

Non-governmental Organizations as Partners: Obstacles in the EU Cohesion Policy?¹

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Abstract

The EU Cohesion Policy requires the interaction of the public, private and non-profit sectors in policy making. The Czech Republic presents an ideal case study for identifying the major obstacles to the successful implementation of this approach since Czech citizens evaluate Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in their country as having less capacity to influence policies at the lowest level than NGOs in any other EU member state. The goal of the study is to identify and explain the determinants of success and failure regarding NGOs' participation in designing public programmes. The methodology includes a combination of in-depth interviews with NGO representatives and public servants, a review of official documents, a focus group, and a stakeholders' review of the study's conclusions. The main obstacles to the implementation of the partnership principle are the following: NGOs' insufficient capacities and responsibilities; fluctuations in the participation of public servants and NGO representatives; dependence of partnership on personal contacts; NGOs' late entry and the non-consultative, informative character of the partnership.

Keywords: Cohesion Policy, non-governmental organisations, participation, partnership principle, The Czech Republic

JEL Classification: H11, L31, D73

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Introduction

The EU commands enormous financial resources in the amount of 453.2 bn EUR within the EU Cohesion Policy (EC, 2015) and there is a will to support non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from this source (EC, 2014). Implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy does not only bring NGOs financial sources, but also a possibility to participate in the process of its own design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The EU Cohesion Policy is implemented through multilevel governance which demands the interaction and cooperation of stakeholders from different governmental levels (Marks, 1993; Bache and Flinders, 2004; Hooghe and Marks, 2003). Competences are not only delegated vertically from the European Commission (EC) towards member states and regional and local administrative levels, but also horizontally towards NGOs by the partnership principle (Rhodes, 1996; Kluvánková-Oravská et al., 2009). The aim is to improve the relevance of the policy and to reach a long-term consensus in policies (OECD, 2001). While the role of sub-national (local and regional) government actors as partners in EU policy development is widely accepted, the involvement of non-governmental organizations, businesses and other socio-economic partners still has significant limits (Fritsch et al., 2015).

The implementation of the partnership principle was enhanced by the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy in Central European countries after their accession to the EU in May 2004 (Dąbrowski, 2008; Pálné Kovács, 2009). The EU member states are legally obliged to implement the partnership principle, whilst the EU provides a framework for its implementation (EC, 2013b). The variety of partners also includes, among all levels of public administration, the business sector and civil society. Such arrangement opens opportunities for NGOs to participate in designing and implementing cohesion policy programmes in the fields of their primary interest.

In the European context, the EU Cohesion Policy, by involving relevant partners, responds to the public's perceived needs (OECD, 2001). The Barca Report (Barca, 2009) supports this fact by pointing out that all EU citizens should have access to the benefits from the EU Cohesion Policy. It is therefore crucial that local actors and especially NGOs participate in these cohesion policy programmes, as their participation not only helps to implement them successfully, but also enhances the relationship between European citizens and the EU (Lane, 2010).

Nevertheless, there is still a lack of evidence about the practical implementation of the partnership in particular member states within their specific institutional environment.

From this perspective, the paper focuses on experience with attaining the partnership principle during the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy in the Czech Republic. We set the following research questions: a) what are the key obstacles to the successful implementation of the partnership principle in the Czech Republic? b) Is the experience with the partnership principle in the EU Cohesion Policy transferable to other policies?

The main contribution that this study makes to the body of research on the partnership principle is that, compared to the other member states of the EU, NGOs in the Czech Republic receive little public-sector support when trying to influence public policies. Our study is of high relevance for other countries as well, especially those with a similar history and those with problematic NGO participation in policy-making (see for example Baun and Marek, 2008; Nałęcz, Leś and Pielniński, 2015).

The Czech Republic provides a unique opportunity to study the main causes obstructing NGOs' attempts to influence particular policies. Although the Czechs perceive NGOs as a necessary component of society (EC, 2013a), they still have the least confidence among all other EU member states in NGOs' capacity to influence political decision-making (EC, 2012).

The article is structured in the five following sections: after the introduction, Section 1 outlines the historical development of the partnership principle and its implementation in the Czech Republic. Section 2 describes the methods used (especially in data collection and processing procedures). Section 3 presents the results and discusses recent experience in applying the partnership principle. The final section concludes with findings concerning the determinants and managerial consequences explaining the success and failure of NGOs' participation in designing the EU Cohesion Policy programmes.

1. Background of the Study

1.1. Importance of the Partnership Principle for Cohesion Policy

The importance of the partnership principle is stressed by its long-term presence in the European legal framework. Partnership has been part of the Cohesion Policy since the 1994 – 1999 programming period when it began to be used more extensively within the EU (Piattoni, 2009).

The most recent development not only confirms this approach, but also introduces a new tool for partnership – the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (EC, 2014) that provides partners with more elaborate information on the partnership principle's implementation.

Opinions about the partnership principle between the public sector and NGOs differ among scholars. Many see the benefits of the partnership in better targeted policies, acquiring new knowledge, learning among involved actors, the increased transparency of decision-making, the potential for increased innovation and a more efficient use of public resources (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Leonardi, 2006; Bache, 2010). Recently, Chang et al. (2015) point out that policymakers should consider the different strategic cooperative characteristics of NGOs and attain an effective management of the partnership. Others see the risks of these partnerships in terms of influence from strong interest groups, a lack of citizens' skills, conflicting situations, a destabilization of existing systems, obstructions or questionable accountability (Peters and Pierre, 2004; Scharpf, 2007; Geissel, 2009). These studies mainly focus on multi-level governance or partnership in general and the partnership of the public sector and NGOs as a research topic has been omitted.

The primary motivation of NGOs for being involved is not to influence the policy, but as a perceived opportunity to facilitate organizational maintenance (Ljubownikow and Crotty, 2016). Nevertheless, the more public services NGOs provide, the higher the need to involve them as partners in designing policies. Moreover, the European Commission, as the main administrative body responsible for EU policies, is providing long-term support for the partnership within the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy.

The implementation of the partnership principle differs according to the social origins of civil society and the current situation of a particular country. Salamon and Anheier (1998) see the differences in civil societies of distinct countries based on the scale of the welfare state and the size of the non-profit sector. Thus, countries with a corporatist culture implement partnership much easier than those with statist culture, as in the example of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) (Demidov, 2017; Slavíková et al., 2017; Fritsch et al., 2015). Moreover, the partnership practice changes according to the societal needs (see the case of the UK in Bowden and Liddle, 2017).

Though there is support, some problematic issues in the partnership implementation appear. Initial permission to implement the partnership principle in accordance with national rules and practices has led countries with low participative cultures and centralized public administration to opt out of initiating a consultative process of participation. This situation is also confirmed by Kendall and Anheier (1999), who identified the low level of involvement of NGOs in designing and implementing the EU Cohesion Policy. Fritsch et al. (2015) highlight insufficient instructions or guidelines provided by the European Commission (EC) as a limit for the wider implementation of the partnership principle. Dąbrowski,

Bachtler and Bafoil (2014) bring the evidence of different outcomes of the partnership principle implemented within EU multilevel governance due to different political cultures, decision making styles and institutional setting in particular EU member states. Rinaldi (2016) shows that institutional actors' responses to the introduced partnership principle by the EU Cohesion Policy differ significantly not only across EU countries, but also according to regional and local institutional arrangements. Based on the analysis of Sicilian local partnerships, he emphasizes that the development of partnerships is determined by political culture and social capital rather than by regional administrative capacities and governmental stability very often mentioned as the main preconditions (see e.g. (Dąbrowski, 2014) for the evidence from Central European countries).

The limitations posed by a centralised approach lacking the knowledge of local needs is one of the important concerns (EC, 2004; Kelleher, Batterbury and Stern, 1999). On the contrary, this issue has been evaded owing to anxiety about rent-seeking behaviour (Milio, 2014) and a democratic deficit as un-elected representatives influence policies (Perron, 2014).

Nevertheless, the promotion of civil society and the empowerment of NGOs as civil society's agents became an EU policy objective (EC, 2014b). Citizens' participation can help to redress perceived democratic deficits of EU institutions (Lane, 2010). However, such support is imposed through a top-down method of implementation instead of a bottom-up approach which is more sustainable in the long term. In a similar vein, Lane (2010) emphasizes the role of an economy in providing a necessary foundation to support long-term democratic development in Western European countries, which was missing in the CEEC. On the other hand, the size and the role of civil society vary also among Western European societies (Sissenich, 2010; Salamon and Anheier, 1998).

Partnership, however, has also been identified as a prerequisite for improved effectiveness of EU Cohesion Policy (Mairate, 2006). In this context, Dąbrowski (2014) refers to the political importance of promoting that EU Funds are properly spent.

1.2. Czech Non-Governmental Organizations as Partners

The Czech legislation is using the narrow definition of NGOs in the form of an explicit list of legal forms covered by the term. According to the current legislation, legal forms of NGOs are societies (former civic associations) (82,597 registered units + 24,739 branches of societies), public benefit corporations (2,710), institutes (established for the public benefit purpose; 142 units), foundations (490), endowment funds (1,331) and registered legal entities (established by religion organizations; 4,117 units) (Czech Statistical Office, 2017). Such

a definition is also authoritative for public administration in relation to the non-profit sector. In the same vein, the term NGO is used in the following text. We do not include political parties, public schools and universities, trade unions, and professional organizations among them.

The Development of Civil Society in the Post-socialist Period as a Partner for the Public Sector

Path dependency is obvious when implementation of the partnership principle is still developing. In the first half of the 1990s, NGOs blossomed in the Czech Republic. The growth of a number of newly established NGOs was rapid (Mansfeldová et al., 2004). According to the social origins theory of civil society (Salamon and Anheier, 1998; Anheier, 2014), the Czech Republic has a statist non-profit sector model with less importance attributed to civic engagement, low level of volunteer input and a smaller civil society labour force. Such a situation was also caused by the EC when new member states had no option to negotiate the scope of implemented policies before their accession (Grosse, 2010; Kutter and Trappmann, 2010).

The accession of the Czech Republic to the EU in 2004 offered Czech NGOs an opportunity to deploy their political resources under the implementation of the partnership principle. Expectations were mainly linked to the EU Cohesion Policy (Sudbery, 2010; Demidov, 2015). However, such expectations were followed by disappointment (Harvey, 2004) when insufficient means together with the inability of NGOs' to shape priorities according to the new programmes hampered the adoption and implementation of the partnership principle. After the accession in 2004, the capacities of NGOs were oriented towards projects whose objectives were determined by the EU and ministries responsible for particular operational programmes (OP). Thus, NGOs became providers of parts of public-policy programmes rather than pursuing their own objectives.

Empirical surveys provide evidence that Czech NGOs are aware of the main requirements for successful participation in the political decision-making process (Černá and Marek, 2003). However, they do not have sufficient economic and socio-political capacity to improve their position (Rose-Ackerman, 2007; Frič, 2004; Polverari and Michie, 2009). Thus, path dependency is present in the implementation of the partnership principle throughout the two periods 2007 – 2013 and 2014 – 2020 within all stakeholder groups.

Barriers to the Partnership Principle in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, one of the most important barriers to the partnership principle is the NGOs' lack of sufficient funding. This is reflected in the NGOs' poor strategic planning (USAID, 2006) and has led NGOs to focus on achieving

short-term operational goals. According to Novotný and Lukeš (2008), less than ten percent of Czech NGOs formulate written strategies that extend beyond three years. The importance of sufficient resources and its impact on partnership effectiveness is demonstrated by Klüver (2012) who points out that subjects that are well-equipped with resources have a higher chance of influencing the content of a policy.

Another barrier to effectively implement the partnership principle is the low level of long-term employment within NGOs. In 1995, this was 1.7% of the Czech labour force (Mansfeldová et al., 2004). It increased to 2.04% in 2012 (Czech Statistical Office, 2015), but it is still three times lower than that in Western European countries. NGOs do not have the capacity to change political issues in a political arena or to frame policies (Sudbery, 2010).

A specific barrier is a fragmentation of the Czech NGOs, their high level of heterogeneity and a lack of support from umbrella associations. As a result of such a fragmentation, public administration had to face the heterogeneous groups of NGOs (Černá and Marek, 2003). Moreover, managing authorities often did not know who is representing the Czech NGOs. Thus, the selection process used to determine which NGO representatives would enter into partnerships was exposed to criticism from both the NGOs and the public administration and it was perceived as being insufficiently transparent. However, such lack of trust is not only a concern of NGOs because the managing authorities might also perform better in setting the framework for partnership involvement. Markovic (2017) shows how important it is to combine the formalization and trust governing the interaction in public networks.

2. Data and Methodology

The current research is based on a mixed methodology combining secondary analysis of already available data (derived from official documents) and primary research based on in-depth interviews and focus groups. Moreover, representatives of both sectors provided two rounds of peer reviews (October and November 2014). This research design allows information to be collected from both the public administration and the NGOs involved in the partnership for the programming periods 2007 – 2013 and 2014 – 2020. It also enabled matching the information from interviews with data from the official documents such as monitoring committees (MCs) minutes, and different types of programming documents. These documents have been used to check the activity of particular members representing NGOs, and the environment in which they negotiated the implementation of the particular OPs.

Interviews

The in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups of participants who represent the major stakeholders. The first group consisted of representatives and managers from NGOs who were members of MCs in the programming period 2007 – 2013 or who are members of working groups for the programming period 2014 – 2020. The second group is composed of civil servants. Such an approach enables obtaining a comprehensive picture of partnership implementation from the perspective of both NGOs and the public sector.

The set of questions was prepared according to the form of the partnership implementation approach defined by recent studies. These principles frame our analysis as all of them help to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the partnership. It concerns transparency, clarity of goals and sharing values in a partnership which leads to shared added value (Potluka and Liddle, 2014; Gazley, 2010; Demidov, 2015). Also, a requirement of a long-term status of a cooperation to increase its effectiveness (Milio, 2014; Gazley, 2010) and the equality of partners in policy-making and political decision-making are important issues (Adshead, 2013; Demidov, 2015). From this perspective, the process, communication among partners, variability of opinions, and timing of a partnership are important factors influencing the outputs of partnerships which need to be analysed.

The interviews consisted of 46 questions in three blocks: (1) general questions related to the partnership principle; (2) questions concerning previous experience with the partnership principle; and (3) recent participation in the EU Cohesion Policy programming period 2014 – 2020. Specific questions focused on the application of the partnership principle and on opportunities to suggest ideas and voice opinions during the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of operational programmes. Further questions investigated expectations of participants and the extent to which these expectations had been fulfilled. The interviews were led face-to-face, by telephone, or by Skype. The length usually varied from 50 – 70 minutes.

Interviews with Representatives of NGOs

All NGOs that participated in the partnership principle of the EU Cohesion Policy in the programming periods 2007 – 2013 and 2014 – 2020 were contacted. The contacts to these 94 NGOs have been compiled in cooperation with the Committee for EU of the Government Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations (CEU GCNGO), an advisory body of the Czech government in the field of NGOs. In July, August, and September 2014, we performed 48 interviews among the 94 NGOs. A response rate exceeding 50% is extraordinary for

this type of research and the collected data provided adequate coverage of the relevant NGOs. Usually, representatives of small NGOs refused to take part in the interviews as they had been busy with their own activities.

Among the whole population of NGOs in the Czech Republic (around 115,000), a majority of NGOs are inactive, and only a minority applied for EU funding. For example, only 16% of public benefit corporations have got some amount of EU funding since 2006 (Potluka, Spacek and von Schnurbein, 2017). Only those 94 NGOs actively participating in implementation of EU programmes since 2007 had been invited to the interviews.

To follow the categorisation introduced by Li and Zhang (2017), NGOs' participation within the partnership principle represent a formal participation which can be characterised by a moderate degree of institutionalization, mixed between individualised and group-based acting, a difficulty to act and medium political influence. Thus, the sample is structured as follows: 15 interviews were conducted with representatives of national umbrella associations (representing approximately 1,489 NGOs); another 10 interviews were conducted with representatives of regional associations (representing approximately 609 NGOs). Then, six interviews with managers of large NGOs (acting nationwide) and 17 participants from smaller NGOs were performed. These smaller NGOs represent a group of NGOs with influential experts. Altogether these interviewees represent around 2,188 Czech NGOs which is sufficient for the representativeness of the sample.

Interviews with Civil Servants

The second group of participants consisted of civil servants from eight managing authorities which are responsible for the main OPs. The sample was drawn from the list of eight thematic and nine regional OPs in the programming period 2007 – 2013 and nine thematic OPs and one integrated regional OP in the programming period 2014 – 2020 (i.e. 27 subjects; however, some managing authorities overlap between the programming periods). Five participants represent thematic programmes and another three participants represent regional OPs (South-East; North-West and South-West). Moreover, we also interviewed two members of the Committee for the EU of the GCNGO.

In total, 10 in-depth interviews with representatives of the Czech public authorities were performed. Those interviews were conducted in September and October 2014.

Focus Group

The focus group was used to triangulate the results from the interviews. Three attendees from the public sector and nine from the civil society sector took part in a focus group in October 2014. The public sector, were represented by the

National Coordination Unit which is responsible for the overall management of EU funding. Moreover, two representatives from the CEU GCNGO were present. Nine NGOs' representatives had been invited according to their experience and knowledge of the EU Cohesion Policy. These attendees were selected from the list of 94 NGOs participating in the partnership principle of the EU Cohesion Policy since 2007. We have sorted them according to their knowledge of the EU funding and invited the most skilled experts to the nine places in the focus group available for the NGOs' experts.

3. Results and Discussion

An unprecedented number of NGOs engaged in the partnership process in the programming period 2014 – 2020 in the Czech Republic. This initiative involves people who have previous experience with the partnership principle and knowledge about the EU Cohesion Policy as well as those who do not.

The investigation identifies the main barriers to the partnership principle, but also shows that the capacities to cooperate are developing in both the civil and the public sectors.

Transparency of the Selection Process

The NGOs' representatives were selected differently in the programming period 2014 – 2020 than in the previous periods. During this period, they were selected via the NGO Working Group called the Partnership Platform 2014+. This group was mostly composed of representatives from regional and sectorial associations as well as major NGOs. This platform took the initiative to conduct the nomination process as it had the capacity to organize this within a few weeks in late 2012 and early 2013. The Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic (ANNO) led the process. NGOs managed to organize the nomination process within the non-profit sector as a basis for selecting suitable NGO representatives to particular OPs. From NGOs, 120 representatives were nominated for the OPs and working groups. Of the total number selected, 54 nominees actually participated in the partnership.

The vast majority of interviewees considered this system of selecting representatives to the programming structures to be sufficiently transparent. Thus, these selection results were considered more legitimate than those of previous programming periods. The stakeholders also emphasized the bottom-up principle as the candidates were nominated and selected by NGOs. Likewise, this method of selection covered all OPs. Similar development has also been seen in other CEEC countries (Demidov, 2017).

The Added Value for Partners

The majority of the implemented partnerships are still rather formal. This applies in particular to MCs that have very formal processes. This is not only the case in the Czech Republic (for Slovakia and Hungary, see Cartwright and Batory, 2012; and for Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary, see Demidov, 2015). The NGOs' representatives perceive the added value of partnership as being low, although improvements in public-sector openness are revising attitudes in the programming period 2014 – 2020. Almost two thirds (61.5%) of the interviewed NGO representatives who held opinions on the issue reported that the Czech public administration implemented the partnership principle in conformity with the requirements of the EC. The interviewees indicated that success in implementing a partnership depends on the personal approach adopted by the managing authorities' personnel and the NGOs' representatives. It confirms experience from other countries (Nałęcz, Leś and Pielński, 2015) and importance of social capital for successful implementation of partnership (Jordana, Mota and Noferini, 2012).

Table 1 provides opinions of the NGOs' representatives regarding the application of the main principles of the partnership principle. The interviewees responded, 'no decision' when they were unable to decide on the issue or did not have a strong opinion on it.

Table 1
Implementation of Partnership Principles

Is the following statement valid according to your experience?	Interviewees (N)			Interviewees with an opinion (%)	
	No	Yes	Undecided	No	Yes
Partners cooperate over the long term	18	18	12	50.0	50.0
Partnership is beneficial for all partners	12	24	12	33.3	66.7
The goals are clear and are shared by all of them	21	11	16	65.6	34.4
There is acceptance of a form of cooperation by all partners	22	9	17	71.0	29.0
The added value of each partner is clear	16	17	15	48.5	51.5
The sum of effects is higher in partnership than without it	9	24	15	27.3	72.7
Consensus decisions are made by all partners	29	8	11	78.4	21.6

Source: In-depth interviews with NGOs' representatives, N = 48.

The answers indicate that the main problems associated with implementing the partnership principles relate to differentials in the added values of the stakeholders, in the effects of partnership, and in decision-making within the partnership. A detailed inspection of the responses shows that NGO representatives initially expected to obtain an opportunity to influence the objectives of the newly

formed OPs, but that they were unable to do so as their role in the process was limited to commenting on the documents.

Politics vs. Policy

The NGOs' representatives expected the process to be highly open. In total, 50% of the interviewed NGO representatives considered that public servants had no motivation for implementing the partnership. Moreover, 60.4% of all interviewed NGO representatives did not witness another NGO participation in decision-making. These results point out a locked situation in the decision-making process as the politicians and governmental/administrative authorities are the dominant decision-makers. Furthermore, 47.9% of all interviewed NGOs observe the Czech public administration's resistance to involving other partners in decision-making.

Politics prevails over policy in the implementation of the working groups' outputs. The outputs of the working groups are problem-oriented. Thus, it is possible to find a solution to a particular problem and programme orientation. However, the transition of the working groups' output into the political decision process reveals that there are no or very few incentives for implementing the results of working groups in real policies. It confirms that the NGO's role should be that of agenda setting and not of political decision-making (Kohler-Koch, 2009). Moreover, it underlines the importance of a relationship between politicians and NGOs (Fyall and McGuire, 2015) which was omitted by NGOs in this case.

The Partnership Process

The interviewees stated that the partnership process is impersonal. A number of issues may be discussed and explained, but this requires time and intense discussion. Moreover, many NGO representatives receive no information about how their comments are being dealt with.

The interviewees reported that less important comments were usually accepted. Some working groups succeeded in persuading managing authorities to extend the pool of potential beneficiaries to include NGOs (INT 1, 10, 40 and 42 and the managing authorities' representatives). On the other hand, pleas to reallocate funding according to the priorities of the NGOs' objectives were rejected by the managing authorities.

The fact that NGOs entered the partnership process after the programming documents had already been created was identified as another hindrance to NGO participation in the partnership process. Thus, when new NGO representatives entered the process, they did not have sufficient time to gain an in-depth understanding of the upcoming programmes and influence them.

These impediments to NGO participation are partially the result of the fragmentation of the civil society sector. Representatives of the Czech National Coordination Body contacted *bona fide* representatives of ANNO which was thought to be the representative of the non-profit sector.

However, the information that ANNO provided was not shared with other NGOs. This omission caused delays in the partnership process lasting several months.

The fragmentation of the civil society sector is evident in the NGO representatives' perception of openness and communication within the public sector. Some of the interviewees assessed the public sector's approach favourably (INT 15, 17, 19, 27, 28 and 41), while others criticized the form and content of the communication (INT 25, 26, 32 and 40).

These problems obstructed long-term planning and also prevented NGOs from organizing their participation. As a result, many of the new NGO representatives who participate in working groups have no idea how their contribution will continue.

Fragmented NGOs in the Czech Republic

The fact that NGOs' interests are fragmented is reflected in their inability to form a consensus. The Czech Republic's public administrations as well as the population are not informed about NGOs' issues. NGOs are able to reach consensus within their fields of specialization, but not as a sector. We can identify a variety of objectives as there are four main groups of employers among NGOs (see Table 2) active in recreation and culture, education, social protection, and other services. Thus, their political objectives and needs relating to the EU funding also differ.

Table 2

Number of Employees of NGOs by Purpose in the Czech Republic for the Year 2014

Purpose of NGOs	Employment (FTE)	Share (%)
Housing	356	0.6
Health	4,346	7.8
Recreation and culture	13,452	24.1
Education	8,996	16.1
Social protection	9,696	17.3
Religion	4,768	8.5
Political parties, labour and professional organizations	4,043	7.2
Environmental protection	463	0.8
Services not elsewhere classified	9,800	17.5
Total	55,920	100.0

Source: Czech Statistical Office (2017), Employment in nonfinancial and financial institutions and non-profit institutions serving households (S.11 + S.12 + S.15) according to classification CZ-COPNI.

A lack of mutual communication and common interest awareness within the civil society are among the main issues (INT 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 20, 26, 36, 39 and 41). Other interviewees (INT 1, 2, 14, 20 and 25) stated that communication amongst NGOs operated well. On the other hand, since the NGO representatives did not share the workloads among themselves, they were overwhelmed by the amount of information that they received from the managing authorities. This situation occurred in both surveyed programming periods (Polverari and Michie, 2009).

Both the public administration and the NGOs interviewees considered that fragmentation among NGOs is an important barrier to implementing the partnership principle. Specific competing interests within the civil society sector pose a problem according to three quarters of the interviewees. In this respect, the Czech situation is very similar to that of Hungary, Poland and Romania; here, Börzel and Buzogány (2010) identify instability in the relations among stakeholders as being responsible for the non-alignment of interests.

We have identified four interest groups among the NGOs in an EU Cohesion Policy partnership. These groups are usually gathered around strong NGOs or official platforms: NGOs around ANNO (representing around 1.487 NGOs), CEU GCNGO (being supported by a group of approximately 230 NGOs), National Network of Local Action Groups (representing 179 Local Action Groups), and other strong NGOs. Strong NGOs are usually working nationwide with dozens of local branches and organisational units, but having different interests. We have identified networks within the latter group of around 412 NGOs.

In order to achieve their goals, all the groups create coalitions. They rarely collaborate to create a unified national coalition. This is a situation similar to Spain as competition between NGOs over control and other interests appears (Jordana, Mota and Noferini, 2012). If the NGOs unify, then it is usually only for a short-term period as it happened during the preparations for the programming period 2014 – 2020 in the Partnership Platform 2014+. Thus, the situation is closer to creation of short-term political coalitions than to long-term networks (Fyall and McGuire, 2015).

The Role of Communication among NGOs

The fragmentation of the civil society sector is partly the result of inadequate communication among NGOs. A communication system was created for NGOs within the Partnership Platform 2014+ (INT 2 and 25). The main purpose of this system was to facilitate the transfer of information concerning the preparation process for the operational programmes as well as updated documentation to NGOs. There were coordinators in each group who were responsible for the transmission of all documents to the platform's secretary who would then forward the information to other interested NGOs.

This system was only operative at the beginning of the partnership implementation in 2013. According to 58.3% of the NGOs managers interviewed, negotiations concerning the priorities in the EU Cohesion Policy were often badly coordinated, and NGOs in particular promoted their own interests without attempting to reach a consensus with other NGOs. The greatest problem that NGOs encountered was the insufficient exchange of information concerning recent developments across the thematic areas, as well as a lack of coordination within the non-profit sector. Moreover, sometimes even representatives of NGOs within the same working group did not communicate with each other at all (INT 41).

In other instances, the NGO representatives attempted to establish and manage their own websites so that they could share information and documents internally as well as with other NGOs.

Disillusionment and Fluctuation

NGOs stated that their primary interest was to participate in creating new priorities. At this stage of the programme development process, they have optimal access to information about the operational programmes' focus and can prepare proposals for new development projects. Their interest in the participation was shown to gradually decline the longer they were involved in contributing to the working groups and MCs as volunteers. The fact that the work-related costs of NGOs' representatives have to be carried either by the NGOs or by the representatives themselves is not sustainable in the long term. This funding disparity between NGOs and public servants was mentioned by fifteen of the interviewees (INT 2, 4, 7, 10, 13, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 29, 34, 39, 40 and 44).

These problems gradually obliterate the initial enthusiasm that exists. More than a quarter (26.7%) of the NGOs' representatives felt that they had lost their initial drive. As a result, there is strong fluctuation in participation rates among NGO representatives. Moreover, the formal application of the partnership principle by public officials led to an exodus of NGO representatives, similar to other CEECs (Demidov, 2015). Experience-related disinterest is also reflected in the finding that only 5 of the 32 members of the MCs in the period 2007 – 2013 decided to participate in the Platform 2014+ and that only 2 of them stood for a seat as a MC in the programming period 2014 – 2020.

Timing of the Partnership Principle Implementation

The NGOs had no opportunity to intervene in the preparation of the programming documents, but only had a chance to voice their opinions once the first drafts of the operational programmes had already been prepared. In addition to this, only about one half of the NGOs' representatives were aware of how time-consuming it would be to find consensus among partners since they had only joined the partnership structures in the most recent programming period.

The interview responses also showed that, apart from insufficient information about the actual needs of target groups, the delayed timing of the intervention obstructed the preparation of the programming documents in the partnership. Due to delays, there was insufficient time to comment on the documents. This could have been solved either by engaging more personnel, or by lowering the quality of the output of the partnership process. In response to these alternative propositions, 75.0% of all responding NGO representatives considered that the only option was to reduce the quality of the partnership process. In total, 58.3% of the interviewees attributed this problem to the insufficient time capacities of NGOs, and 12 of them specifically identified the time that is necessary to read and comment on documents as being the main problem.

The NGOs' low level of expertise in partnership participation was identified as a general problem (Kohler-Koch, 2009), but the perception of Czech NGOs' lack of capacity is striking.

To sum up, Table 3 displays the successes and failures of Czech NGOs in implementing the partnership process and Figure 1 shows the causal chains of the main problems of partnership between NGOs and the public sector in the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy.

Table 3

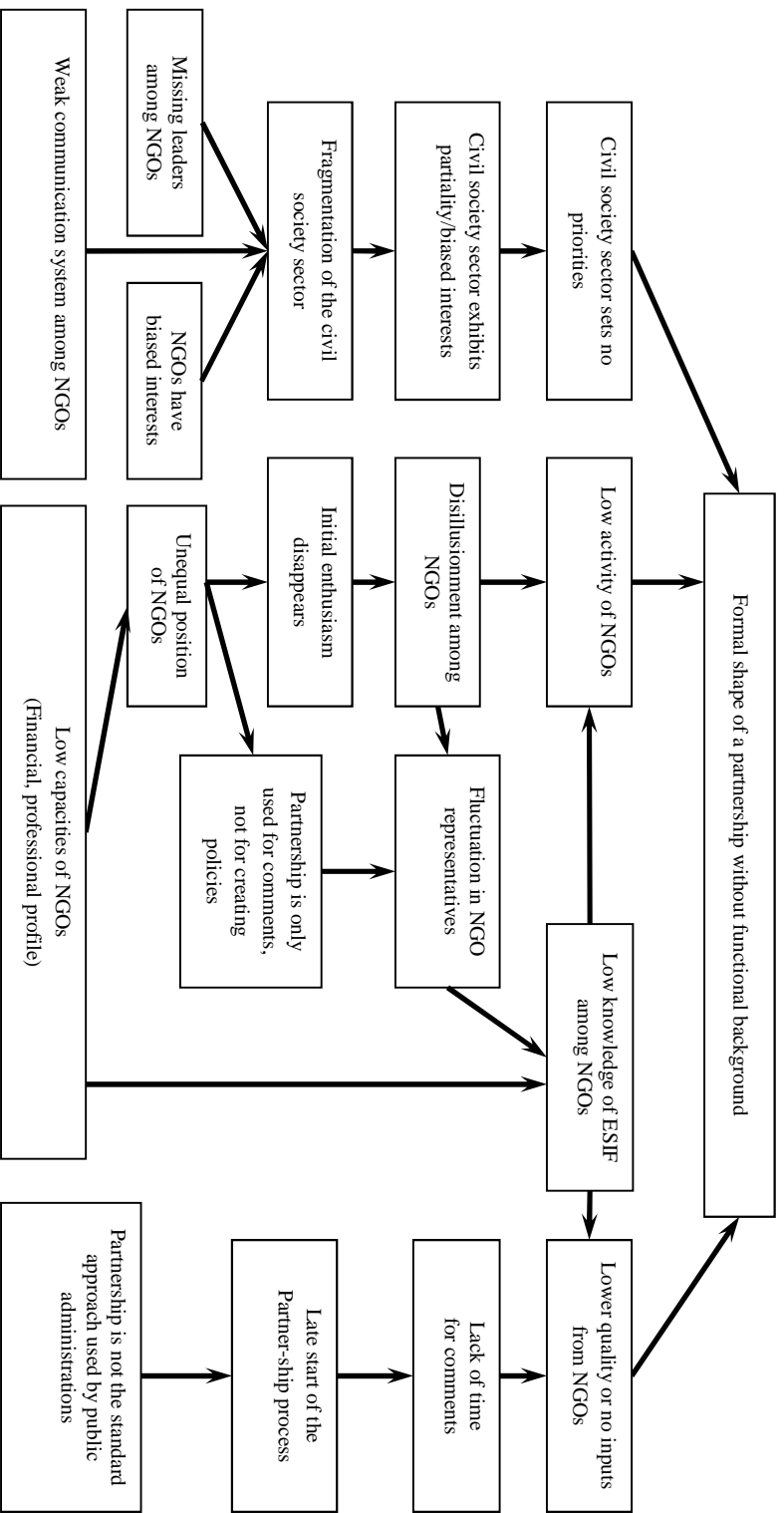
Summary of Successes and Failures of NGOs in Partnership Process

Successes	Failures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great effort of NGOs • Transparent process for selecting NGOs' representatives • Partnership process is more open than before 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low persuasive capacity of NGOs • Fluctuation and loss of skilled people in NGOs • Fragmented civil society sector • Low coordination and communication among NGOs • Low NGO capacities (personnel, financial, time)

Source: Own elaboration.

Our analysis confirms the acquiring knowledge of NGOs and the increasing transparency of decision-making in accordance with Lowndes and Skelcher (1998), Leonardi (2006), Bache (2010). On the other hand, though there are all the problems with partnership implementation mentioned above, we have not proved the effects of NGOs as strong interest groups and thus the risks of rent-seeking (Milio, 2014) and a destabilization of existing systems, contrary to several studies on partnership (Peters and Pierre, 2004; Scharpf, 2007; Geissel, 2009). Still, the partnership principle implementation is not in its optimal form (Gazley, 2010; Potluka and Liddle, 2014; Milio, 2014; Adshead, 2013), but it is moving towards it. The main issues, causes and effects are visualised in the problem tree which is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Causes and Effects of Problems in Partnerships under the EU Cohesion Policy in the Czech Republic



Source: In-depth interviews, own elaboration.

Conclusions

Our study provides an analysis of the opinions of NGO managers with regard to the implementation and development of partnership principle within the Czech Republic during the EU Cohesion Policy periods 2007 – 2013 and 2014 – 2020. We provide reliable data based on in-depth interviews with 48 leaders of the relevant NGOs in the Czech Republic, with eight managers of the EU programmes, and with two representatives of the Governmental Committee for NGOs. Moreover, we analysed the official documents of the particular MCs and working groups. The findings of this research can be applied to improving the implementation of the programmes' specific policies on both NGO and the public sector.

The implementation of the partnership principle is, in the long-run, a positive trend and is evaluated as satisfactory by both managing authorities and NGOs. However, there are still major barriers causing the suboptimal interactions between NGOs and the public sector. The main obstacles to a successful implementation of the partnership principle in the Czech Republic are the four following issues:

The first and the most crucial problem is the widespread fragmentation of the civil society sector in the Czech Republic. This dysfunctionality impedes the need to collaboratively determine the priorities and joint actions of the sector. Thus, many partners are unable to profit from the added value that ought to be gained from efficient cooperation. If the NGOs were able to introduce a means of coordination (i.e., if they developed communication systems or instated effective leaders), they would achieve better results in the policy negotiation process.

The second important issue concerns the low level of competence that NGO representatives receive in the partnership process; i.e., they work at their own expense, they work in their free time. Thus, if their efforts are not fruitful, they simply leave the partnership or stop being active. In turn, the partnership stagnates. NGOs should therefore draw on the funding support that is offered by the Cohesion Policy (EC, 2014), as this would help them to extend their personnel and time capacities and finance full-time experts.

The third issue is the fluctuation in representatives from the NGOs which prevents the establishment of a functional partnership. Although rotation in policy making is a principle of democracy, this can nevertheless have a disruptive effect on the decision-making process when members of an administrative staff change too often. Fluctuations result in a loss of previously established personal contacts and the partnership not only becomes unsustainable, but may also need to be rebuilt. This problem deprives the working groups' long-term

memory and means that partners have to share information. The situation does not meet the requirement of a long-term relationship. Efforts aimed at building the capacities of NGO representatives in MCs and working groups would decrease such fluctuations and consequently increase the NGOs' ability to participate successfully.

The fourth and the final issue is the timing of the partnership. NGO representatives which join the partnership at a late stage in programming have insufficient time to consult priorities, which leads to low-quality outputs. A timely implementation of the partnership principle is necessary to satisfy the triple constraints of the programme's project management: costs, time and quality. It is simply not possible to achieve a high standard of quality in the partnership if NGOs lack time and financial resources. From this perspective, it is up to the managing authorities to initiate proceedings by holding discussions about the forthcoming policies with reliable partners three years prior to submitting the programme proposal to the EC. Furthermore, it is crucially important to improve cooperation among NGOs and strengthen their motivation. Our study found that the creation of a working group for NGOs to deal with issues of the EU Cohesion Policy resulted in their increased activity and interest.

This paper found that enabling NGOs to achieve their specific goals was a key contributing factor in promoting greater involvement of NGO representatives in the preparation of programmes in the current programming period 2014 – 2020.

Great effort and involvement of high numbers of NGO representatives, together with transparent processes for selecting NGO representatives are the current successes of the partnership principle implementation in the Czech Republic. It caused that partnership process to be more open than in the past.

As for the involvement of NGOs in the preparation of other policies than the EU Cohesion Policy, it is still not common in the Czech Republic hence the importance of a top-down imposition of requirement for the implementation of the partnership principle by the EC is seen as crucial.

Our study has shown that the intensity and quality of future partnerships within the EU Cohesion Policy in countries with statist society will depend on the degree of support that the European Commission and managing authorities can offer to NGOs to participate. The experience gained with the implementation of the partnership principle within the EU Cohesion Policy is transferable only if the partnership principle is an official requirement. Otherwise, there would be strong resistance among politicians (although less among civil servants) to adopt the partnership principle in policies in the Czech Republic. Thus, the possible transfer of experience, knowledge, and skills is limited to other policies.

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