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### **EUROPEAN UNION'S OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES FOR HARMONIOUS REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT: EXPERIENCES FROM SLOVENIA**

The issue of regional development is especially challenging in the case of post-socialist countries. Shortly after systemic, constitutional changes in practically most post-socialist countries regional development was placed on the back burner and implementation of a balanced regional policy was not seen as a priority, primarily because developmental problems were managed separately and not regionally (i.e. as regional developmental problems). Thereby, in the initial years of transition period there were high degrees of centralisation of resources and arbitrary decision-making at the national levels; on top of the political agenda were the tasks of establishing the political and administrative structures of states and the macroeconomic dilemmas in the process of economic transitions. Hence, the level of resources earmarked for the regional domain was falling throughout, and disparities between 'regions' in most (if not all) post-socialist countries after their systemic changes further expanded. In this respect, accession of post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries had been important also from the viewpoint of adaptation of subnational levels to successfully participate in the EU policymaking processes, in particular in the EU cohesion policy.

In the last few decades the EU has paid more attention to endogenous regional development that builds the strength of regional uniqueness 'from the foundations up' (i.e. bottom-up) (Plut 1998, 34-6). EU member-states, however, agree to consider the status of subnational government as part of their sovereignty, and this basic legal understanding applies to the accession-states as well. Nonetheless, EU institutions have a much more powerful position vis-à-vis accession-states than in their relations with member-states. Hence, regional governments or regional administrations have been subjected to fundamental changes in the accession-states; their constitutional status has been also generally less consolidated than in EU member-states (Brusis 2003, 89). During accession to the EU, this has led to two tasks for Slovenia: its integration into successful European development axes so as not to remain on the periphery; and the development of internal regionalisation, without which the country's more uniform development would be impossible. Namely, Slovenia's territory is extremely mixed in its natural and socio-geographical aspects. In relation to building up the 'Europe of regions', Slovenia as a whole is a (peripheral) region while, within Slovenia, there are structurally limited and economically weak areas, border areas and areas with an old industrial structure. As such, on one side this situation can lead to the formation of regions while, on the other, many questions arise resulting in none of the proposals for Slovenia's political-administrative regionalisation being so far completely satisfactory. However, from the viewpoint of Slovenia's accession to the EU, (EU-model) regionalisation has been important especially due to participation in the sources of structural and cohesion funds destined for regional development. Following the perspective of the logic of consequentialism (March and Olsen 1998; Reich 2000), Europeanisation and regionalisation are thus largely

conceived as an emerging political opportunity structure, which offers some actors (here subnational actors in particular) additional resources to exert an influence (Börzel and Risse 2003; Ágh 2003).

In the paper we treat Europeanisation as an ‘explanatory variable’ of domestic changes at subnational level in Slovenia. The main aim of the paper is thereby to analyse the impact of the EU on subnational structures in Slovenia: institutions, actors and territorial organisation. As such, the paper does not address the question of whether the EU causes domestic changes, but rather their outcomes.