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THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS IN THE
EUROPEAN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.
THE CASE OF PARTNERSHIPS FOR
REGIONAL INNOVATION

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Abstract

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) is a key institution in the EU's institutional framework. Its role in the European decision-making process is multifaceted. The Committee is consulted on a mandatory basis in certain policy areas (TFEU Art. 148, 165, 167, 172, 178). The three main European institutions – European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the European Union – may ask for the so-called “optional” or “facultative” opinions in all cases of interest to the Committee (Hönnige and Panke, 2013; Coen and Richardson, 2009). Lastly, the CoR can issue opinions on its own initiative. However, existing literature is split on the actual extent of the influence exerted by this institution in the EU's policymaking process. According to Hönnige and Panke (2013), the CoR does have an influence, but it is limited. Piattoni and Schönlau (2015), on the other hand, highlight the CoR's role as an agenda-setter. Nicolosi and Mustert (2020) suggest that it should be more aware of its role of «guardian of subsidiarity», using all its powers to make its voice heard.

To contribute to the above literature and with the aim of understanding the agenda-setter role and real influence of the CoR in the EU's policymaking process, the present thesis explores the CoR's role in the design and formation of the new Partnerships for Regional Innovation (PRI). The partnerships are a pilot project launched by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) and the Committee of the Regions. For this initiative, the CoR worked in close contact with the JRC during the conceptual development process.

The research questions addressed are as follows: what has been the role of the CoR in the conceptual development process of the PRI? How did the Committee of the Regions become involved in this work? Does the CoR's involvement in the development of the PRIs confirm this institution's role as an agenda-setter?

The research supports the idea that the CoR's role goes beyond that of an advisory body. It actively works to influence the decisions made at the European level, not only provide comments on regional issues.

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List of Abbreviations

AER – Assembly of European Regions

CEMR – Council of European Municipalities and Regions

CF – Cohesion Fund

CHOIRs – Challenge-Oriented Innovation Partnerships

CJEU – Court of the European Union

COM – European Commission

CONECCS – Consultation the European Commission and Civil Society

CoR – European Committee of the Regions

CPMR – Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions

CSOs – Civil Society Organization

DG EAC – Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

DGs – Directorates-General

EC – European Council

ECRN – European Chemical Regions Network

EDP – Entrepreneurial Discovery Process

EESC – European Economic and Social Committee

EIT – European Institute of Innovation & Technology

EP – European Parliament

ERDF – European Regional Development Fund

ERRIN – European Regions Research and Innovation Network

ESF+ - European Social Fund Plus

ETI – European Transparency Initiative

EU – European Union

EWRC – European Week of Regions and Cities

IIA – Inter-institutional Agreement

JRC – Joint Research Centre

JTF – Just Transition Fund

JTR – Joint Transparency Register

LRAs – Local and Regional Authorities

MFF – Multiannual Financial Framework

MOIP – Mission-Oriented Innovation Policy

MS – Member State

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NUTS – Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

ODP – Open Discovery Process

OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PRIs – Partnerships for Regional Innovation

QMV – Qualified Majority Voting

R&I – Research and Investment

REGLEG – European Regions with Legislative Power

RRP – Recovery and Resilience Facility

S3s – Smart Specialization Strategies

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

SEA – Single European Act

SMEs – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

STI – Science, Technology and Innovation

SWOT - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

TFEU – Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

TTIP – Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

UCLG – United Cities and Local Governments

UN – United Nation

WoG – Whole-of-Government

Introduction

At the end of the 18th century, Pierre-Hyacinthe Caseaux, a merchant and blacksmith in Morez, France, discovered that he could make thin metal eyeglass frames instead of hobnails using essentially the same wire-drawing and finishing skills and abilities that had been the foundation of his profitable company. Many others in his former industry followed Caseaux into the production of spectacle frames, and then into the manufacture of "reading-glasses." Over the course of the following 20 years, a number of small factories specialising in the manufacture of spectacles sprang up in the area. At the time, eyeglasses of the fashionable English type had become a product with a very high potential for market growth. At the end of the 19th century, Morez was regarded as one of the few top centres for the manufacture of eyeglasses. By providing funds for a technical school to train apprentices in this new economic sector, the regional authorities had supported the process. Nowadays, the town continues to command a significant percentage of the world market. This brief story is used by Foray *et al.* (2011) to explain what a successful smart specialisation plan is. It contains all the fundamental ingredients: the entrepreneurial discovery (discovery of eyeglass frames), the imitative entry of other actors in the business, the active role of public institutions, and a structural evolution of the whole regional economy. Yet one may wonder what this story has to do with this thesis. As will be explained in the third chapter, the new Partnerships for Regional Innovation (PRI) are built on the experience of the previous Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). The European Commission (COM) introduced the S3 approach in 2014. This strategy provided a strengthened environment for enhancing contact and collaboration among the many players in innovation ecosystems, at all levels—local, regional, national, and worldwide. Thus, basically,

the European institutions are trying to recreate the same conditions of Morez huge success. In order to recreate this path every ingredient is needed. That is why they call it partnerships. A partnership between private and public spheres, but also within the same sphere is fundamental. Moreover, it is not surprising that the regional authorities played a major role in this successful story. Regional and local actors are those who have to implement the policies for regional innovation, so it makes a lot of sense to incorporate them in the policy development process.

On 17th May 2022, the Pilot Project on Partnerships for Regional was launched jointly by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre and the Committee of the Regions. The PRI are a «new approach to place-based innovation policy which build on positive experiences with smart specialisation strategies»¹ The CoR is a key institution in the EU's institutional framework. Its role in the European decision-making process is multifaceted. The Committee is consulted on a mandatory basis in certain policy areas (TFEU Art. 148, 165, 167, 172, 178). However, existing literature is split on the actual extent of the influence exerted by this institution in the EU's policymaking process. According to Hönnige and Panke (2013), the CoR does have an influence, but it is limited. Piattoni and Schönlau (2015), on the other hand, highlight the CoR's role as an agenda-setter. Nicolosi and Mustert (2020) suggest that it should be more aware of its role of «guardian of subsidiarity», using all its power to make its voice heard. To contribute to the above literature, and with the aim of understanding the agenda-setter role and real influence of the CoR in the EU's policymaking process, the present thesis explores the CoR's role in the development of the PRI. The research questions addressed are as follows: what has been the role of the CoR in the conceptual development process of the PRIs? How did the Committee of the Regions become involved in this work and to what effect? Does the CoR's involvement in the development of the PRI confirm this institution's role as an agenda-setter?

This work comprises four chapters. The first one, “Theoretical Underpinnings”, provides the theoretical elements to understand what underlies the PRI from a theoretical point of view. A major element in the genesis of the PRI is institutional lobbying. This type of lobbying plays an important role in the European policy-

¹ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

making (Panke, 2012). Yet, it is not studied as much as other types of lobbying. It is worth mentioning that institutional lobbying should not be viewed with a negative connotation as it is part of the decision-making process of all democracies worldwide. The second chapter, “Analytical framework: data and methodology”, discusses the methodology adopted in this thesis and explains the reasons behind it, as well as how the data were collected and processed. The third section, “What are the Partnerships for Regional Innovation?”, examines what PRI are from an empirical point of view. It explains the origins, formation and functioning of the partnerships and what policy-makers expect for the future. In the fourth chapter, 'Discussion', there is an analysis of the semi-structured interviews carried out to answer the research questions listed above. They show, as will be discussed in detail, an initial internal reluctance within the Commission to adopt this pilot project. The CoR, which reacted to this appeal, became the JRC's ally in dealing with this initial situation. Lastly, the conclusion hosts a summary of the main points of the thesis, together with some final considerations in response to the research questions. The research hypothesis which will be discussed in the following chapters is that the CoR played, and still plays, a major role in the development of the project. Thus, I believe that it has a broader and more important role than a mere advisory body.

Chapter I

Theoretical underpinning

In the last 30 years, lobbying has been studied and conceptualized in many different ways. Even today there is no common definition among scholars. Beyers *et al.* define lobbying as an attempt by an interest group to influence the policy outcomes via «informal interactions with politicians and bureaucrats» (Beyers *et al.*, 2008: p. 1106). Kluger Dionigi argues that lobbying «includes anyone seeking to influence policy outcomes by targeting decision-makers, either directly or indirectly, to advance their interests through information, arguments, or threats» (Kluger Dionigi, 2017: p. 1). These two definitions suggest that the lobbyist could be a general “interest group” or “anyone”, but only rarely have scholars focused their attention on government officials as lobbyists. In 2007, Frank R. Baumgartner suggested that the European scholars should study more in depth the link between the European officials and the «allies of individual interests» Baumgartner, 2007: p. 483). In his words, «many of those acting as policy advocates are in fact government officials themselves, acting as allies of other and sharing their interests» (Baumgartner, 2007: p. 483). Up to now, there is still a gap in this field of studies. Even in the Green Paper on the European Transparency Initiative published in May 2006, lobbyists are defined as «persons carrying out such [lobbying] activities, working in a variety of organizations such as public affairs consultancies, law firms, NGOs, think-tanks, corporate lobby units (“in-house” representatives”) or trade associations.». Thus, the institutional lobbying is not recognized even by the European institutions.

Many scholars have studied various types of interest groups, yet academic literature has focused on the role of business lobbying and, secondly, to the lobbying of the

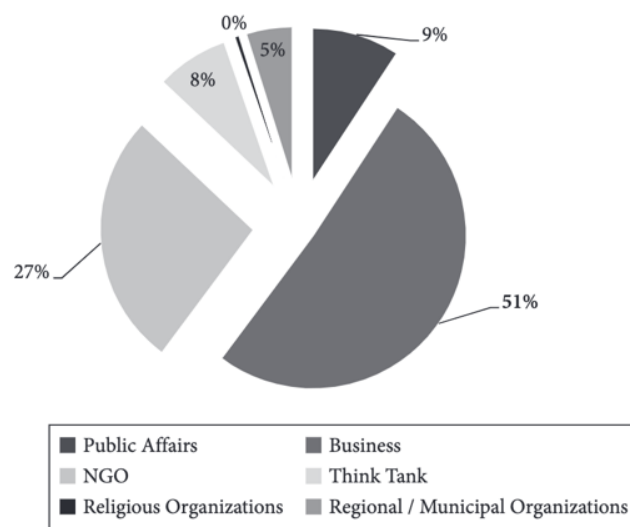


Figure 1: Distribution of different types of interest groups lobbying EU institutions.
 Source: Data from Joint Transparency Index 2019 (Coen et al, 2021: 60)

third sector. It is clear, from Figure 1, why scholars have made this choice. According to Coen *et al*, business lobbying represents 51% of the entire lobbying in the European institutions. This is followed by NGO (27%), public affairs (9%), think tank (8%), regional/municipal organization (5%), and religious organizations (0%) (Coen *et al*, 2021). In their monograph, these authors analyse the relationship between the businesses and government officials, through different levels (macro, meso and micro). The reason why business lobbying accounts for more than half of the entire game is simple: economic interest. Academic literature has studied thoroughly the matter, identifying five elements that explain the success of business lobbying: concentrated and clear constituencies together with financial and organizational resources (Beyers, 2004), technical expertise (Bouwen, 2002), State’s dependency on business capital (Bernhagen & Bräuninger, 2005), and cognitive capture (Kwak, 2014). Businesses can influence and frame an issue to their benefit, ending with a favourable legislation or more funding in a specific policy area.

Although secondary, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have also been studied by scholars. The textbook case is represented by the grassroots movement against Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The 5 elements listed

above might suggest that CSOs have no power in the policy-cycle, however this is not true. The TTIP case proved otherwise. A grassroots movement arose from the ground, forcing the EU to withdraw from the negotiations. The legacy of TTIP represented a new step for the European lobbying framework (Gheyle and De Ville, 2019).

1.1 Informal lobbying

One element that is common to different definitions of lobbying is the role of informal activities. Figure 1.1 shows that informal lobbying counts for 80% of the

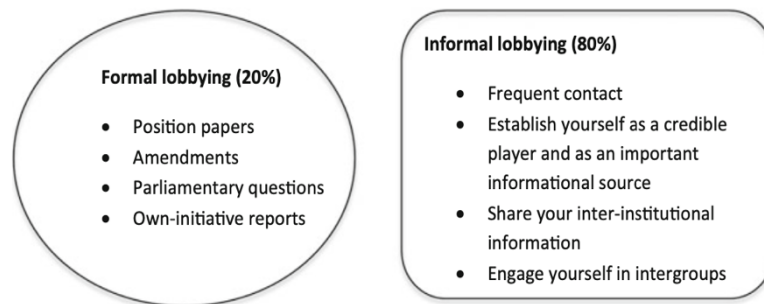


Figure 1.1: Formal and informal lobbying.
Source: Kluger Dionigi, 2017, 22

total activities that a lobbyist undertakes. Kluger Dionigi (2017) listed these activities in relation to the lobbying of the European Parliament (EP), yet they are valuable also for the other European institutions. The author suggests that formal and informal lobbying are part of the same coin. The distinction lies on the different purpose they tend to have. Formal lobbying is used on specific dossiers «when amendments and position papers are communicated to MEPs» (Kluger Dionigi, 2017: p. 22). Informal lobbying is a tool used to establish a trustworthy reputation with the officials. For this reason, it is also called “long-term” lobbying, because it requires time and the fruits will be harvested in the long term. Informal lobbying and governance proved to be a crucial pillar for a smooth and efficient functioning of the European institutions, because they allow convergence of views and normative standards (Christiansen and Piattoni, 2003).

Panke (2012) shed new light on the interinstitutional informal lobbying in particular with reference to how EU Member States (MSs) lobby the European institutions.

Her precious contribution highlighted how informal lobbying is used especially with the Commission and the Council Presidency. As Member States are more involved with these two institutions, more informal relationships are created. Consequently, it is easier for the Member States to influence these European institutions given the more lasting informal relationships. This is primarily due to a transaction-cost effect: the EP does not attend the Council negotiations. Thus, it is easier to establish an informal connection with actors that are already informed and available on the matter. Moreover, the author also noted that when states «have no formal access and no formal power in the consultative stage of the Commission, in the EP and in trilogue meetings» (Panke, 2012: 145), they recur to informal lobbying in order to influence the final consultation.

Of particular interest are the trilogues. They are defined as «informal tripartite meetings on legislative proposals between representatives of the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. Their purpose is to reach a provisional agreement on a text acceptable to both the Council and the Parliament»². The use of these informal meetings is very extensive. Coen *et al* (2021) suggest that 80 per cent of files in the 2009-14 legislature passed in the first reading. The wide use of this instrument raised a couple of questions on the negative democratic implication that this tool could potentially bring because it limits transparency and deliberation and gives a lot of power to limited participants. For all these reasons, the EP decided to limit its use (AFCO, 2017).

This negative view of the trilogues is not new. Lobbying shares a similarly negative reputation. It is associated with the terms such as «corruption» and «unethical practices» (Holman and Susman, 2009). This may be caused by the scandals that occurred in the EU (for example the “cash for law” scandal³) or the alleged lack of transparency by and civic engagement with the European institutions (Greenwood, 2011). Despite the negative connotation of all types of lobbying, one must bear in

² <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/olp/en/interinstitutional-negotiations#:~:text=Trilogues%20are%20informal%20tripartite%20meetings,the%20Council%20and%20the%20Parliament.>

³ Sunday Times journalists pretended to be lobbyists and went undercover to approach 60 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), asking them to support or table particular amendments in exchange for money. What emerged shocked that public opinion, because 4 MEPs accepted the offer (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/insight-fourth-mep-taped-in-cash-for-laws-scandal-n6hlx9fzt2x>).

mind that lobbyists are used by institutions to support and legitimize public policies (Jarman, 2011). Moreover, according to Chalmers (2013), there is an information exchange between EU institutions (especially the EP) and lobbyists, through which knowledgeable interest groups give decision-makers, who are frequently understaffed, specialized and technical information. It is evident that lobbying is part of the democratic process. It is not inherently good or bad: it is just part of the game. Exactly because of this, public demand for transparency has led to the development of a comprehensive regulatory framework for lobbying within the EU.

1.2 The lobbying regulation in the European Union

Lobbying activities at the European level were almost unknown for several years. Yet, the European integration process triggered a huge change in the way interest groups targeted the European institutions. So much that Brussels hosts the «second largest lobbying industry after Washington» (McGrath 2005, in Crepaz *et al*, 2019: p. 50).

The history of the European lobbying started with the creation of the European Steel and Coal Community in 1952, followed few years later by the European Atomic Energy Community (1957) and the European Economic Community (1958). Despite the limited amount of topics considered, these three communities were the first steps for what came to be known as the European integration process. At this time, lobbying was in essence institutional, because even businesses relied on «national trade associations and the national champions of the larger members states, which acted in conjunctions with their government» (Coen *et al*, 2021: p. 23). It is unsurprising that the lobbying regulation at that time was absent.

In 1986, the Single European Act (SEA) raised enormously the importance of lobbying at the European level because it gave new competences to the Community such as on: economic and social cohesion, research and technology, the environment, monetary policy, and social policy. Not to mention the extension Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in economic policy areas (Coen *et al*, 2021). The ultimate result was that interest groups expanded their direct lobbying of the European Commission (Coen, 1997).

The context had changed significantly by many years later, with the Treaty of Lisbon (2007, entered into force in 2009). The Treaty currently represents the constitutional basis of the European Union, and increased the legislative power of the European Parliament. It set the ordinary legislative procedure, which elevated the EP to the same status of co-legislator as the European Council. In doing so, the EP gained new decision-making powers, which made it one of the most lobbied institutions in the EU.

The turning point of lobbying regulation in the European Union were the 1990s. The first person who raised the issue was Alman Metten, in 1989, when he wrote a Written Question regarding the lack of specialized regulation of lobbying in the European Union (AFCO, 2003). Yet, the real first step towards a regulation was implemented by the European Parliament in 1996. In sum, every lobbyist was required to register and disclose details about its organization and the goal of the activities being performed, whilst accepting a code of conduct setting minimal ethical standards. Crepaz and Chari (2014) referred to this initial rule as «minimalist regulatory system», because it was very weak from many points of view (no sanctions, no revolving door provisions, related only to the EP, etc.). Since 1999, the European Commission has implemented some transparency-related measures in order to regulate its own administration: access to documents, legislation and to databases on consultative bodies and experts, a register of documents, the Code of Good Administrative Behaviour and the Code of Conduct for Commissioners (EP, 2005). A “Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society” database (CONECCS) was also implemented. Yet, it is estimated that no more than 7% of all lobbyists registered.

In 2005, Siim Kallas, the Director-General for Administrative Affairs, Audit and Anti-Fraud, launched the European Transparency Initiative (ETI) which ended in the creation, in 2008, of the first registry for lobbyists. The European Commission Register of Interest Representatives was voluntary in nature and those who registered had to abide with a code of conduct. Moreover, the EP adopted in the same year a resolution on the development of the framework for the activities of interest representatives in European institutions. After this, a Joint Working Group, between the EP and the Commission, started to prepare the Inter-institutional

Agreement (IIA). In 2011, the Joint Transparency Register (JTR) was established, still voluntary in nature (Coen *et al.*, 2021).

Following the “cash for law” scandal, the EP asked the Commission to submit a new proposal. In 2014 a new IIA was signed, improving the rules on financial disclosure and the availability of data. Thanks to Juncker’s activism for institutional transparency, a new legislative proposal was discussed, but it did not reach the final step until July 2021. After five years of negotiations, the EU was able to improve its own lobbying laws. The Joint Transparency Register will now be a requirement for all interest representatives attempting to influence the EU, according to an agreement reached by the Commission, the Parliament, and the Council. The European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament achieved this by signing an interinstitutional agreement requiring lobbyists, lawmakers, and Commission representatives to register their meetings. However, there are still gaps. In short, there is a grey area where it is simple to avoid the Register (for example churches and faith-based associations or confederations). Additionally, only the committee chairmen, the rapporteurs, and the shadow rapporteurs are required to declare their meetings with EU Parliament stakeholders. Regular MEPs are also only encouraged to do so, as are lower-level employees like assistants from the Commission and the Parliament. Finally, the permanent delegations of each EU Member State that actively advocate in Brussels are not required to register with the Council. Nevertheless, a few countries, such as Germany and Italy, have chosen to make the sessions of the permanent representatives transparent. ALTER_EU suggests that the Transparency Register is not legally mandatory. Although the incentives are not specified in the IIA, the system is nonetheless built on incentives. Since the institutions were unable to agree on the incentives, they decided to create their own. In this regard, ALTER-EU suggests that these incentives should be created and put into effect by the institutions in a coordinated manner. Moreover, there are no regulations governing staff lobbying gatherings. Registered lobbyists are not required to disclose when they hire former EU institution employees or members. The introduction of liability in the client-intermediary is undermined by the next clause, nullifying the first. Lastly, although the complaints procedure has been described in much greater

depth, there are still issues with the absence of warnings or deadlines for filing complaints. For instance, a one-year window for filing complaints for Code of Conduct infractions is too short.

As I stated above, Brussels represents the second largest lobbying arena in the world, because thanks to the furthering of the European integration process and the development of the lobbying regulation, various interests merged in one city. Coen *et al.*, write «it is unsurprising that in the 1960s and the 1970s the number of interest group organizations located in Brussels were limited, estimated at only 200 groups» (Coen *et al.*, 2021: p. 23). To date, estimations by Transparency International EU⁴ tell us that there are about 48,000 individuals seeking to influence the EU institutions, of which 7,500 accredited with a lobby badge to the European

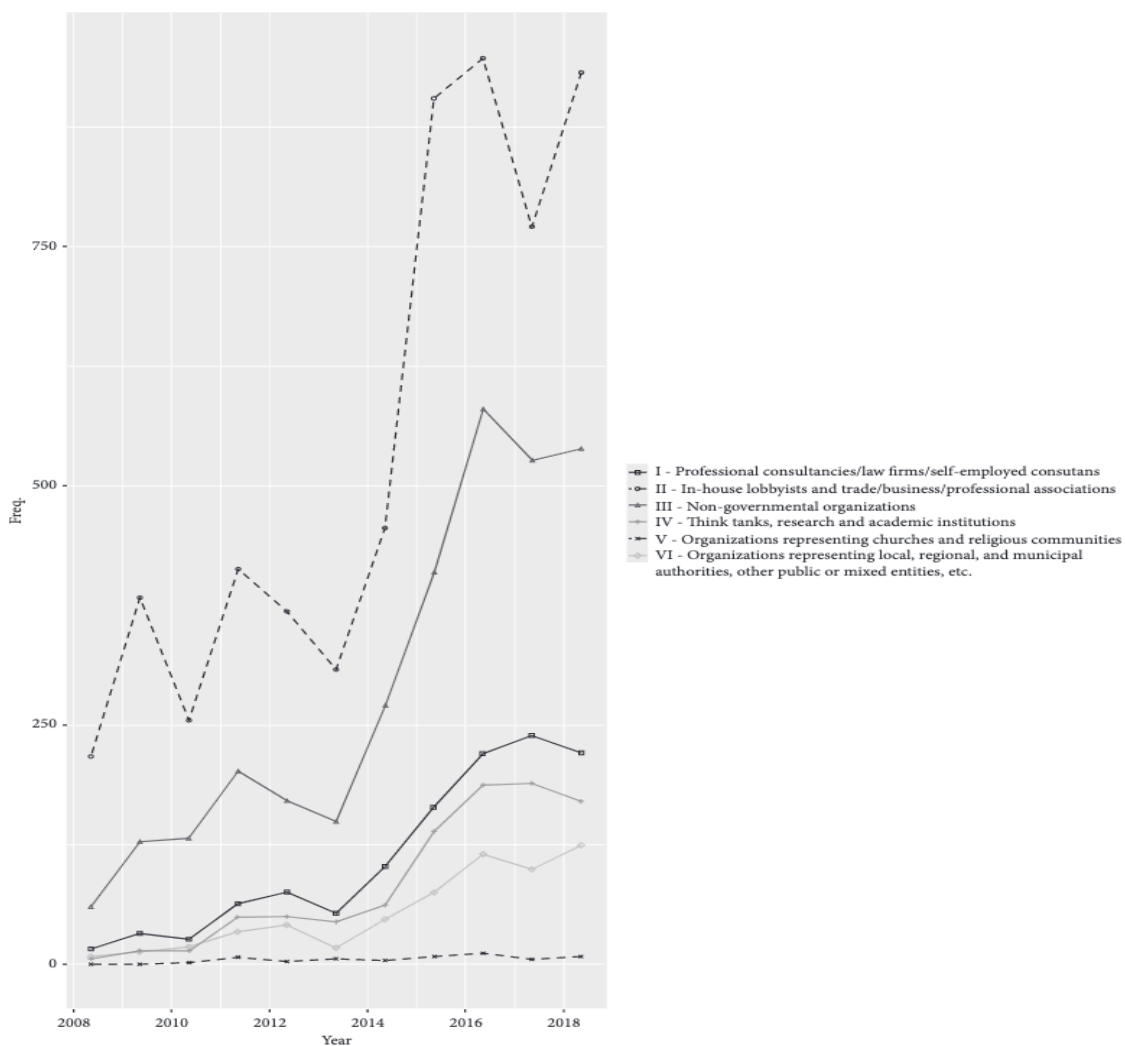


Figure 1.2: Number of organizations registering in the Joint Transparency Register per year.
Source: Joint Transparency Register 2019 (Coen et al, 2021, 51)

⁴ <https://transparency.eu/priority/eu-money-politics/>

Parliament. Moreover, nearly 12,000 organizations voluntarily registered in the JTR with a combined annual lobby budget of 1.8 billion euros⁵. In order to have a clear picture of this phenomenon, it is useful to take a look at Figure 1.2. It shows the trend of expansion and concentration of each interest group. Not surprisingly, the first group, in terms of speed and concentration, is represented by the “in-house lobbyists and trade/business/professional associations”. The last group are the “organizations representing local, regional, and municipal authorities, other public or mixed entities, etc.”.

This confirms what I already showed in Figure 1 (p. 6). In 2019, only 14%⁶ of the all lobbyists in Brussels were lobbying for public interests. Yet, the relatively limited number of these lobbyists does not affect their effectiveness. On the contrary, probably the informal ties that they can boast with European officials allows them to reach where non-institutional lobbyists cannot. This can be explained through the relationships that institutional issues create between the actors and also because both groups are already aware of the issue at hand. The set of informal ties and human relations that are created between institutional actors may be the reason why institutional lobbying is so effective. Thus, institutional actors, especially those within the European institutions, have a preferred path (Panke, 2012; Christiansen and Piattoni, 2003).

My hypothesis, which will be discussed in the next chapter, relates to the support of the CoR for the formulation and implementation of the new PRIs. So, before turning to this specific case, it is worth describing how the CoR influences the European policy cycle and how it lobbies the other European institutions.

1.3 Regional governance in the EU and its impact on EU policy-making

In this section, I will briefly analyse how the Committee of the Regions, and more in general the European Regions, affect the European policy-making.

⁵ <https://transparency.eu/priority/eu-money-politics/lobbying/>

⁶ Combining 9% (public affairs) and 5% (regional/municipal organization).

The CoR was established in 1992 by the Maastricht Treaty and came into existence in 1994. This institution was the result of different factors, such as: the relaunch of the Community by Jacques Delors in 1985, the signing of the Single European Act in 1987, the Single Market in 1993 and, finally, the salience of the new sub-national level in the European arena. All these factors «have made the “regional dimension” more central to European policies in general and have strengthened the participation and representation of regions and local authorities in European policy-making» (Loughlin, 1997: p. 194). Yet, the story is not as straightforward as it might seem at first sight. There were some difficulties in how the CoR, and the regions, were represented at the European level. First, what was a region was not clear at all. Each Member State (MS) had its own geographical organization. Moreover, not every country had a meso-level in its governance. Second, the wide variety of how central states dealt with local administrations had to be taken into consideration. Lastly, should the CoR represent the interest of regions or even the that one of local administrations?

The term “region” had different meanings. There are “global regions” (West Europe, South America, South-East Asia) and regions within or across countries. The latter can be divided in four types of regions: economic regions, historical regions, administrative regions and political regions. Groppi (2007) highlighted that the absence of a clear definition in the European governance was one of the weaknesses of the regionalism in the EU. That was why in 2003 the European Union adopted a geocode standard called “Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics” (NUTS). Today this standard is essential in order to allocate funds and study the outcomes of the European policies.

The second point represented one of the biggest complexities in the European integration process. Loughlin (1997) distinguishes between federal and non-federal (centralized unitary states, decentralized unitary states, regionalized unitary states) systems. Each of which contains a cosmos in its own. That is why I will not go into the details of each one. What is important to mention here is that every European Member State has a different relationship between the various level of governance. Multiply these differences for all EU Member States and you will understand why it was challenging to find a solution that suited everyone.

Whether or not to include local interest in the CoR's remit was a debated point too. But given the differences discussed above, it did not make sense to restrict the institution's competencies to a general regional level. Thus, the Member States, during the negotiations for the birth of the institution, decided to include both. This according to Loughlin (1997) diminished the importance of the institution, because it nuanced its role and the possible future federal Europe. Moreover, the author identified at least five other reasons that weakened this institution. First, the representatives of the regions and local authorities were chosen by the national governments. Second, governments had the option of appointing non-elected people as Committee delegates. This implied that, for instance, local businesspeople may potentially be nominated. Third, the CoR was obliged to share some resources (mainly financial) with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Fourth, the decision on how to rule the institution were up to the Council of Ministers and not to the Committee itself. Finally, the power of the CoR was limited to consultation only, similarly to the EESC. The CoR has had to adapt to two different sets of expectations on the part of the other EU institutions. One is that it can provide expertise on the reality of EU policy on the ground, and local/regional situations, and explain EU decisions back in their regions (Domorenok, 2009).

Having said this, it is not a surprise that the CoR has only three official ways to access the European Union's decision-making process. The Committee is consulted on a mandatory basis in certain policy areas⁷ (TFEU Art. 148, 165, 167, 172, 178). The three main European institutions may ask for the so-called "optional" or "facultative" opinions in all cases of interest to the Committee. This interest can be applied whenever a proposal has important regional or local implications. Lastly, the CoR can issue opinions on its own initiative. These opinions are usually written in the form of general comments, policy recommendations and amendments.

There are 329 members of the CoR who represent local and regional governments from the 27 EU Member States. Five to six times a year, they meet in plenary in Brussels to decide on political goals and vote on EU legislation. Members must

⁷ These include policy areas such as the internal market, environment and sustainable development, agriculture, employment, social policy, cohesion policy, youth and education, vocational training, research and innovation, culture, health, transport and energy, consumer policy and trade.

have won a political mandate from their home nation or have been democratically elected. Every national government suggests its regional and local delegates, or "national delegations," which must be authorised by the EU Council. It is composed of six thematic commissions:

- Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture Commission (SEDEC). This commission is responsible for the PRIs.
- Citizenship, governance, institutional and external affairs commission (CIVEX);
- Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget Commission (COTER);
- Economic Policy Commission (ECON);
- Commission for the Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE);
- Natural Resources Commission (NAT)⁸.

The CoR's involvement in upholding the subsidiarity principle has come to light as an important area of work. According to the subsidiarity principle, decisions should be made as near to the people as possible. It is one of the criteria the EU should consider while exercising its legislative powers, according to the Maastricht Treaty (Tridimas, 2006). It made sense to give the CoR jurisdiction over the subsidiarity principle since the CoR consists of representatives or officers who operate at the closest level to the public. The CoR acknowledged this function soon after it was established and referred to itself as the "guardian of subsidiarity" (Opinion of the CoR, CdR 302/98 fin) OJ 1999 C 198/7). The CoR was not designated as the "guardian of the subsidiarity", however, until the Lisbon Treaty. The Lisbon Treaty significantly altered the Protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality as annexed to the Treaties by placing a strong emphasis on the further democratisation of the EU, the strengthening of national parliaments' roles, and the principle of subsidiarity (Petrašević and Duić, 2021). Yet, Piattoni and Schönlaue (2015) acknowledge that «while not unequivocally justiciable, the principle of subsidiarity is symptomatic of a new form of surveillance, where accounting for having made a decision at the inappropriate level is not predefined by a static division of competences, nor decided once and for all by procedural

⁸ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/commissions>

choices, but needs to be decided case by case on the basis of good arguments and convincing evidence» (Piattoni and Schönlau, 2015: p. 3). The principle of subsidiarity was even strengthened by the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). It gave the CoR legal standing to bring annulment cases before the Court of the European Union (CJEU) «for the purpose of protecting their prerogatives» under Article 263 of the TFEU. This has significantly enhanced the CoR's position. This action was a brand-new, potent tool for the CoR. The action for annulment, which is a judicial action conducted before the CJEU, is the control mechanism that the Lisbon Treaty provides the CoR. By taking this move, the Court is empowered to examine the validity of any actions passed by European institutions, bodies, offices, or organisations. As a result, if the Court determines that the act in question violates EU law, it shall be declared invalid. Additionally, Article 2 of Protocol stipulates that the Committee of the Regions may pursue proceedings for annulment against legislative acts that the CoR believes violate the concept of subsidiarity and those whose adoption need previous consultation with the CoR. Thus «while not unequivocally justiciable, the principle of subsidiarity is symptomatic of a new form of surveillance, where accounting for having made a decision at the inappropriate level is not predefined by a static division of competences, nor decided once and for all by procedural choices, but needs to be decided case by case on the basis of good arguments and convincing evidence» (Piattoni and Schönlau, 2015: p. 3).

1.4 The Regions' role in the European policy-making

The brief description gives an idea of how complex the role of the CoR is in the European legislative process. Before discussing this issue further, which I shall do in the next section, this paragraph provides some context on the role that individual regions play in the European decision-making process. What I will discuss in this section does not undermine the CoR's role in this process. On the contrary, the regions' role in the European decision-making process complements and supports that of the Committee. The regional perspective is important in this analysis

because, apparently, the frontrunner regions played a role in the shaping of the PRIs.

As mentioned above, one of the factors that contributed to the birth of the Committee of the Regions was the establishment of liaison offices of the regional and local authorities in Brussels. Birmingham City Council was the first to open an office in 1984, quickly followed by Spanish, French and German regional and local authorities. The following decade saw the arrival of the first offices from Belgium, Italy, Denmark and other EU countries (Ammassari, 2010). This new trend gave rise to a plethora of different systems that did not conform into one, in parallel with the diversity of institutional settings that existed, and still exists, across the Member States. Thus, one can find «ministries of federal regions staffed by civil servants through to economic development agencies through to membership associations of territorial civil society organizations. [...] from territorial administrations in federal states through to local government; public-private partnerships and membership services offices, which may reflect national controversies in the establishment of a territorial ‘representation’ in Brussels» (Greenwood, 2017: 182). These different systems of regional lobbying will be discussed later.

Trobbiani (2019) highlighted the double nature of regions when it comes to lobbying their interest in EU policy-making. On the one hand, they are public authorities which are in charge of the implementation of roughly 70% of EU legislation⁹. For this reason, they are also formally involved in the EU legislative procedure through the CoR. On the other hand, they can be described as the bridges between EU institutions and multiple economic, social and cultural interests from their territory. Keating (2000: p. 9) defined the activity played by the regions as “paradiplomacy”. In his words, paradiplomacy is «inherently a pluralistic activity involving economic and social actors as well as governments and its success often hinges on the ability to involve these» (Keating, 2000: p. 9). This basic distinction allows us to understand why regions are so important. They represent a milestone of the European policy-making.

It is also important to mention that the national political system in which regions operate may affect their lobbying goals in the EU. According to Tatham (2008),

⁹ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/about/Pages/default.aspx#9>

there are stronger regions and weaker regions in the arena. Their strength or weakness is linked to the degree of devolution in their national system and the expertise of their staff. Stronger regions might aim to influence EU decision-making, while weaker regions from centralized states might seek primarily to obtain funding from the EU (Greenwood, 2011). Despite the obviousness and clarity of the thought, the empirical evaluation of this phenomenon is difficult (Greenwood, 2011).

Building on Tatham's thought, one can assume that only stronger regions can actually have a say in EU policy-making. Yet this is not true. There is a third way, that is used by regions to have an impact on the European agenda: interregional networks. There are many and different regional networks in Brussels, but they do not substitute official mechanisms, rather they complement them. Interregional networks are defined as «associations formed between subnational entities of different states whose ultimate purpose is to act as pressure groups in multilateral institutions, and foster cooperation based upon common interests, needs and aspirations» (Happaerts, 2008: 4). These entities are typically distinguished by a relatively homogeneous membership made up of civil servants or even elected politicians, with a tendency to concentrate on all policy areas under a region's remit without specializing in a particular legislative field, and a propensity to advocate on institutional meta-issues relating to regional participation in EU policy-making. The main entities are the Assembly of European Regions (AER) and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). AER was founded in 1985 and it can count on 270 regions, also from outside the EU. AER took an active role in the establishment of the CoR and it also had a strong working relationship with the Commission, particularly in regard to institutional issues and structural funds, and was successful in its efforts to get the subsidiarity concept incorporated into the Maastricht Treaty. Nowadays it is focused on strengthening the cooperation and networking among its members (Happaerts, 2008). CEMR founded in 1984, it is the European section of the world organization United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). It exhibits a clear internal difference between the interests of the two institutions and, in contrast to AER, is more focused on local authorities than regions. Another smaller network is the European Regions with Legislative

Power (REGLEG). REGLEG was created in 2000 and is open only to those regions¹⁰ with legislative power. Despite its size, it gained a special status within the CoR (CoR 2008) and in the 2000 European Council Declaration (Greenwood 2011). Its main goal is to defend their regional status and competences.

Specific policy-oriented organizations proved to be even more efficient than the general ones (Bouza García, 2011). These are typically distinguished by a membership that enables the inclusion of experts from the regions along with representatives of other economic, social, and cultural actors, a focus on particular policy areas involving regions as institutions and as intermediaries for territorially based interests, and a working methodology based on developing expert positions through the involvement of like-minded stakeholders, most of whom are based in their territories. Interestingly, in a survey conducted by Trobbiani (2019), the interviewees¹¹ were asked if, in response to the inefficiency of the CoR, they started to adopt the same strategies of non-institutional actors. 64.5%¹² of the responses were positive, making thematic networks one of the principal ways to influence the EU policy-making. Through this type of networks, members develop expertise on specific policies and create broader alliances. They are able to «exploit the opportunity structures available for the inclusion of wider civil society in the EU law-making process, [...], as well as less formal contacts with EU legislators in search of technical advice» (Trobbiani, 2019: p. 193). Not to mention the big advantage of those institutionally weaker regions that are excluded from other mechanisms of representations (Greenwood, 2011a). In addition, the search for European funding through the creation of interregional initiatives and the submission of application programs like Horizon 2020, substantially influences the importance of thematic networks. There are many policy-oriented organizations, the main ones are: the European Regional and Local Health Authorities (EUREGHA), the European Chemical Regions Network (ECRN), the European Regions Research and Innovation Network¹³ (ERRIN), the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR), etc. Even thematic collaboration, which

¹⁰ In total, there are 75 regions from 8 Member States with legislative powers in the EU.

¹¹ A group of 39 anonymous most-senior officials working in regional offices in Brussels.

¹² Composed by 38.7% agreed with the statement and 25.8% strongly agreed.

¹³ ERRIN was the most mentioned in Trobbiani's survey.

can allow smaller regions to have a say on issues in which they are highly specialized, cannot fully guarantee equal participation. Indeed, despite programs such as the Joint Transparency Register, regional lobbying is still not properly regulated and economic and human resources have a significant impact on a region's ability to influence policy.

1.5 The Committee of the Regions as an institutional lobbyist

In the previous section, I discussed how the CoR can influence officially the European policy-making process. In this section, I will provide a brief explanation of how the CoR informally influences the EU policy process.

The role of the CoR as policy entrepreneur is more or less important according to scholars. The CoR can be used to promote regional interests in two different ways. First, it can help the Commission identify its allies and support its views. During the 2005 budget negotiations, for instance, the CoR backed the Commission's position on regional policy. Secondly, the CoR can also exert its influence by providing suggestions on policies that the Commission should adopt. This occurs when the Commission does not have a clear-cut view on certain issues. (Tatham, 2008). Examples of this are regional airports legislation or cultural policies. The Commission then uses the CoR as a test-bed for its policy proposals. In these cases, regions can try to exert some influence on the EU's policy process. However, in other situations, their influence might be weak or diffuse (Tatham, 2008). Moreover, another interpretation that has now been superseded is that the Commission used the CoR to bypass the Member States (John, 2000).

How influential the Committee is remains an open question, although tending toward the negative. According to Hönnige and Panke, this consultative committee «do have influence on policy-making, both on the addressee and the final policy outcome, even though their recommendations are not binding for the addressee. However, this influence is limited, with 40 per cent of respondents fully ignoring the advice given by EESC and CoR» (Hönnige and Panke, 2013: p. 467). Nicolosi and Mustert suggest that it should be more aware of its role of «guardian of

subsidiarity». Using all its power to make its voice heard. But also, that CoR's «activism remains merely symbolic if not complemented by constitutional effectiveness» (Nicolosi and Mustert, 2020: p. 287). Petrašević and Duić (2016) describe the CoR as an institution with “modest” powers and internal divisions. The heterogeneous background of the CoR members entails a weakness according to the authors as each level of government could push for a different outcome even within the same State. Another point raised by the authors is that the members of the CoR are not always directly elected, so this may affect negatively its democratic legitimacy.

So far I discussed the negative or sceptical view of academic literature on the CoR's role in the EU's policy-making. Nevertheless, these opinions are only part of the picture. On the contrary, most scholars agree that greater importance and powers should be given to the CoR. As stated by Schönlau (2017: p. 1175), «it is difficult, in this context, and given the complexity of the debates, to precisely show whether/how the CoR is ‘successful’ in permanently pushing the boundaries of its treaty mandate». Nevertheless, in this section I will try to provide an overview on the issue. This institution is certainly part of the European decision-making process, being an advisory body. But its role, with time and increased resources (financial and human), has become increasingly important (Schönlau, 2017).

Many scholars and observers see the CoR as a useless institution because it is too internally divided and unable to bring added value to the decision-making process (Petrašević and Duić, 2016; Tatham, 2008). On the contrary, Piattoni and Schönlau's analysis sees the CoR as an essential institution precisely because it does not have the power to decide (to express its will), but must strive to produce a judgement, i.e. to articulate its voice and exercise control. That is, it must overcome the many divisions that exist within it and find a common voice. The CoR has investigated other methods of "activating," "proposing," "receiving," and "surveilling" other EU actors and their choices (Piattoni and Schönlau, 2015). Piattoni and Schönlau (2015) consider the history of this institution a rather strong indication of its ability to influence European decision-making and even impose a certain vision. Consider that the CoR's areas of “mandatory consultation” have increased considerably since 1994. Rising from 4 to 14 thanks to the Amsterdam

and Lisbon Treaties. The authors attribute this rise to an intense lobbying campaign towards both the European Commission and the Member States. Martial (2022) sees the cohesion policy reforms, influenced by CoR lobbying, as proof of the institution's efficiency and determination. Moreover, a recent empirical research has highlighted that the CoR has a greater opportunity to influence EU decision-making when it actively advocates its viewpoints through «extracurricular activities»¹⁴ (Hönnige and Panke, 2016). Wobben¹⁵ (2016) defined some characteristics that these activities must have and that are necessary for the CoR to successfully influence European decision-making. These are: long-term planning over many years; targeted involvement of key stakeholders and partners in the various stages of the debate; timely selection of the appropriate actors, both at the political and administrative levels; consistent demands at the European, but also at the local and national levels; focus on key priorities; flexibility to respond to new circumstances; and stamina to keep sight of the target, despite sometimes fast-moving political operations.

Piattoni (2022) discussed the impact the CoR has towards the Commission and the European Parliament. The relationship between the CoR and the Commission is so close that the two institutions signed a coordination memorandum that allows the CoR to organise its work according to the Commission's timetable. Over time, the CoR has increasingly focused more on the production of opinions necessary for decision-making and has made less use of the instrument of own-initiative opinions, which, however, when produced have a greater impact. Regarding the relationship between the CoR and the European Parliament, both representing different aggregations of citizens, there are now frequent and collaborative contacts between the rapporteurs of legislative proposals of the Parliament and of opinions of the CoR. In this way, the two institutions tend to align their work assembly and have a greater impact. Even more systematic are the contacts between representatives of the political groups who can guide the decisions of the European Parliament and the CoR in their respective plenary sessions (Piattoni, 2022).

¹⁴ These activities are seminars, participation in hearings, circulation of additional information etc.

¹⁵ It must be acknowledged that he is Director for Legislative Works (Regional Policy, Economic Affairs, Employment and Innovation) of the European Committee of the Regions.

Chapter II

Analytical framework: data and methodology

The structure of the thesis follows the logic of a classical master's thesis. First, I have identified the intervening mechanisms based on theoretical studies. Second, I shall apply the conceptual lenses adopted to the empirical case (the PIRs, Partnerships for Regional Innovation). Finally, I shall assess the results of the empirical analysis in the light of the information gathered during the interviews.

As outlined in the introduction, the main research questions are: what has been the role of the CoR in the conceptual development process of the PRIs? How did the Committee of the Regions become involved in this work and to what effect? Does the CoR's involvement in the development of the PRIs confirm this institution's role as an agenda-setter?

What I want to highlight is the CoR's role in this pilot project. Many scholars argue that this institution is almost useless or even that it should merge with the EESC to get a bigger influence and do not waste too many resources (Petrašević and Duić, 2016). Yet, my hypothesis is that the CoR played, and is playing, a major role in the development of this project, thus recognising that the CoR has a broader and more important role than that of a mere advisory body. In order to test this hypothesis and answer my research questions, the analysis builds on three steps.

Primary literature analysis. I have carried out an extensive review of literature and grey literature on the issues discussed in this work.

Primary resource analysis. I have sourced and analysed a variety of official documents of the European Commission and other European institutions pertaining

to the PRIs. The third chapter of this dissertation, in particular, is based on the official documentation on the PRIs¹⁶ which is available online and from panels on the subject held during the “European Week of Regions and Cities”¹⁷.

Qualitative expert interviews. What emerges from the official documents is that the CoR played a role in the development of the project, but it is not possible to understand exactly what role and its importance. In order to gain a better understanding of these matters, I carried out interviews with selected key actors, from both institutions (European Commission, JRC, and Committee of the Regions). I chose the semi-structured interview approach, in order to cover a wide range of topics. Semi-structured interviews often take place in a setting where the interviewer is given a list of questions that are similar to an interview guide but has the freedom to change the order of the questions. Most of the time, the questions have a broader scope than what is generally found in a structured interview schedule. Additionally, the interviewer often has considerable freedom to follow up on responses that are perceived as noteworthy (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). The underlying reason why I chose this type of interviews is that usually they provide a more in-depth understanding of participant’s perceptions, motivation, and emotions. More precisely, I selected three individuals that are actively working on PRIs from the CoR and the JRC.¹⁸

A series of questions was used as a guide for the interviews, namely:

- How was this concept developed (beyond the official documentation)?
- How did the Committee of the Regions get involved in this work?
- What was the main focus/content of the CoR’s proposals?
- How did the CoR seek and organise the inputs from regional/local actors?
- Were the inputs from the CoR taken on board?
- What have been the practical outcomes of the CoR’s involvement?

¹⁶ The available documentation can be found here: <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/pri>

¹⁷ In particular, I refer to the conference held on 11 October 2022 entitled “Partnerships for Regional Innovation (PRI): Sharing experience of a new experimental policy” and a second conference held on 13 October 2022 entitled “Transition of the S3 to the PRI (S4) through the circular economy”.

¹⁸ Originally, I selected four individuals including an official from a regional authority. The latter would have brought the regional perspective in the research. Yet, despite several attempts, it has been not possible to finalise the interview.

- On the whole, how do you assess the role that the CoR has had in shaping the partnerships?

As already mentioned, this was a guide, during the interviews the questions were adapted according to the answers given. Interviewees were contacted by email starting in July 2022. Interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams or Zoom in October 2022 and lasted about 25 minutes each. Answers were recorded by note-taking and the participants agreed to register the calls. I also transcribed the calls according to the intelligent verbatim transcription level.

The results of the interviews will be discussed and summarized in a coherent way in the fourth chapter.

Of course, more interviews, including with other actors (e.g. in selected regions) might have yielded more solid findings. Yet, this is what was possible given the limited time and resources available. This does not mean that this work might not be further developed with more interviews in future research endeavours.

Chapter III

What are the Partnerships for Regional Innovation?

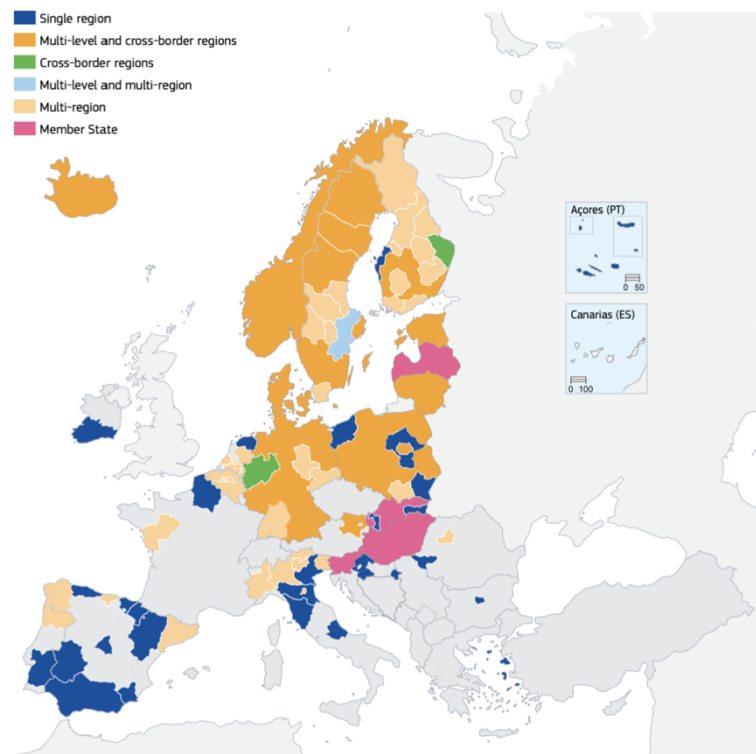


Figure 3: Participation in the PRI
Source: Pontikakis et al., 2022c: 8

The Partnerships for Regional Innovation «aspire to become a strategic framework for innovation-driven territorial transformation, linking EU priorities with national plans and place-based opportunities and challenges». Moreover, they «aim to draw linkages across multiple policy domains and funding instruments, exploits

synergies and address possible tension to generate co-benefits for the economy, society and environment» (Pontikakis *et al*, 2022a: p. 4). Figure 3 shows the 74 territories (4 Member States, 63 regions, and 7 cities) that joined the pilot project. As highlighted in the Playbook published by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre together with the European Committee of the Regions, this pilot project owes a lot to the experience with Smart Specialization Strategies (S3s). The S3s was created within the context of the EU Cohesion policy during the 2014–2020 programme cycle. At the end of the programme, the strategy was praised, but also criticized. According to recent research, the S3s have improved relationships between parties and addressed coordination issues, leading to more inclusive regional governance of innovation policy (Guzzo and Giannelle, 2021). Many scholars studied S3 approach from various perspective identifying some shortcomings, such as: the possibility for lagging regions to develop an effective S3 policy, due to the lack of capacity (McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2015), Borrás (2011) suggests that S3 does not connect innovations with the necessary policy environment, Kroll (2015) says that integration between place-based theoretical development of innovation systems in economic geography and S3 is lacking, other scholars criticise the adherence between of real policy actions to the S3 conceptual framework (Marrocu *et al.*, 2022; D'Adda *et al.*, 2020; Gianelle *et al.*, 2020; Trippel *et al.*, 2020; Di Cataldo *et al.*, 2021).

The aim of the PRIs is to break down the criticism and problems discussed above encountered in the previous experience of the Smart Specialisation Strategies. But not only that. The ultimate goal is to make it more inclusive towards greater civil society participation with a strong focus on twin transitions and environmental sustainability. System-level innovation is the model used to frame innovation in S3s and PRIs. However, in the latter, enterprises and knowledge producers share centre stage with users and households. This seeks to make people aware that transformative social change, which would be the ultimate goal of PRIs, will inevitably entail new socio-economic configurations and thus new socio-economic functions. Yet as acknowledged by Koundouri *et al.* (2022), this shift toward a more systemic approach poses a number of difficulties. These can include a lack of a comprehensive and cohesive policy context, a lack of comprehension of how

research and innovation might help sustainability, or a slow rate of implementing structural and organizational changes. The partnerships will be created from a multi-level perspective, paying attention to the necessities of local, regional, and national policy makers and creating routes for their closer cooperation and alignment. They focus in particular on two forms of fragmentation that harm the EU innovation ecosystem: misalignments between regional/national and EU activities and fragmentation of financial instruments and policies in territories.

In this chapter I will analyse how the PRIs approach fits in the EU's policy framework. I will explain the three building blocks of the PRIs and the related tools. After this, a discussion on the future developments on PRIs will follow. Please note that this chapter is mainly based on official documents¹⁹ available on the European Commission website. Furthermore, as this is a pilot project, some information or concepts may change in the future.

3.1 The PRIs in the EU's policy framework and in the global policy framework

The PRIs strategy is intended to coordinate numerous funding and policy areas for the twin green and digital transition and be appropriate for different levels of government. Additionally, it ought to make use of a range of assistance tools and enable collaboration with European missions and partnerships (thanks to mission hubs). Furthermore, as already mentioned, the new strategy operates not only at the European level but also at the national, regional and local levels. For all these reasons, the PRIs approach must be seen as a framework itself in which many policy actors operate. Figure 3.1 exemplifies a complex situation in which there are five main policies that are part of current European policies and that often complement each other.

¹⁹ Specifically: Pontikakis et al., 2022a; 2022b; 2022c.

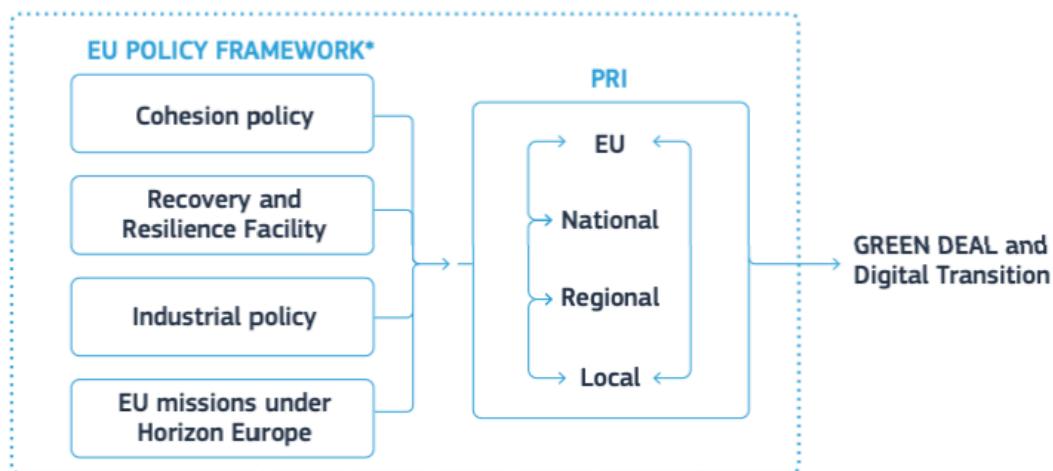


Figure 3.1: How does the PRI fit into the EU policy framework?
 Source: Pontikakis et al., 2022c: 6

I will briefly analyse each one:

- **Cohesion policy:** Cohesion policy is “the EU’s main investment policy”²⁰ with € 392 billion for 2021-2027 period, almost a third of the total EU budget. It is delivered through specific funds: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion fund (CF), European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and Just Transition Fund (JTF). As stated above, in 2014 the European Commission made the use of the Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3s) as an ex-ante conditionality for two²¹ thematic objectives of the ERDF funding and theme one²² of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Even if the PRIs strategy represents the evolution of the previous concept, yet nothing will change in this regard, the conditionality criterion will be maintained;
- **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRP):** The Recovery and Resilience Facility is the foundational tool of NextGenerationEU, which aims to assist the EU in overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic towards a more sustainable, resilient and better prepared European economy and society. The Recovery

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/investment-policy/

²¹ Strengthening research, technological development and innovation (R&I target); enhancing access to and use quality of ICT (ICT target).

²² Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture forestry and rural areas.

and Resilience Facility may be implemented with the help of the PRIs, which encourages a logic of economic transformation that connects RRP money with other tools at hand and produces substantive change;

- **Industrial policy:** The European industrial policy aims to make European industry competitive and sustainable always in the light of the twin transition. The PRIs will make an effort to connect networks of regions in order to jointly develop mechanisms that solve territorial fragmentation and connect regions to resilient European value chains. In place-based industrial transitions, this may result in the creation of workable transitional paths;
- **EU missions under Horizon Europe:** Horizon Europe is “the EU’s key funding programme for research and innovation”²³ with a budget of € 95.5 billion. The missions are a novelty of the HE programs for the 2021-2027 period. They will bring concrete solutions to some of the greatest challenges the EU is facing, setting ambitious goals and concrete results by 2030. The new PRIs has the potential to serve as a territorial and catalyst coordinator. In light of the fact that four of the five EU missions—Climate adaptation, Oceans and waterways, Soil and food, and Climate-neutral cities—are location-based. For the regions and nations taking part in the missions, this will create new chances to develop place-based innovation clusters, scale up homegrown technologies, gain access to funds for innovation, and engage in global networking and interregional cooperation in accordance with the PRIs;
- **EU Green Deal and Digital Transition:** The European Green Deal intends to promote resource efficiency by implementing a clean, circular economy, as well as to halt climate change, stop the loss of biodiversity, and reduce pollution. It describes the financial resources that must be invested in, the funding options available, and how to achieve a fair and equitable transition. The socio-economic transformation rationale that underpins the Green Deal is completely in line with the PRIs. In any region, PRIs can successfully promote Green Deal goals.

²³ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

Moreover, in order to support the integration of activities and investment at the EU and national levels, the Partnerships are also grounded in the planned new Innovation Agenda for Europe. It aims to promote innovation ecosystems, which are crucial for enhancing Europe's performance in the innovation department. The main goals are to increase the connections between local and regional innovation ecosystems, as well as to support deep-tech industries and sustainable value chains throughout Europe.

So far, I have analysed how the PRIs fits into the European policy framework, but the European Union and its Member States have also co-created and committed to the Global Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, a brief analysis of the global perspective will be provided. Innovation is acknowledged as a key driver towards the SDGs in many international reports (Sustainable Development Report 2019 or TWI 2050 report). But to achieve the goals set by the United Nations (UN), this innovation needs to reach all levels of governance before it is too late. The timing issue is highlighted by many experts but also by UN Secretary General in 2019 who announced the Decade of Action. In this regard, The UN created the Technology Facilitation Mechanism to encourage multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaboration in achieving the SDGs. Synergies and coordinated policy initiatives to solve knowledge and capacity shortages that many territories face can be developed with the aid of global and international collaboration. The Global Partnership in Action for the creation and implementation of the SDGs, as well as the new UN Science, Technology, and Innovation Resolution (2022), both acknowledge the critical role that STI plays in these processes. By putting more emphasis on the sustainability component of such place-based research and innovation plans, smart specialisation strategy has been acknowledged as one of the worldwide techniques to design such roadmaps.

3.2 Three “building blocks” and related tools of the PRIs

The pilot project is organised around three operational and interlinked building blocks: a “Strategic Policy Framework”, an “Open Discovery Process”, and a “Policies and Actions Mix”. These are based on the JRC's experience over the past

ten years with the Smart Specialisation Strategies, cutting-edge research on innovation, including transformative innovation and sustainability transitions, and the pioneering experiences of an increasing number of practitioners who are incorporating more comprehensive and transformative approaches as part of their innovation policies. The overall strategy is supported by the strategic policy framework. It establishes institutional underpinnings for governance that are only gradually altering the "rules of the game," but it also provides mechanisms that allow those rules to be changed as needed. Policy formulation and implementation take place through the Open Discovery Process and the Policy and Action Mix. Now let's take a closer look to each one.

3.2.1 Strategic Policy Framework

One of the main traits of a Strategic Policy Framework is going beyond the scope of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and attempting to include a better integration of national and regional innovation policy funding as well. An ideal first step would be the adoption of a new strategy that integrates many of the relevant spaces for action into a clear directional logic, provided the political will is available and the planning cycles are mature. Yet, the authors highlight that it is not always necessarily to change strategies with PRIs. Continuity at the strategic and planning level between S3s and PRIs, and beyond, allows similar strategies to be adopted. Especially if these have proven successful in the past. In this sense, there is no need to adopt different strategies from those adopted in the past.

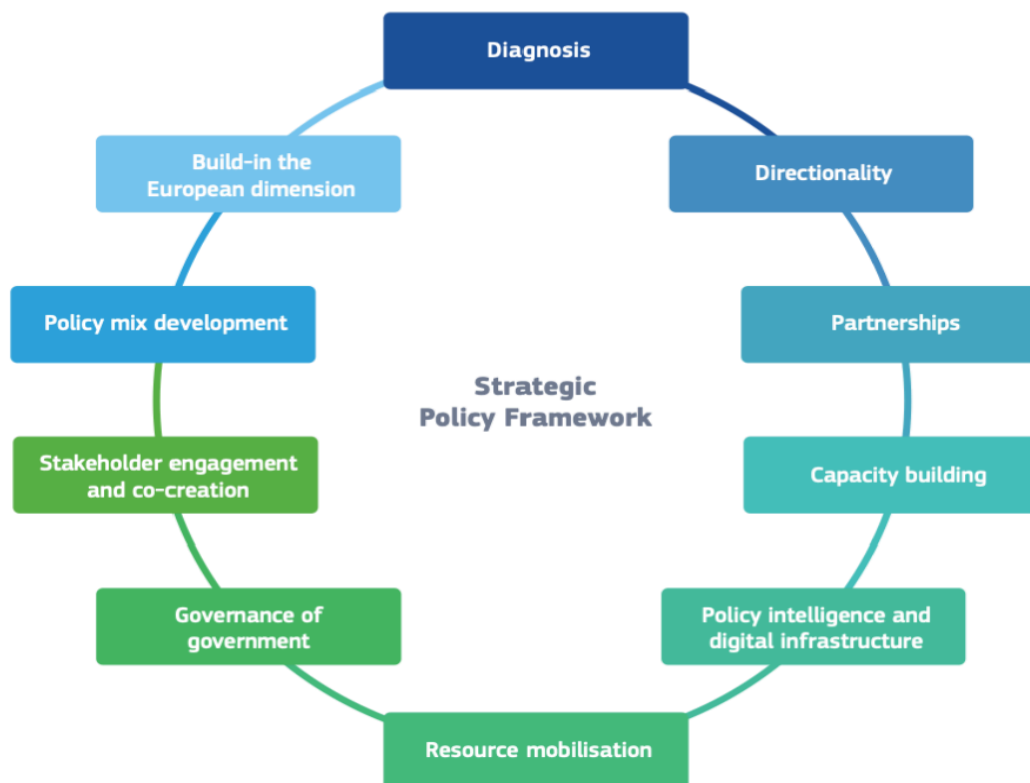


Figure 3.2: Elements of a strategic framework
 Source: Pontikakis et al., 2022a: 33

Figure 3.2 lists ten key elements of the Strategic Policy Framework:

- **Diagnosis:** an initial SWOT analysis is fundamental. It gives an idea of what are the major challenges for the territory, the bottlenecks and opportunities, and possible solutions;
- **Directionality:** Directionality is driven by the European framework in which PRIs operates. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, PRIs is linked to different existing european policies (European Green Deal, Cohesion Policy, etc.) that should define the future goals and priorities;
- **Partnerships:** Due to the cross-government engagement that partnerships would entail, it will be crucial to plan for how to deal with any departmental conflicts that may arise. The cornerstone of a whole-of-government (WoG) approach is trust among public officials in various departments, and no

amount of departmental reorganization can make up for a lack of trust engagement and mobilisation of external stakeholders are essential. Thus, a partnership is defined as a grouping of pertinent parties that may contribute to or may be impacted by the priorities and objectives of choice.;

- **Capacity-building:** Capacity building has been one of the main elements influencing the outcome of the S3s strategy (Marrocu *et al.*, 2022) and all European policies in general. The European institutions are also aware of the problem, so they dedicated EU funds (for example technical assistance) in order to allow every administration to support the development of capacity over time. That is why the Playbook's goals are to spread awareness of better practises, encourage learning via experimentation, and assist the growth of the necessary skills in public administrations as well as in the local innovation ecosystem. Yet, in the Playbook it is also stated that «it is important to recognise that not all public administration will be able to develop the same capacity» (Pontikakis *et al.*, 2022a: p. 34),
- **Policy intelligence and digital infrastructure:** To identify pertinent issues and development patterns, policy intelligence is required. Such issues are getting more and more complex, thus an up-to-date monitoring system is needed. This system has to be easily readable and easy to access. For this reason, a digital infrastructure that works is crucial. Yet one of the fundamental purposes of monitoring is to be able to adjust, correct and adapt to the results the evaluation provides;
- **Resource mobilisation:** the utilization of different funds has always been a problem because each fund had its own rules and regulation. Yet PRIs will be helpful due to its ability to work at a greater level of aggregation and the fact that many of the funds have been simplified;
- **Governance of government:** In contrast to earlier place-based innovation strategies, PRIs urge for a more comprehensive WoG approach to governance that includes both vertical and horizontal facets of governance. These strengthened ties between government entities and with external stakeholders, both horizontally and vertically, meant in many instances a change from governmental leadership to collaborative leadership or from

centralised to dispersed leadership. This process can already be seen with the S3s strategy, but with PRIs it will be strengthened even more;

- **Stakeholder engagement and co-creation:** this element owes a lot to the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) which was the process through which the S3s worked. In practice, it was limited to the professionally organized scientific and technological community. Yet the pillar of PRIs, Open Discovery Process (ODP), which will be discussed in detail in the following section, seeks to include a wider group of participants;
- **Policy mix development:** The policy mix is one of the foundational elements, and for a diversified and personalised policy mix to be possible, the essential governance and administrative frameworks must be integrated into the strategic policy framework;
- **Build-in the European dimension:** The European dimension is omnipresent in PRIs in three eloquent ways. As already mentioned, the policies already agreed upon provide the future goals and directions to be taken. Second, the European framework provides common rules for all, greatly simplifying the terrain in which actors will operate. Finally, the European Commission plays a major role by being able to foster better practices with all actors involved in the various levels of governance.

3.2.2 Open Discovery Process (ODP)

The Open Discovery Process is defined as «the central PRIs mechanism for stakeholder engagement and co-creation. It is where new opportunities are co-discovered, where the agreement for their exploration begins and where joint plans for action are developed» (Pontikakis *et al.*, 2022: p. 39). This concept builds on the experience with the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) which was the pillar of the S3s. The idea was that through an inclusive and evidence-based process, grounded in stakeholders' engagement, the policy actors involved would have been able to identify priorities and goals, and so areas for investment in research and innovation. Since the ODP builds on the previous EDP, one may wonder whether the latter was implemented in the right way or whether it was

successful. Thus, a brief discussion of the concept will be provided. According to Sotarauta (2018), concerns about EDP have included local entrepreneurs' self-interest and their capacity to identify the "proper material" necessary for self-sustaining growth, particularly in outlying areas. Hassink and Gong (2019) express further worries about regional "lock-in" and the impossibility to implement significant structural changes under the EDP. Another problem is the so-called "related diversification". Which of the identified assets are genuinely place-based and hence serve as a foundation for future growth at the local/regional level is a challenging topic that the EDP must deal with. The strength of the region's current skills and the potential for using those strengths in new areas of economic growth will largely determine how successful diversification is. In this regard, related diversification plays a key role in the accomplishment of regional branching (Frenken and Boschma, 2007; Neffke *et al.*, 2011). Many of the restrictions were attributable to S3' prior policy framing, which was centred on economic growth. Because of S3' strong relationship to Cohesion policy, it was unable to spark more extensive conversations about other sorts of investments and policy reforms. Furthermore, in reality, the EDP was frequently not continuous, it lacked mechanisms that might modify the policy mix, and it tended to be inward-looking, losing possibilities for collaboration with other areas and with key players for revolutionary change (Guzzo and Giannelle, 2021; Prognos, 2021). Even today, there is still no agreed assessment by all scholars. The point remains debated.

Having said this, the ODP aims to significantly extend the involvement of actors and co-creation to include new stakeholder groups and to give the discovery process a new sense of purpose to accomplish sustainability goals. In addition to the traditional discovery process adopted in S3s, the PRIs will use a new mechanism: the challenge-oriented innovation partnerships (CHOIRs). The authors believe that this will allow «the right combination of bottom up knowledge and actions with top-down changes in regulation and shifts in the policy mix that permit transformative, system-level innovation to happen» (Pontikakis *et al.*, 2022a: p. 41). A CHOIR may be established at any level of government, whether municipal,

regional, national, or by groupings of decision-makers from other countries. The granularity of the aim will, in many ways, determine its structure and scope.

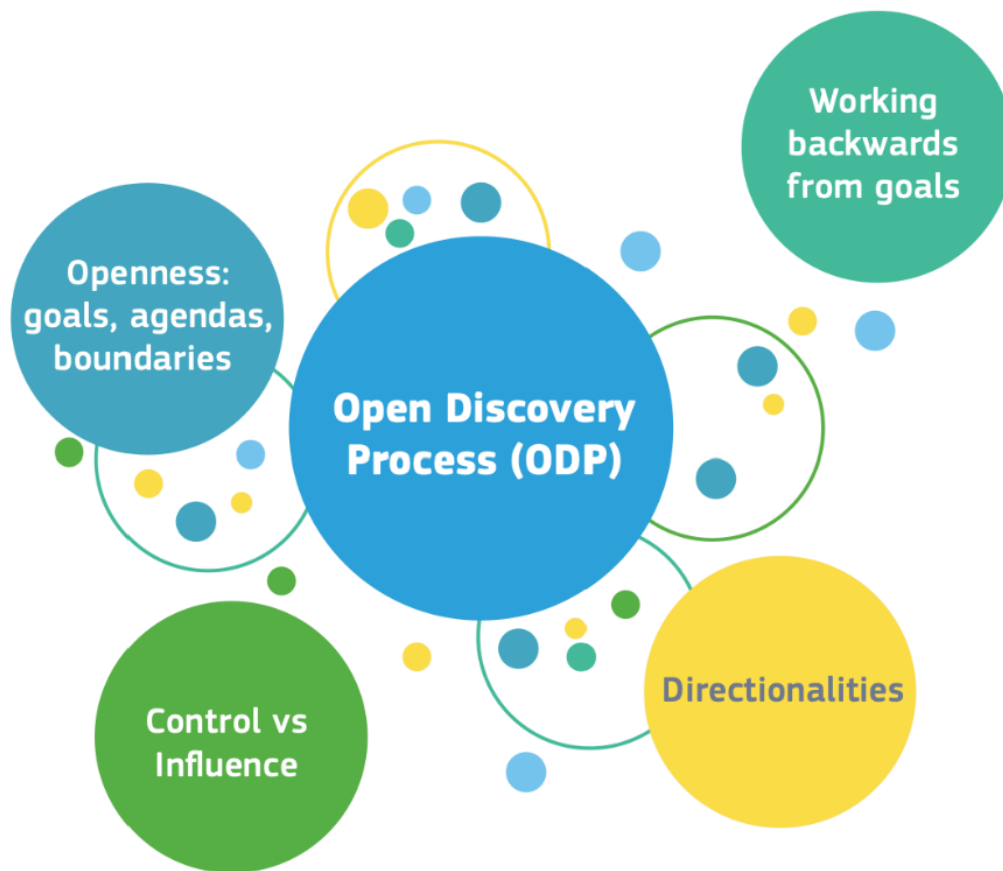


Figure 3.3: Key features of an Open Discovery Process (ODP)
Source: Pontikakis et al., 2022a: 42

As for the previous building block an analysis of the key features will follow:

- **Openness:** The process's objectives are really open in the sense that they might be either economic, sociological, or environmental, and stakeholders would ideally find integrated strategies to move closer to all three. The ODP can prevent "closure" and lock-in by being open in the direction of the search. Second, the ODP is transparent about how innovation is framed and acknowledges that there isn't a single framework that can be used to achieve all objectives. Third, the ODP should create incentives to encourage stakeholders, starting with the pertinent levels and departments of government, to open up their plans pertinent to the aim. As partnerships operate at a higher degree of aggregation than projects, it should be simpler

to include stakeholders from beyond the area in the ODP. The numerous interregional and European methods for promoting inter-territorial cooperation can be taken into account in their design;

- **Directionalities:** Priorities should be guided by directionalities focused on long-term social wellbeing for local communities, which has the added benefit of bringing together improbable groups of stakeholders, including those who do not engage in systematic R&I activities. To have any hope of energising action from citizens and other consumers of innovation, directionalities must be formed by them, and they must be included at all levels. The identification of desirable directionalities for the area is essential not only in determining priorities for public finances, but also in converting possibilities and difficulties into specific objectives to strive towards. It is not a one-time event, but rather a long-term, ongoing process that employs many kinds of involvement with stakeholders;
- **Working backwards from goals:** Working backwards from objectives, with different groups of stakeholders depending on the goal, is another aspect of challenge-oriented PRIs. The objective might be environmental sustainability or quality employment and wealth. It is critical to start with the goals and adopt a user-centered viewpoint in order for challenge-oriented relationships to form;
- **Control and influence:** Policymakers and other stakeholders in charge of orchestrating the discovery process should distinguish between the portions of the system they control and the parts of the system they can influence. The latter is a crucial pillar of the renew ODP, because it will allow to include actors that up to now were missing. Actors that are fundamental to establish a successful innovation policy. It will be critical to adopt a strategic approach to the establishment and makeup of partnerships in order for them to grow over time. Partnerships are both the result and the source of a dynamic discovery process.

It is clear from this brief analysis that the authors are trying to solve some issue that they encountered with the EDP. I mentioned the “lock-in” issue and the closeness of the previous process. The Playbook gives a lot of space to the CHOIR

mechanism. In the authors' intention, this mechanism would solve some of the problems highlighted above. This instrument is already being used nationally and globally (both outside and inside Europe). It has also recently been part of the new Horizon Europe programme (Pontikakis *et al.*, 2022a). It has not yet been evaluated since it is too early to define the success or otherwise of this measure. It will be interesting to carry out an evaluation at European level in the future to see whether the CHOIR approach has indeed solved some of the problems of the EDP.

3.2.3 Policy and Action Mix

The PRIs are centred on innovation policy, but they are much more than a new approach to place-based R&I policy. PRIs promotes system-level innovation, which requires the strategic use of industrial, employment, education, and social policy tools, as required by each problem, which has hitherto worked in isolation. Coordination of policy efforts in these areas is crucial for change that benefits both the economy and society. In reality, the authors highlight that first focus might be primarily on R&I policy and its interconnections with other policy areas (energy, environment, transport, education, fiscal policy, etc.). Over time, however, it will be critical for the policy portfolio's scope to gradually broaden in order to engage more completely with and influence other policy domains and their tools, as each territorial situation requires.



Figure 3.4: Key features of a Policy and Action Mix for PRIs
 Source: Pontikakis et al., 2022a: 55

There are three key features to the ‘Policy and Action Mix’:

- **Policy mix tailored to opportunities and challenges:** the systemic transformation facilitated by PRIs cannot be achieved merely by supply-side innovation policies targeted at addressing financing and/or business capacities shortfalls. Achieving the required directionality is also dependent on demand-side market-shaping and market-creation policies, such as the use of procurement and regulation to stimulate innovation. The authors rely on the taxonomy proposed by Edler and Georghiou (2007), yet they also state that the selection of policy instruments does not need to be based on such a wide range of instruments²⁴, but rather on their ability to meet the demands of the transition. On the demand side, PRIs emphasises the relevance of regulation as an innovation instrument. On the supply side, methods that mobilise different sources of money for the same aim are critical in situations when a plethora of frequently diverse funding sources at the EU level must be brought together under a single roof;

²⁴ The authors listed more than 40 policy instruments.

- **Readiness to identify and deploy supply- and demand-side instruments:** to coordinate policy packages beyond policy silos is a crucial goal in order to overcome one of the issues which had arisen with S3s strategy. In this case, the authors used the policy package matrix by Andreoni and Chang (2019). It is useful because it can provide an adequate mapping and clustering of the various policy instruments, allowing conversation with stakeholders and decision-making. It can also assist in establishing important links between the various policy instruments developed and enforced by various institutions across various policy areas;
- **Alignment and coordination across policy silos:** the PRIs will need goal or mission specific policy combinations. Towards that goal, policy mixtures or a portfolio of instruments that span across numerous previously separate or poorly integrated policy areas might be deployed.

The Playbook lists 68 tools divided between the three building blocks. Each tool is explained in a brief fiche that communicates the basic idea, explains why it can be useful, and provides connections to more detailed descriptions elsewhere. The fiches will explain tools or techniques that might help actors implement partnerships for innovation in their territory.

These fiches define principles that can serve as the foundation for innovation strategies aimed at tackling societal great issues and transitioning to a greener, more connected Europe. These conceptual fiches are crucial for ensuring that stakeholders and policymakers adopt the required mentality. The main aim of this toolbox is to give a practical understanding of how the PRIs should work.

3.3 Key consideration for a long-term development of the PRIs

The PRI's objectives are undoubtedly ambitious. They seek to solve atavistic problems with regard to European policies (silo mentalities, difficult implementation, complementing funding, inclusion, etc.). Administrative expertise, political support and many other things will be needed for PRIs to be a success. The

authors outline six key considerations for the successful long-term development of this project.

- **To consider the needs of the territory through the lens of transition.** Given the profound and unavoidable change affecting broad portions of our production and consumption systems, it may be useful to see the planning era as one of transition. In this setting, policy planning will require assistance for both existing actors planning for new realities and rising actors who may produce new benefits for the area. A critical necessity will be to provide bridges for employees and disadvantaged social groups so that the territory may fully use its human potential and no one is left behind. Taking a transitional approach to policymaking entails thinking about how to transition our monitoring and evaluation frameworks, policy tools, institutions, and ways of engaging with stakeholders to meet the challenge of sustainability and long-term societal wellbeing. The transition process that Europe is undertaking will produce unexpected results. It could also lead to unpredictable contrasts or trade-offs that are costly for parts of the population. To avoid conflicts, true sustainable development policies would abandon the primary objective of economic competitiveness in favour of long-term social well-being (Ashford and Renda, 2016). It is also vital to recognise early on the significance of social policies in mitigating some of the transition costs, which historical evidence shows cannot be addressed only through skills programmes (Caldecott *et al.*, 2017). Early consideration of the social component of the transition should be part of innovation planning, as it can reduce resistance to change, which frequently prevents people from seizing new possibilities. In light of growing requirements, these realities necessitate anticipation, collaboration, alertness, and reflexivity. The authors also warn that despite the pace of the transition, policymakers should bear in mind the long-term goal. Short-term turbulence or policy problems should not stop the process.
- **To adopt a broader framing of innovation, which varies according to the goal.** Innovation scholarship and leading policy practice nowadays emphasise a broader framing of innovation that places producers and

consumers at the centre of innovation policy. The objective of policy in this context is to re-configure the system so it meets the new societal goals. In addition to supporting companies and knowledge producing organisations, this new framing draws our attention to the need for systemic change. The importance of system framing is that it displays structure. Taking a broader perspective might assist in identifying new connections. Interconnections may be strong areas of policy leverage: by affecting one node of the system, you can impact other nodes as well. Framing also shows perspective, which allows for predictions (Meadows, 2003). What is inside the system that needs to change only according to the societal goal? Goals that are in keeping with the territory's cultural values and material conditions have a better chance of opening up transformation pathways. Public policy can have control over some nodes of the system and exert influence over others. Influence can grow over time if the right partnerships are forged. Policy leverage comes from using the necessary information and using it to plan strategically.

- **To ‘unlearn loaded framings’.** Adopting broader and flexible framings of innovation based on the aim may need unlearning loaded framings. Framings can be 'loaded,' in the sense that they can carry the seed of a certain goal inside them while diverting our attention away from other desirable objectives. Of course, a quadruple helix framework is still effective if the aim is to persuade universities and businesses to collaborate to develop competitive innovation. However, it might be problematic for other social aims because it gives universities, companies, and government absolute prominence.
- **To work backward from goals with broad coalitions of stakeholders.** In the previous pages, I have already mentioned this point, but it is worth repeating. Hill (2022) observed that when stakeholders try to solve problems or even facing them, this situation could lead to a conflict. In order to overcome this issue, it is extremely important to create “open deliberation spaces” where actors feel free to suggest a solution or reach a common understanding of the problem. Working closely with stakeholders to

establish strategic goals may be challenging. It can include lengthy collaborative procedures, open-ended conversations, numerous iterations of system maps, relationship drawings, issue re-framings, and alternative scenarios. However, as Hill (2022) argues, it is desirable to spend this time up front in order to save it later by generating more deliberate contexts and more valid objectives that may be durable, cost-effective, engaged, organised, meaningful, and useful. Breaking through paralysing deadlocks entails creating viable alternatives for both incumbents and vulnerable social groups. Identifying constructive routes applicable to the place requires ingenuity and context-specific knowledge. There are compelling grounds to assume that even in less developed places, co-benefits from the transition are achievable. However, they are unlikely in the lack of planning and readiness to respond.

- **To complement, strengthen and reform governance.** Goal-oriented policy needs more coordination between government, agencies and levels. The new approach is also an opportunity to reassess the role of public administrations in governance models that stretch well beyond the public sector's borders. Social and administrative innovations will be required to find a fair balance between the need to plan collaboratively and deliver on the critical duties that have already been committed to. Decision makers will need to examine administrative change throughout the extended term that will be required to put in place adequate governance mechanisms for the new course. Reform disrupts current duties and responsibilities within government and, as a result, might be opposed. The evident decision then is whether to overlay more responsibilities and structures on top of current ones, or to demolish old structures and establish new ones. Layering can offer competing or contradicting aims, leading to compromise solutions, whereas profound transformation can erode confidence and cause disruption. In Edmondson words, «layering new policy alongside existing arrangements, can generate conflicts among programs and agencies which undermines policy support. Consequently, layering is considered much less effective for institutional recalibration than dismantling (terminating the

existing arrangements) » (Edmondson *et al.*, 2019: p. 4). Transition thinking applies here as well, and evidence regarding what works is usually a useful starting point in talks aimed at reaching agreement on potential reform roadmaps.

- **To diagnose development bottlenecks and deploy a tailored policy mix.**

There is no single road to long-term territorial development, and the types of assistance required will be determined by the recognised difficulties and diagnostics. It will be crucial to expand the evidence base and policy intelligence skills in general. It is critical to consider different future scenarios and transition paths using evidence and stakeholder involvement. The SDGs' relevance to local policymakers and stakeholders may be strengthened by translating them into local outcomes. If we are to accomplish the 2030 Agenda, we must form context-specific alliances. Identification of localised difficulties based on evidence may be very useful in creating a wide knowledge of the system's suitable framing. PRIs includes the transformation of existing strong sectors and the build-up of competence toward sustainability and other societal goals. Some current comparative advantages, however, no longer serve social interests. Diverse areas will necessitate quite different approaches in terms of encouraging greater specialisation, diversification from existing strengths, and even the formation of new paths. The risks associated with the establishment of new routes can be reduced if the paths are related to unavoidable public investments or changes in local demand circumstances, some of which are already being driven by other policies and can be predicted. Massive public and corporate investments in skills and infrastructure will be required to transition to the new economy. A significant portion of these expenditures will go toward the adoption and distribution of current technology. Tailored public policy may guarantee that SMEs take advantage of such opportunities to improve both their innovation and production capacities. A wide frame and coordinated activity across portfolios that incorporate sequences of interventions can bring the industrial system near to radical change tipping points.

Chapter IV

Discussion

As discussed in the previous chapter, the PRIs are an ambitious policy strategy. It tries to solve issues encountered with the previous S3s, as well as to develop a new set of policies that go beyond the traditional innovation strategies. Yet, how was the PRIs concept developed? What was the CoR's role in the process? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions, thanks to the information gathered during the interviews with European officers. To maintain anonymity, the interviewees will be referred to as interviewee no. 1, interviewee no. 2 and interviewee no. 3.

All interviewees concurred that the beginning of the PRI' evolutionary process has distant origins. In 2015, the CoR and the Joint Research Centre intensified their cooperation around several projects. One of these is "Science meets Regions" which aims to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking. Furthermore, the CoR had very strong contact not only with JRC but also with the Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) among others. In particular, Markku Markkula, former President of the CoR, and Tibor Navracsics, former Commissioner for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, established a strong connection at the time.

The JRC's original suggestion was to consider expanding S3s approach to include the concept of sustainability. This shift towards sustainability in industrial and innovation policies did not develop only within the European institutions. The academic community played a major role in shaping this idea too. Scholars of innovation started to feel the weight of the growing concern about climate change. Because they realized that R&D funding is not enough in order to tackle this issue.

They needed policies that mobilize R&D funding complementary to the promotion of particular skills and broader infrastructure investment toward a greener and fairer European society. Thus, the popular conception of innovation started to turn toward "system innovation", as discussed in the previous chapter.

Many CoR members were quite active on the implementation of the S3s in the 2014-2020 period. Therefore, the CoR had a close collaboration with the European Commission on Smart Specialisation. The JRC was the source of the PRIs original concept. When the "Joint Action Plan" was created, it gave birth to the PRIs original concept which was discussed for the first time.

As proof of the close cooperation between these two institutions, on 25 November 2020, this plan was signed by CoR President Apostolos Tzitzikostas and Commissioner Mariya Gabriel to boost research and innovation at local and regional level. Two years later a new "Joint Action Plan" was signed by President Tzitzikostas and Commissioner Elisa Ferreira to support local and regional authorities in the effective use of the 500 billion euros available in EU structural funds and national co-funding, and to ensure coherence and complementarity with the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

So far, we have understood that the PRIs concept was built up over time and is the result of various discussions on industrial and innovation policies. As expressed by interviewee no. 2:

«there was a confluence of trends at the time. Within the Commission a new programming cycle was been prepared and in the academic community there were important shifts in the discussion of industrial policy and innovation policy. Both of which pointed to the need for extensive coordination within governments for ensuring that different parts of the government coordinate to tackle climate change above all and the other societal challenges».

All interviewees concurred that it is possible that PRIs will become the new standard for S3s. Because the PRIs could provide the tools to address the problems encountered with the previous strategy, but also to respond to today's challenges through a holistic and mission-oriented approach (something that has been lacking to date).

One of the most important triggers of the development of PRIs was the meeting between CoR President Tzitzikostas and EC-JRC Seville director Mikel Landabaso in June 2021 in Seville. During that meeting it was agreed to launch the pilot action for the development of the toolbox for self-reflection for cities and regions about innovation and the promotion of the directionalities of their innovation strategies. At that time, it was also agreed to approach Commissioner Gabriel and Commissioner Ferreira. The two Directorates-General (DGs) responded in September 2021. What emerges from an interview (interviewee no. 1) is the scepticism with which the two DGs approached this proposal. In particular, Commissioner Gabriel showed interest in the PRIs as it could become a new strategy to promote innovation and transformation agenda of the EU. However, at the same time, she felt that the mechanisms of PRIs were too complex compared to what the DG was used to. S3s projects are built on the quadruple helix, while DG EAC often features only project where there are European calls, but no project partners are involved. On the other hand, Commissioner Ferreira wanted to avoid a new debate on Smart Specialisation without her and her DG involved. Interviewee no. 1 acknowledged that:

«Both DGs were not that, how to say, enthusiastic because they were pushed out of their comfort zone. DG Regio thought S3s belongs largely to Cohesion Policy and DG EAC did not want to engage in such a complex matter».

However, arguably also thanks to the influence of the CoR (as we shall see), both DGs wrote a joint letter in September 2021, where they supported the idea. Subsequently, a discussion began within the Commission on the New Innovation Agenda statement, where it quickly became clear that this PRIs strategy should be included. During the writing of this communication, the name "Partnerships for Regional Innovation" was created.

This is a brief history of how the PRIs concept was developed, but what was the CoR's role in this development process? An element that was raised by all interviewees was the political and administrative commitment of the CoR. Interviewee no. 3 remarked that «We included our most notable politicians. We spread the word, still we are at the beginning of the process». Interviewee no. 2 endorsed the same view. Specifically, he stressed the fact that there is a strong

«political interest in the Committee of the Regions President to come up with a new method that is much more comprehensive that goes beyond cohesion funding. Also, a strong interest from the Secretariat of the Committee from some of the officials, particularly the Director Thomas Wobben who understand himself the opportunities» of PRIs.

In another interview, interviewee no. 1 said that the secretariat has «made also sure that [PRIs] has been high in the political agenda of the Committee». With this sentence, he implied that within the CoR itself, the secretariat moved to make PRI a political priority.

Regarding the CoR's role, Interviewee no. 3 said that the role of the institution was to «mobilise the regions». This is not only because the PRIs strategy is based on a holistic bottom-up approach but also because regions that had been frontrunners in the implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies felt that the exercise of the Smart Specialisation «was too formalistic» (Interviewee n. 3). Thus, they needed a new framework within which they could operate in a less strict manner. A framework within which coordination would be possible not only between EU funds (and their required domestic co-financing) but also across national and regional funds more widely. This is why many regions and some Member States replied positively to the CoR's call for PRIs. The same interviewee also stressed the fact that «our role was of a co-designer. I can't stress how many policy papers we wrote together, how many conferences we prepared together etc.» Interviewee no. 1 said «the Playbook itself is largely a product of the JRC services, but we have been co-creating and co-preparing the Action Plan and the different activities. We meet on a regular basis even two days ago about the state of play of this collaboration». He goes even beyond by saying:

«we [CoR and JRC] built on the mutual strengths. For the JRC it was difficult to step out of line of the two DGs. Because the JRC is a service provider. The thing is that without us the DGs would not have launched this initiative. The JRC needed a partner to do this to reach the local level and the two DGs had no choice to participate as well. In a way we [CoR] overcome the deadlock».

It is clear now that the CoR played a key role in promoting the PRIs approach both at the political and administrative level. These interviews shed new light on the role

of the CoR as policy actor in the European policy-making process. Yet, its role is not that defined. One of the last questions sought precisely to understand the extent to which the CoR is an “agenda-setter” as argued by Piattoni and Schönlaue (2015). What has emerged is the dual nature of this institution. On the one hand, there is the function of coordinating and representing the interests of its partners, as well as the desire to simplify the life of the regions with regard to European funds and European rules. On the other hand, the CoR tries to promote its own vision on issues within its competence. It does not only do this through official means (such as opinions), but actively seeks to lobby other institutions, like the European Commission in the examined case study. In the words of interviewee no. 1 « [the CoR] is an agenda-setter in a limited number of policy areas. It is an agenda-setter in territorial impact assessment [...]. We have been pushing for it and setting the agenda in this field». Other examples are the “cross border cooperation” and the implementation of the “Just Transition Fund”. Interviewee no. 3 said «I think this [PRIs] is an exceptional case. I think we had a very big impact. I would assess that 50% together with JRC. We worked hand in hand. The JRC provided the writing force on our side, we have the political strength, we organized the events». As the previous interviewee, he recognized the limited policy areas within which the CoR has its influence. He said «in similar situation I would say, let’s say the New Innovation Agenda (which has the PRIs inside), we contributed, in my opinion, between 10-20%.».

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the CoR's role in the European policy-making process through a concrete case: the Partnerships for Regional Innovation. Thanks to the interviews, it was possible to ascertain the role played by the CoR in this case. What emerges is a reality akin and similar to that developed by Piattoni and Schönlaue in their book "Shaping EU Policy from Below: EU Democracy and the Committee of the Regions" (2015).

The interviews and the analysis of the academic and policy sources allow me to provide answers to the research questions described at the outset of this work.

First of all, the CoR's role in the conceptual development process of the PRIs was that of a «co-designer». During the interviews it has been noted that the Playbook, the conceptual pillar of the PRIs, was mainly drafted by the JRC. Yet, many opinions delivered by the CoR on S3s and innovation ecosystems were taken into account. The CoR's role was also that of «co-creator». Without doubt the CoR's played a major role in the creation of the PRIs not only from the conceptual point of view, but also from the organisational one. This has been highlighted in the interviews by all respondents.

The second research question concerned the involvement of the Committee of the Regions in the PRIs pilot project. It is not possible to identify a precise point in time when the CoR became involved in the pilot project, because the collaboration between the JRC and the CoR (on various policy areas including but not limited to innovation) started long before. If one really wants to find a moment that captures the beginning of this pilot, it would be the meeting in Seville in June 2021 between

President Tzitzikostas and Director Mikel Landabaso. However, even this was the result of a lot of preparatory work on both sides, so it would be misleading to point to it as the beginning.

During one of the interviews (interview no. 1) it emerged that the administrative level played an important role in lobbying for the partnerships. There are two levels within which lobbying took place. The first level is administrative, because the CoR's Secretariat ensured that PRIs became a political priority for the institution. The second level is political. In the PRIs case, it is divided between the CoR and the regions themselves. As explained in Chapter IV, the CoR, perhaps together with the JRC²⁵, actively lobbied the two DGs to accept and promote the pilot project. On the other hand, once the PRIs became a political priority for the CoR, the CoR mobilized the regions. The call for PRIs organised by the Committee was a success, but it is also true that some of these regions were already calling for a change of the S3s approach. According to some interviewees and to some workshops about the Smart Specialisation Strategies organised during the European Week of Regions and Cities (EWRC) 2022, regions who had been front-runners in embracing the S3s expressed their willingness to take part in the PRIs as a way to solve policy problems such as silos, lack of capacity and other problems discussed in Chapter III. But their activity to update their S3s was already in place before the CoR published the PRIs call. This means that they were already active in pushing for a change.

As mentioned in Chapter I, stronger regions do seek to influence the European decision-making process (Tatham, 2008). The PRIs case is a proof of this phenomenon. What the CoR did was to channel these impulses by lobbying for the pilot project to start. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to investigate this regional level in depth. Numerous and repeated attempts to interview a regional-level official involved in the PRIs pilot project in an Italian region proved

²⁵ This is still an open issue. Some interviewees hinted that the JRC was also involved in getting the PRIs accepted by the doubtful DGs. In my opinion, this is not that surprising giving that they worked on this project together but above all they spent a lot of time and resources. However, no one has confirmed or denied this so far.

unfortunately unsuccessful. It would be interesting to understand what dynamics occurred in the regions once the PRIs was defined. This will be left to a future research endeavour.

The last research question aimed at understanding to what extent the CoR can be seen as an agenda-setter in the European decision-making process. The majority of interviewees suggested that the CoR is an agenda-setter in a limited number of policy areas. Not surprisingly, the areas of regional development coincide with its competences. It is inconceivable that the CoR would seek to influence other institutions in matters outside its competence. But the attempt to influence the European policy process is not a foregone conclusion. The self-attributed role of “guardian of subsidiarity” is all the more relevant if one looks at the concrete case of the PRIs or other projects mentioned above. Although in a limited way, the CoR is trying to bring the regional and local dimension into the European decision-making process.

Despite the limited number of interviews, it was possible to understand the role of the CoR in the development of PRIs. Obviously, there is room for improvement and to expand the research. Open questions remain such as: what was the role, if any, of the S3s frontrunner regions in more detail? What tools and strategies does the CoR concretely use to lobby other institutions? How does the CoR choose which dossiers to lobby? Can the double level of intervention that emerged from the interviews - administrative and political - be generalised to other policy initiatives?

In conclusion, the research confirms that the CoR’s role goes beyond its official role of an advisor body. It does not just deliver opinions on regional matters, it actively seeks to influence the European decision-making process. In the PRIs’ case, the CoR persuaded the seemingly reluctant DGs to accept the pilot project, through political and administrative action. The CoR was crucial to the birth of the PRIs which, without its support, might have not seen the light.

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