role in administrative processes as an actor can be described as part of this dynamic. Thus, it can be referred that within the framework of the discourse of

governance new governance actors have started to become visible, like networks that have different dynamics and reflexes than classical local government structures and can mobilize in a wider area.

According to Hughes (2012: 123), governance can be related to drawing the boundaries of authority, one of the deep discussion areas of public administration. Because, while it is claimed that the application of authority and the exercise of power come to the forefront in management, it is underlined that the concepts such as “participation and involvement” can gain more emphasis in governance.

In other respects, it can be argued that governance reflects the concepts of institutionalism and network, in which especially public choice academics work. While examining the relationships and structures between economic development and governance refer to institutionalist conceptualization studies; references to concepts such as multi-actor partnerships, self-governing networks, dissolution of the clear-cut distinction between the public and private sectors, strengthening civil society, local leadership, civic and democratic participation can specify network emphasis (Lynn et al., 2001).

Participatory and stakeholder-oriented approach, including the flexible, formal and informal relations which are open to multilateral interactions, and decentralization and delegation processes are effective to deal with governance (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007: 3-7).

Bevir (2011), in his study of these theories and approaches, puts forward that the theories such as policy networks and rational choice draw attention to the interactions and processes created through all actors and suggests the need for a governance that will create a line between people and government levels and provide mobility to stakeholders.

Basically, it can be seen that in the decision processes, besides the classical tools of representative democracy, deliberation processes have started to gain importance. Because, new governance structures such as NGOs, networks, and some social movements that prepare the ground for horizontal interactions can penetrate the democratic system as new channels (Klijn & Skelcher, 2007: 589-601).

2.2. Key Notions

Network structures formed by the combination of local and/or regional governments can also be referred under the concepts such as "*policy networks*" described by Börzel (1997) or Peterson (2003) or "*governance networks*" cited by Klijn (2008) or Torfing (2007).

Klijn (2008: 507-508) implies that four key definitions of governance have become more prevalent in the literature, in which he analyzed the studies generated in the last years by the governance literature both in America and Europe:

The first is governance as good governance or corporate governance. At this point, governance has a meaning attributable to the principles of well-functioning public administration. The second is governance as the new public administration. Improving performances is essential for the delivery of public goods and services. There is a kind of market governance.

The third is multi-level governance or inter-governmental relations. There are many actors and multiple levels of governance involved in policy processes. Networks come into play, especially in areas such as the development of urban and regional areas, environmental problems, which are beyond the national boundaries, or that cannot be resolved by a single public organization or that are related to hierarchically different levels of governance.

Fourthly, governance as network governance. At this point, governance is a difficult and complex process to be managed by public or non-public actors depending on mutual interaction, negotiations and deliberations.

Thus, Klijn (2008: 511) defines governance networks as “public policy making and implementation through a web of relationships between government, business and civil society actors”. Börzel (1997: 4-5) points out that governance networks can be defined as “a new and special form of governance as denoting the structural relationships, interdependencies and dynamics between actors in public administration and the policy-making process. In addition, governance networks are a relatively stable and continuous network of relationships that bring together and mobilize resources that are dispersed through jointly or parallel actions for a policy solution”.

Furthermore, the concept of transnationality can be clarified by taking into consideration the situation in which groups or organizations operating transnationally. Nölke (2003: 278) assumes that at least one organization within the group does not act in the name of a national government or an intergovernmental organization for transnational activity of the network. In these circumstances, local and regional authorities can engage in transnational activities beyond the national borders or national level by coming together within networked structures, unlike the structures in which national levels are associated with clear-cut distinctions, in other words, which do not reflect the classical international character.

In summary, the majority of these approaches argue that local and regional authorities have expanded their “horizontal networks” and have carried these networks to a transnational or cross-border form, with the globalization and governance approaches becoming widespread.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL SPHERE FOR TRANSNATIONAL NETWORK ACTIVITIES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Undoubtedly, European Union can be regarded as one of the main political spheres for the development and interaction processes of subnational governance networks. Based on this inference, transnational network activities of local and regional authorities within public administration structure of the European Union are discussed hereinafter in the context of Brussels offices and regional/cohesion policy.

3.1. System Basics

The European Commission's Governance White Paper (Commission of the European Communities, 2001) articulates that networks at the European and international sphere can be considered as a non-hierarchical interaction of the entities like individuals and/or communities, regional and local governments, enterprises, directorates, research institutions with each other. Participants in these networks can be described as one of the resources needed to achieve the common goal. Accordingly, it can be argued that the Commission prioritizes the networks to participate more in decision making and implementation processes. Moreover, it can be suggested that Commission pay attention to achieve a framework for transnational cooperation, particularly between subnational actors.

EU Commission has stimulated these networks as a form of governance by obtaining information and getting expert opinion from them and by using them as ones of the facilitators of policy implementations and so on (Borrás, 2007). This stance can be reckoned as an opportunity in terms of the governance approach that is desired to orchestrate the decision-making mechanisms of the EU. Namely, the multi-stakeholder and non-hierarchical structure of the subnational governance networks can be featured as another basis for ensuring the democratic legitimacy of the decisions taken.

Transnational activities of subnational governance networks can be figured out remarkably from the EU's multilevel governance perspective. Correspondingly, it can be alleged that multilevel governance emphasizes the existence of a new form of policy making in the EU. National governments can not be deemed as the only actors of decision-making processes. Along with this consideration, while EU institutions are independent actors of decision-making processes, local and regional authorities are gaining mobility as part of policy-making processes.

It can be plausible to suggest that each level of governance has its own resources like knowledge, experience, political power, expertise etc. Each level can use these resources in the processes of mutual negotiation and deliberation. Based on the administrative structure of the country, some local and regional authorities can encounter national barriers when they desire to contact directly with the EU.

Even it could not be easy to access EU institutions due to these national boundaries, many local and regional authorities can find other gates opening to the EU through the governance networks they established among themselves. It can be argued that EU institutions also support the formation of these structures. This does not require denial of the importance of central governments in EU policy processes, or namely the supranational and subnational level do not eliminate the national level. However, it is claimed that the game is played in three levels.

In particular, it is suggested that there is a policy-making process that includes formal procedures and rules in the multilevel governance system and informal practices based on mutual negotiations and discussions, developing cooperation and reaching agreement on (Schmitter, 2003). This system has multi-level and multi-actor processes. The essence of the governance system has several key principles such as subsidiarity, openness, participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness and compliance etc.

3.2. Brussels Representation and Participation in Policy Processes

The offices opened by local and regional entities in Brussels can be portrayed as a noticeable aspect of transnational network activities of subnational level. The developments in the EU political arena after the mid-1980s and with the 1990s (the Single European Act regarding the regional policy as an objective, 1988 structural funds reform, subsidiarity principle with Maastrich Agreement in the 1990s, launching of the Cohesion Fund, establishment of the Committee of the Regions, representation in the Council of Ministers, strengthened governance networks etc.) can be remarked as game changer in increasing the number of offices opened in Brussels.

The number of accredited offices determined by Huysseune and Jans (2008: 1) in Brussels as of April 2007 is 226. 165 of these belong to the regions, 17 to local and sub-regional governments, 26 to governance networks established by local and regional governments, and 18 to other segments representing private sector organizations.

Huysseune and Jans (2008: 5) suggest that one attribution of Brussels offices is to strengthen local and regional authorities before national governments. Similarly, Beyers and Donas (2014: 3) denote that Brussels offices can serve as "semi-embassies". According to them; Basque, Catalonia, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, etc. Brussels offices of the region and countries evoke almost a diplomatic mission in terms of equipment and human resources. However, the

research by Beyers and Donas (2014: 21) reflects the conclusion that regional/local representation and mobility do not compromise the representation of the member state in the EU, but rather a complementary function.

Correspondingly, it would be factual to argue that Commission did not hesitate to take advantage of Brussels offices, but expanded the importance attributed to the information they provide. Especially the networking activities as one of the prime concerns of Commission aiming to render the actions and programs more inclusive can smooth the way for figuring these offices as the representation framework of the units closest to the citizens.

It can be discussed that lobbying of subnational networks and their participation in policy processes has been stimulated by Commission through the motives as follows: (1) strengthening the legitimacy of the decisions taken, (2) access to information from the nearest source, and (3) optimizing the involvement of large groups of actors in negotiation and discussion processes.

However, it is determined that local and regional authorities with certain richness in resources actively use both office and subnational networks in Brussels representation. While it is suggested that this situation shows that the subnational networks are suitable for the “venue shopping” strategy, additionally it is emphasized that this habitat provides occasions such as attracting attention of EU decision-makers, increasing the chances of involving political processes and expanding their mobility for local and regional authorities. Furthermore, it is noted that Brussels offices differ from the subnational networks in terms of functional context as predominantly accentuating the lobbying activities (Donas & Beyers, 2013).

Accordingly, given that many of the umbrella organizations of EU’s towns, municipalities, cities and provinces have offices in Brussels, it can be noticeable that considerable part of the subnational network activities is carried out through these organizations. Further in some cases, offices can turn into a base where business world, universities and NGOs can perform their network activities.

Therefore, local and regional authorities can directly contact the European Commission, some even participate in the Council of Ministers, be formally represented in the Parliament through the Committee of the Regions, lobby at the Brussels offices they have established or developed a cooperation with, and go beyond national borders through networks by interacting with each other and others (Hooghe and Marks, 2001: 81).

3.3. EU Regional/Cohesion Policy and Subnational Networks

Subnational entities get noticed as actors playing a role in EU regional policy (Rhodes, 2017: 61). Having a representative office in Brussels or establishment of units for the execution of EU relations, trying to influence EU decision making processes and making a partnership to apply for EU funding programs can be denoted as revelations of mobility provided by the subnational networks.

It can be argued that subnational networks have various functions in order to foster the engagement of local and regional authorities to processes and to enable them to act systematically as well as collectively. In the context of EU regional/cohesion policy processes, it can be deliberated that subnational networks come into play in two main points:

First, it seems that the subnational networks are trying to influence decision-making processes at the point of harmonization of the policies and legislative regulations with subnational interests. Secondly, the action plans of the local and regional authorities which are presumably synchronized within the framework of the topics, scopes, standards and rules determined by the EU regional policy turn the spotlight on the structural and investment funds. In this sense, it can be mentioned that the networks enable local and regional authorities to cooperate and collaborate in accordance with the principle of partnership for the use of the funds (Borghetto & Franchino, 2010).

From a periodic point of view, EU regional policy has undergone significant transformations both on the basis of founding agreements and financially, strategically and operationally. In particular, the transformation of the EU regional policy on a strategic and operational basis has a special meaning in terms of subnational governments. It can be argued that this innovative system supports governance levels to cooperate with each other (Bache, 2007: 395-412). Likewise Goldsmith (2003: 112-133) underlines that strong regional policy has fostered the forms of cooperative subnational politics and new networks of subnational level have reflected the experience of regional policy.

In the study, where Bache (2003) investigates the effects of Europeanization on the British administration, especially EU Regional Policy has been broadly investigated. Accordingly, the government, which intended to make more use of EU funds, had to open its doors to the transfer of regional policies from the EU. As a result, local and regional authorities gained relatively effectiveness, the principle of partnership, which is obligatory for using funds, has become widespread, and public-private partnership and cooperation projects have started to be implemented in urban policies.

In fact, EU has an investment resource planning of over EUR 350 billion for the period of 2014-2020 including local and regional authorities. Creating joint

programs, projects and networks by pairing up the various local and regional authorities can be considered as prospective accomplishments of this investment plan. The EU spends about one third of its budget on cohesion policy objectives.

Articles 32-35 of the Common and General Provisions Regulation related to the use of all structural and investment funds pronounce that it is focused on customized capacity building and revealing the potential of local organizations through network activities (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013a, Regulation [EU] 1303).

Innovative measures/actions can be cited as one of the important topics that offer direct related opportunities for subnational networks in terms of cohesion policy. Within the framework of innovative actions, thematic networks have been accentuated, especially for less developed regions. More than 350 operations were conducted under the innovative action title financed by the Regional Development Fund during the 1994-1999 programming period (European Commission, 2001).

It can be acknowledged that the research by Jerzyniak (2011) on innovative actions financed by structural funds under various titles like RIS / RITTS, RISI, TERRA, RECITE; ECOS-Ouverture, Urban Development etc. and particularly featuring inter-regional networking propounds remarkable findings. Within the scope of the research, it is reflected that innovative actions for network development under structural funds have a positive effect on the quality of partnership and governance.

Innovative actions are included in the 8th article of the Regional Development Fund Regulation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013b, Regulation [EU] 1301) for 2014-2020 period. The budget for Innovative Actions and Technical Assistance is more than 1.5 billion Euros (European Commission, 2014).

In addition, pursuant to Article 9 of the Regulation, it is stipulated that the Commission should establish a “Urban Development Network”, and actions such as capacity building, skill building, performing network activities and mutual sharing of experiences among local and regional authorities at the Union level were envisaged. The Urban Development Network is intended to serve as an immediate deliberation channel in the implementation of integrated urban development strategies and innovative actions between Commission and subnational level.

Since European Territorial Cooperation was built as the third column of the EU cohesion policy in the 2007-2013 programming period, cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation projects, which were previously carried

out through the Community Initiative such as INTERREG, are being implemented within the framework of the European Territorial Cooperation in the programming period 2007-2013 and subsequently in 2014-2020. In the 2014-2020 programming period, it can be stated that the budget planned to be spent from the structural and investment funds for the European Territorial Cooperation target is over 10 billion Euros. It is understood that this figure corresponds to approximately 3% of the total budget allocated under the cohesion policy (European Commission, 2014).

Furthermore, making the network activities one of the three pillars/goals of cohesion policy can be noted as a remarkable development. This kind of reform can provide various positive effects such as increasing the amount of funds, laying out some prioritizations and delivering more visibility opportunities for subnational networks.

In accordance with Article 2 of the European Territorial Cooperation Regulation; the opportunity to carry out network activities for local and regional authorities is provided and programs and projects based on learning, innovation, sharing and exchanging are envisaged within the scope of the target (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013c, Regulation [EU] 1299).

Pursuant to Article 7 of the Regional Development Fund Regulation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013b, Regulation [EU] 1301), local and regional authorities, if benefiting from the Regional Development Fund, should prepare urban development strategies for the solution of the problems faced. In this context, the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities has been developed as an online tool kit to make it available to cities based on the decisions taken in the Leipzig Charter.

Likewise, member states are encouraged to take a stronger focus on urban issues in their Operational Programs. However, it is required for member states to transfer powers to the local and regional authorities for the implementation stages of sustainable urban development strategies, at least during the project selections. Commission specifically addresses this issue in the review processes of the Operational Programs. In addition, Commission go over the provision of the urban dimension in both the Innovative Actions and the Urban Development Network and URBACT III programs (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2013b, Regulation [EU] 1301).

4. CONCLUSION

In line with globalization, technological and socio-economic transformations and under the influence of new managerial paradigm changes, the relationships which local and regional authorities foster with other administrative levels and among themselves, enhanced and widened mobility and crossing, intersecting, vertical and horizontal interactions can be referred to new structures that reflect network features.

In this respect, it would be practical to consider the following three aspects as exploring European political sphere for transnational network activities of subnational level. Firstly, local and regional authorities have started to gain more mobility and visibility as the program periods of regional/cohesion policy progressed and they scaled up their Brussels representation. For instance, every new implementation program of cohesion policy had new features, instruments and approaches to proceed in a more decentralized way. In fact, the latest one, 2021-2027 programming period can be remarked by locally-led development strategies as one of the five main objectives, emphasis on empowering local authorities in the management of the funds and a new networking and capacity-building programme for urban authorities, the European Urban Initiative (European Commission, 2018).

Secondly, as multi-leveled system crystallizes to a greater extent, assuming “watchman role” of the nation state on subnational level become more mitigated. Nevertheless, domestic constitutional status, resource richness, policy-making legacy and visionary leadership can still be reckoned as the primary determinants for this development. Thirdly, it is widely discussed that transnational networks have started to be a part of an embeddedness within the EU’s institutional configuration. They are considered as softer forms of governance serving for sharing best practices, exchange of information, benchmarking, benchlearning etc. Aside from that, new technologies and digitalization processes accelerate networking activities of all government levels, and this progress stipulates the integration and involvement of subnational level. At the end of this developments, some can refer to a unique political sphere employing kind of hybrite mechanisms and endeavoring to remediate its own democratic deficit through a multi-leveled and networked system.

However, the studies in the field can be considered as limited to deeply analyze the extent to which these networks have actual effect in real policy spheres. Particularly the results of regional/cohesion policy instruments, which will be implemented during 2014-2020 programming period, may be remarkable to assess and study with the purpose of providing an insight into networking activities of subnational entities while Commission has set some success goals.

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