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French governance of European local development policies: an analysis of regionalization

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ABSTRACT

While the European Union has just agreed, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, on the amount of the future multi annual financial framework (MFF), the three main European policies for local development are gradually being built in European territories. The economic, social, and territorial cohesion policy, the common agricultural policy (through its second pillar) and the fisheries and maritime affairs policy together represent an active territorialization of the local development policies of the European Union. They are operationalized by the European structural and investment funds, whose multi-level governance is ensured for France, both by the State, and Regions since the Act III of decentralization. This research is based on a 24-month case study, using a participatory observation methodology as a territorial civil servant in charge of these issues. The empirical analysis we have conducted is also based on the analysis of some forty semi-directive interviews with technicians and local elected officials, and on the monitoring and participation in various negotiation meetings and technical-political meetings on European funding in the territories. This research intends to follow an approach of political sociology and to analyze the way in which the territories have appropriated the EFSI since their regionalization 7 years ago, at the beginning of the previous MFF. The purpose of this paper is thus to question the changes in local public action regarding the preparation of a new program, and to sketch a first assessment of this regionalization, regarding sub-regional and national mobilizations. By examining the political-administrative environment, and the reports of the French National Assembly and Senate, we assume that the territories will support a new regionalization. Nevertheless, the empiricism of our data quickly leads us to emit new observations, which send European funding back to Jacobin vs Girondin logics. These logics also lead us to deprive European local development policies of their substance, in a purely financial use of the actors, which takes root in conflicts and logics of thematic appropriation of political competences.

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INTRODUCTION

While the European Union (EU) has just agreed on the amount of the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) for the years 2021–2027, the three main territorialized public policies of the European Union are gradually being implemented by the Member States.

The economic, social, and territorial cohesion policy, the common agricultural policy (through its second pillar) and the fisheries and maritime affairs policy together represent an active territorialisation of the local development policies of the European Union (EU). Their implementation, which is based on the principle of multi-level governance and subsidiarity, helps to bring decision-making closer to the citizen, and promotes communication of the Union's actions by simplifying the communication circuit.

This programming period—still in preparation in the territories for the writing of these lines—is relatively intriguing, because of the originality that characterizes it. First, it is taking shape in a disunited Union, characterized by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom and difficult negotiations on the terms of Brexit, the translation of a flowering of Eurosceptic logic within its Member States. At the same time, it must deal with a plurality of events. From the coronavirus pandemic to the renewal of the European Parliament, which wants to make its voice heard and create a break with the previous mandate. This program is also being built up with the appointment of new European Commissioners, whose current president, Ursula Von Der Leyen, intends to politicize the European Commission through the impetus of a real “geopolitics.”

Beyond the Union, the French local political agenda de facto conditions the national implementation of these European local development policies. This programming period must deal with a renewal of French political actors. On the one hand, it is conditioned by the renewal of part of the Senate in 2020, and, on the other hand, by three local elections (municipal in 2020 and then departmental and regional in 2021). This political and institutional renewal will thus complicate the French debates on this European budgetary programming and its implementation, due to the politicization of subjects in the run-up to elections.

The French implementation of European public policies for local development has, since 2014, and in line with the recommendations of the European Commission, been for the most part regionalized¹. This process of Europeanization of local institutions, through the territorialisation of these three European public policies (*policies*) towards a political structure (*polity*), makes it possible to conceive the close political link (*politics*) that is at work between supranational structures and local territories. This link makes it possible to observe the integration of European logic in a national framework (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2012).

Following an approach of political sociology of the European public action of territories, our communication intends to focus on the role played by local actors in this period of renewal of the MFF. Our remarks are based on 24 months of participatory observation in a local institution, and on 42 semi-structured interviews with the actors of this environment. We were thus able to glimpse, in situ, the construction of the logic of actions of territorial actors, and particularly to question the articulation of the mobilization of the latter in a given temporality: that of the territorial preparation of European local development policies in the light of a new programming.

The semantic choice that we make in opting for the designation of these three European policies as “European local development policies” is in line with the continuity of the work on the Europeanization of territories. However, we take up the expression used by Élodie Lavignotte Guérin (Guérin 1999). In fact, we note a relative semantic cacophony in the French literature regarding work on European funding, which can complicate the understanding of a subject that is already very technocratic².

¹ By law n°2014-58 of 27 January 2014 on the modernization of territorial public action and the affirmation of metropolises, known as the MAPTAM law.

² Indeed, we observe, on reading the state of the art, a confusion of terms and names of these policies. Far be it from us to pass judgment on this point, this confusion can also be explained by the dissemination of research in this area, and particularly by the constant evolution of these European public policies. In fact, each European program changes the names and regulations governing the use of these instruments. It is also this peculiarity that makes the scientific subject intriguing, making scientific work on the theme almost obsolete with each new programming.

The rich literature on the subject, however, allows us to appreciate the European object as a salient element from a territorial point of view. The progressive politicization of this object, initially institutional, then budgetary, has highlighted, very early on, the growing interest and the Brussels-oriented gaze of the latter³. Considered one of the pioneers in the study of territories and their relationship with the European Union, Michael Keating quickly developed an inductive knowledge of the subject, considered even as encyclopaedic (Carter and Smith 2017). He was particularly interested in the beginnings of a tripartite relationship between territories, the State, and the European Union, initiating his work on Scotland, France, and comparative studies (Keating 1988, 2004). Subsequently, some authors have taken an interest in the growing interest of the territories in Brussels, in particular by analyzing the flourishing of regional representations in the area, which are now considered as real “regional embassies” (Carter and Smith 2017; Costa 2002; Huyseune and Jans 2008; Weyand 1996).

Research on the subject has quickly shown that the logic of mobilizing territorial actors is rooted in the capture of EU resources. In this sense, and based on a sociological perspective, a section of the literature has questioned the “uses of Europe” and has reintroduced the role of the actor within the research work by questioning the role and positioning of the local actor in the European environment (Favell and Guiraudon 2009; Jacquot, Woll, and Balme 2004; Lebrou 2015a; Lebrou and Sigalo Santos 2018; Bérut 2020; S. B. Faure and Lebrou 2020). These authors have opened a path of research, by highlighting the strategic role played by the latter in decision-making.

In the continuity, and more recently, work in political sociology has focused on the actors who “*make Europe far from Brussels*”⁴ and opened a path of analysis and a research agenda on local territories. We nevertheless identify in this research a form of deficiency in the analysis of

³ Although semantically polymorphic (Deloye and Haegel, 2019), we understand here the term politicization as a process of increasing the salience of the European object. Notably with regard to the debates and political-administrative stakes of territorial actors.

⁴ Reference to Vincent Lebrou’s doctoral thesis in political science Doctoral thesis in political science, University of Strasbourg. *L’Europe loin de Bruxelles. Acteurs, enjeux et controverses de la mise en œuvre de la politique régionale de l’Union européenne en France*. 2015.

sub-regional territories, except for the municipal level⁵. In this sense, a part of the literature has focused on the analysis of the local-European link, by questioning in particular the political and administrative reconfigurations of the latter with an analytical prism oriented towards the Europeanization of cities and the territorial governance of European issues (Bagnasco et Le Galès ; Négrier et Jouve 1998 ; Pasquier 2015). It appears that most of the research takes the regional and communal level as the prism of analysis, to the detriment of intermediate levels such as intermunicipalities and Departments. Although a minority of authors have committed themselves to analyzing the rural-European link, with nevertheless a focus that we will describe as messy, through a prism of strategic analysis of institutionalization. This work is particularly concerned with the angle of local expertise and its institutionalization (Guérin 1999), or even to sketch out a “*political analysis of Europe in the mirror of the local*” (Smith 1996). A first response to this shortcoming would be to point out that at the Community level, the discourse and consideration of this dimension only date back to 1988 (Smith 1996), and that at the state level, this type of action has been confronted, in the French case, with centralizing and corporatist logic (Faure 1991).

Since Act 3 of decentralization, we have identified the need to update the literature, which has shown little interest in these findings. This lack that we identify is conditioned by the fact that the literature has long been interested in analyzing the way in which European public policies have been perceived and reappropriated “from below” (Pasquier 2015). Nevertheless, we are still questioning this notion of “below.” On reading the literature, going beyond the political framework of decentralization laws, many articles identify the regional level as the “territorial” level. Nevertheless, the beginnings of our fieldwork question this assertion. Within the territories, there seems to be an ideological opposition from sub-regional players to this supra-regional scale embodied by the Regions. Considering the French Regions—particularly

⁵ We do not list any research whose purpose would have been to analyze the role and positioning of the intermediate level local authorities represented by the Departments, nor on the reconfiguration of these actors with regard to European issues. Although they had played a major role in the territorial implementation of the European Union’s local development policy instruments for nearly fifteen years, they were not involved in the implementation of the European Union’s local development policy instruments.

since the Act III of French decentralization—as a structure that is disconnected from the field and from the local level, steering public policies that are no longer directly linked to them. Indeed, sub-regional actors are currently questioning the meaning of “territorial” in view of the current dimension of these “new” Regions. The example of the Region New Aquitaine, which is as large as Austria, comes up regularly in the interviews.

In the light of a new MFF, this set of elements both scientific and contextual at the European and French levels, leads us to question the conditions in which territories address the issues of preparation and consultation of European policies for local development. We make the choice to put our microscope on the sequential period of programming and preparation of these new policies, directly in the territories. These operations will thus enable us to analyze the potential changes in territorial public action in this area generated since the regionalization—for the most part—of the EU’s financial instruments by the MAPTAM law of 2014.

The aim of this research will thus be to question European territorial public action 7 years after regionalization. On reading the research work and the conclusions of the reports of the French Senate and the French National Assembly, encouraging both further regionalization, we assume that all territorial levels will mobilize their resources to pursue this regionalization. Thus responding to a logic of more subsidiarity.

We will first analyze the construction of the politicization of these issues for local actors, before observing the effects on territorial public action generated there.

EUROPEAN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES: A TERRITORIAL POLITICIZATION THROUGH RESOURCES

The European Union appears to be an opportunity in terms of resources for local authorities due to the diminishing institutional resources of French local authorities. The Union also brings many European credits, which generates politicization in this area.

A constant questioning of the French territorial millefeuille

While European resources have a relatively large budget, the French territories, meanwhile, are going through a political period that they see as troubled in the face of a decrease in their institutional and financial resources.

Over the last two decades, numerous territorial reforms have “*disrupted the France of territories*” (Ville 2020). Over a recent period, the last three presidents of the French Republic have all challenged the idea that there is one step too many in the territorial *millefeuille* (Négrier 2012 ; Manier 2015 ; Torre et Bourdin 2016 ; Avenel 2017). The right-wing, embodied by Nicolas Sarkozy, attacked both Departments and Regions, with a reform proposal on local elected representatives, considering that it would have been too complex to reform these institutions head-on. Thus, this proposal suggested setting up territorial councillors sitting on both regional and departmental bodies. The local elected representatives thus assumed that this action concealed a subtle desire to eventually remove one of these two institutions. The Regions assumed that it was going to be the Departmental level, whereas the Departments saw the disappearance of the regional level coming⁶. The socialist party, left-wing, represented by François Hollande, decided to abolish this reform. Paradoxically, although he had been a former president of the Department of Corrèze, his government announced through its Prime Minister, the 8 April 2014, the abolition of the Departmental level. Before changing its mind a few weeks later to arrive at a reform of the territorial parity binomial and a merging of the Regions. More

⁶ Exchange between French, Polish, Belgian and Italian intermediate level Presidents. Conference of the European Confederation of Intermediate Local Authorities, Toulouse, France, 2019

recently, La République en Marche, for its part, raised institutional concerns by wishing (potentially) to extend the Lyonnais model⁷.

Act III of decentralization clarified the competences of local actors⁸, the perimeter of inter-municipalities and the redrawing of regional boundaries. Nevertheless, local elected representatives see these reforms as a paradoxical injunction. While a new phase of decentralization is being organized for local administrations (preparation of Act 4 of decentralization known as 4 D-law), the autonomy of local authorities is gradually decreasing.

Local and regional authorities see themselves conditioned both “from above” by a loss of financial autonomy, but also “from below,” with controls on expenditure and the limitation of the scope of their actions. Indeed, what these French local authorities are concerned about is the issue of financial autonomy. The history of the construction of great civilizations and states has always attached importance to the demands of national parliaments to have a hand in taxation and, in this sense, to have access to a lever for adjusting the resource (Guérin 1999).

Local authorities are now facing a dual problem: limiting revenues and controlling expenditure. Indeed, a limitation of revenues—at entry—by the progressive abolition of taxes compensated by budgetary allocations. This is similar to the abolition of the *taxe d’habitation* on principal residences—a communal level tax—which resulted in a loss of resources for the cities, compensated by the State through a transfer to them of the departmental share of the *taxe foncière sur les propriétés bâties (TFPB)* (property tax on built-up property).

The limitation of spending power is characterized for the French case by the “*contrat de Cahors*.” The interviews reveal in this sense that a plurality of local elected representatives do

⁷ Merger of metropolises and Departments, on the territory of the metropolises. This is a withdrawal of the Department into the territory of a metropolis.

⁸ The term “clarify” should be considered. The local actors thus see it as a progressive suppression of their competences resulting in particular in the suppression of the general clause of competence of the regional and departmental level. This clause endowed local authorities with a generalist capacity for intervention, without the need for the law to enumerate its attributions. This clause was based on the “affairs of the community” or the local public interest. It stemmed from the municipal law of 1884 and had been extended in 1982 to the other local authorities (Departments, Regions).

not consider these contracts as “contracts,” because of the constraint imposed without signing the said document, but as a regulatory constraint from the State to the local authorities. This *contrat de Cahors* thus limits the spending power of local authorities by limiting the increase in their operating expenditure to be contained at + 1.2% per financial year. Local actors see this act as a tutelage of their financial and fiscal autonomy. Resulting in budgetary penalties retained in the allocations (thus replacing the said taxes) of the year N+1 if the expenditure exceeds the imposed threshold.

While local and regional authorities are undergoing institutional and budgetary reforms, they see in the State a desire for decentralization. Through the tutelage of their revenue (abolition of taxes replaced by conditional grants), control of expenditure (by analyzing the increase in operating expenditure per budget year), and the suppression of their freedom of action by the abolition of the general competence clause. The European Union thus appears, in the light of national constraints, as an opportunity to capture resources, both financial, institutional, and political.

The European Union, an Eldorado for local authorities?

Faced with a decrease in the institutional resources of their local authorities, French local elected officials are turning to European funding in search of financial credits.

27.8 billion euros is the financial amount allocated by the European Union to France for the 2014–2020 programming period, as part of the implementation of European local development policies. These European public policies are the main item of budgetary expenditure for the European Union and represent nearly 40% of its financial envelope. Its primary objective, whose genesis is based on the Treaty of Rome, aims to reduce economic disparities between European regions. Since the purpose of this research is not to enter into a historical archaeology of the construction of Europe and the gradual Europeanization of this public policy, we refer you to the rich work done on the subject (Doutriaux 1992; Pasquier and Weisbein 2004; Lebrou 2015b).

The European structural funds represent a major challenge for European territories whether rural, intermediate, or state level. European subsidies for some⁹, communication tools and electoral potential for others, many are the resources perceived by territorial actors towards these public policies and their mobilization. Operated by 5 European structural and investment funds (EFSI) - 4 for the French case—these three European local development policies reflect the political strategies implemented at the global level by the European Union, and become operational at the local level in the territories.

These three European public policies, operationalized by 4 European structural and investment funds (EFSI), have the necessary financial means at their disposal:

Table 1: Budgetary amount of European local development policies

Public policies	EFSI	European funding 2014–2020 (in billions of euros)	Credits for France 2014–2020 (in billions of euros)	Credits for France 2007–2013
Economic, social, and territorial cohesion policy	ERDF (excluding ETC)	196	8.4	8
	ERDF (with ETC)		1.1	-
	ESF	83	6	5,4
	Cohesion Fund	63	-	-
	YEI	6.4	0.3	-
Rural development policy	EAFRD	99	11.4	7.6
Common Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Policy	EMFF	5.7	0.6	0.2
TOTAL	454	27.8	21.2	

Document source: Senate—Information report by Mrs. Colette MÉLOT, made on behalf of the MI Sous-utilization des fonds européens n° 745 (2018–2019) - 25 September 2019

⁹ Reference to the speech by Renaud Muselier President of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region and Member of the European Parliament, celebrating 30 years of Erasmus

The European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) is strongly salient at the local level, due to the amount of the multiannual budget allocated to these policies. Recently, the structural funds appear more than ever an object of politicization, as shown by the debates at the European Council on the mechanism of respect for the rule of law as *a sine qua non* condition for access to them (in the broad sense including the financing of sectoral policies) for Poland and Hungary.

EUROPEAN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES: THE EFFECTS OF POLITICIZATION

In a State where the local level is regularly questioned, and where it appears that European funding is an opportunity, it is interesting to question the effects of this politicization.

While the French governance of European funding is cacophonous for the European Commission, it is the subject of conflicts and mobilization at the French level.

A cacophonous governance of European instruments...

To grasp the entirety of what we are saying, it is necessary to look at the devices themselves. Focusing on the governance structure highlights the fact that the structure of the funds itself maintains the *millefeuille*, because different levels of authorities are involved for different funds.

Although structurally different, the financial instruments operating European local development policies differ on several points. First, their implementation is relatively different, the ERDF, the ESF and the EMFF are based on operational programmes¹⁰. The EAFRD, on the

¹⁰ Operational programs are detailed planning documents structured by policy and intervention themes that reflect the future use of the fund(s) over the programming years. They are drawn up at the beginning of programming by the Managing Authority with territorial jurisdiction over the financial instrument. However, the European Commission imposes a mandatory involvement of territorial actors in this exercise.

other hand, is operationalized through rural development programmes. Nevertheless, these two elements cover the same logic in their conception and translation. They are both based on a diagnosis of the territory, a consultation of local actors and the elaboration of a document identifying the funding axes for the 7 years of the programming period.

Similarly, these disparities condition different implementation timetables and differentiation in the implementation rules. Another of the particularities could be the very purpose of the funding, whereas the ESF is a funding instrument on a human scale, financing actions with individuals, which could easily be understood as part of the EAFRD. The ERDF, on the other hand, is dedicated to more substantial funding for infrastructure and tangible and intangible investments. Another aspect of this differentiation may be the regulations that evolve programme after programme, making it more complex for managing authorities to learn the rules and standards¹¹.

Working on a daily basis with local actors on EU funding instruments revealed the complexity of the subject, and the technostructure that is being put in place there, and more particularly within the “French-style” implementation of the governance of these instruments. The operation of the structural funds relies on a principle of shared management, insofar as the Member State must designate different structures for management, coordination, certification, and audit missions.

¹¹ The managing authority of a European fund corresponds to the designation by the European Commission of a guarantor of the fund on a given territory. It may thus be a state structure (ministry or decentralized state departments such as the Regional Directorate for Competition, Consumer Affairs, Labour and Employment [DIRECCTE]), or, as for the 2014–2020 period, the French Regions which were Managing Authority for the ERDF, part of the ESF and EAFRD, and the EMFF for certain maritime regions. The European Commission is responsible for this.

Table 2: French governance of EFSI (2014–2020)

	ERDF	ESF	EAFRD	EMFF
Managing Authority	Regions for the OPs, and the State for a specific programme	Regions (35%) Axis 1, States Axis 2 and 3 (65%, DGEFP and DIRECCTE)	Regions (approx. 90%), State (approx. 10%, DGPE)	State (DPMA), and in the regions for the coastal regional councils.
Certifying Authority	Direction régionale des finances publiques	Direction régionale des finances publiques	Commission de certification des comptes des organismes payeurs (CCCOP)	Direction régionale des finances publiques
Audit Authority	Commission interministérielle de coordination et de contrôle (CICC)	Commission interministérielle de coordination et de contrôle (CICC)		Commission interministérielle de coordination et de contrôle (CICC)
Payment	Direction régionale des finances publiques	Direction régionale des finances publiques	Agence de services et de paiement (ASP)	Agence de services et de paiement (ASP)

The governance architecture of European funds makes it more complex to understand and make these tools accessible to local actors. In fact, the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT)¹² is responsible for coordinating the implementation of European structural and investment funds, in line with a multi-level governance approach. The ANCT also ensures the national coordination of the ERDF, largely regionalized for the French case. The coordination of the other EFSIs is ensured for the ESF and YEI by the General Delegation for Employment and Vocational Training (DGEFP) of the Ministry of Labour. For the EAFRD and the EMFF it is ensured respectively by the Directorate General for Economic Performance and the Business Environment (DGPE) and the Directorate for Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture (DPMA) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food.

To make our remarks even more complex, if we focus, for example, on the European Social Fund, it is noticeable that the latter is divided into three axes. The governance of these

¹² (*Agence nationale pour la cohésion des territoires*) Merger of the General Commission for Equality of Territories, Epareca and the Digital Agency. The aim of this agency is to bring the actions of the State and local authorities closer together.

three axes is divided between (1) the State, (2) the Regions as management authorities, but also with (3) the Departments and the PLIEs¹³ as an intermediary body (IB). These IBs therefore emigrate, although not to the various regional operational programs, but to the national (ESF NOP). Nevertheless, the coordination of these intermediary bodies, which are not “managing authorities” but simple management delegates structure, is ensured by state structures. Which are themselves deconcentrated and embodied by state actors, in the Regions territory.

The thematic separation of competences between actors is artificial and, very often, projects fall within the competence of both the Departments and the Regions, which creates administrative duplication and even duplications in grant applications. Thus, for the period 2014–2020, 129 structures have coordinated the ESF on the metropolitan, ultra-marine and territorial levels.

Faced with this complexity, the European Commission agrees that simplification is necessary to ensure better coordination of these tools, and that this “sophisticated” management generates porosity in these instruments¹⁴.

Since 2014, the Senate and the National Assembly have both been tackling the restructuring of financial instruments by drafting reports, concluding that a more advanced decentralization would condition a more optimal use of European funding, by pointing out the “illusion” nature of the current architecture.

In fact, interviews in the territories reveal that territorial actors regularly question the current architecture and regionalization of EFSI. Indeed, if the initiative is taken to take European funding, through the prism of the competence that is implemented, the latter can be eminently

¹³ Plans locaux pour l’insertion et l’emploi (PLIE)

¹⁴ The notion of sophistication was used by a senior official of the European Commission present in a coalition body of the Assembly of French Departments on February 6, 2019, in Bordeaux. Showing great diplomacy in his choice of words, the notion of sophistication, which translated as “too complex and cacophonous” was received by these actors as a perfect reflection of the French governance of EFSIs. This intervention also amused the representatives of the State present at the meeting, who could only unofficially agree with this observation.

open to interpretation, as evidenced by the French governance of the ESF. The question of “social” is thus interpreted differently by the State, the Regions, Departments and PLIE, depending on their area of competence and due to the individuality of the actors (Boudon 2004).

The use made of EU financial instruments is thus constructed under the prism of territorial competences, in an institutionalist logic intended to strengthen the role of the territorial structure, but also in a financial logic, where the financial autonomy of local authorities is becoming increasingly complex. This famous situation of the President of the PACA Region bears witness to this: *“Europe is useful if we know how to use it. As we do here in Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. Europe represents more than 2 billion euro of additional funds for our territory. This is our 13th month.”*¹⁵

... to a political-administrative mobilisation of territorial actors

The governance of these policies and the management architecture on which the implementation instruments are based condition a political divide between the institutions. These fractures are revealed in the relations that these institutions maintain in the operationalisation of these instruments.

Our first level of analysis consists in looking at the construction of the national partnership agreement¹⁶.

Indeed, the construction of this document is, for the period 2021–2027, implemented under the authority of the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT) within an entity called

¹⁵ Speech delivered by Renaud Muselier President of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region and Member of the European Parliament on the occasion of the Erasmus Days celebrating 30 years of Erasmus.

¹⁶ The partnership agreement is a document produced by each member state, setting out the strategy, priorities and modalities for the use of European structural and investment funds (EFSF). It is a single document that is co-written by a plurality of actors from state, territorial and civil society structures. This document alone concentrates all the themes that will be reflected in the operational programs. It structures the question of European funds for a State and must be approved by the European Commission in response to the political strategy of the EU.

the “national body for partnership consultation of the Partnership Agreement” (INCOPAP). This body is thus an assembly of more than 350 institutions in which the managing authorities (state and regional bodies) have a very special place.

The role of the managing authorities in the elaboration of the partnership agreement is major insofar as, on the one hand, the European Commission relies on the expertise of the institutions already managing European funding and, on the other hand, because the European public policy of local development is based on the quantitative and qualitative data of the latter. It thus appears that the partnership has only a limited place in these bodies. Only 5% of the heads of networks of local and regional authorities are represented by 17 associations of local and regional authorities¹⁷. The latter, feeling thus underrepresented, have chosen to participate only partially through passive listening, or even not to take part in certain sessions. The representativeness of the territories in its bodies, desired and communicated by the European Commission, in the broadest sense, is thus to be put into perspective. But it is no less effective.

“No, but the State cannot control everything about the EFSIs, it is unthinkable, and we no longer have the human and technical resources, so partnership is a necessity [...] and the State is powerless in the face of the power of local elected representatives, the weight that the PLIE have today is excessive. During the debates in the Senate on the Maptam law, they totally crushed the government. I attended the debate, nothing could be done. They are too powerful. (Interview with a senior official of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Anonymity required, first half of 2020)

These bodies are also the place for negotiations and the distribution of dividing lines for the definition of the national governance of the European structural funds, operationalizing European local development policies. The State and the Regions are in fact in systematic competition here as to the future management of these instruments for each new programming period. The competition is mainly reflected in the demand for good management and good performance of the latter (Lebrou 2020).

¹⁷ It also appears that out of this 17%, some associations of local authorities do not regularly participate in these bodies and are therefore absent from the negotiating table.

The mobilization of these actors is particularly political, as it revolves around the mobilization of actions based on the intervention of elected representatives—be it the Presidents of Regions, national or European MPs—as well as by drawing up opposition speeches or by directly soliciting members of the government. Paradoxically, these quarrels refer to the logic of Jacobins versus Girondins. These logics will even go so far as to territorialise themselves into infra-regional territories and will in fact disunite the territories into multiple blocks. This is what we consider to be our second level of analysis.

*'And the State is alone at the centre...
 - So, you divide and conquer, then?
 - Yes! (laughs) That's right (laughs)! There's a jumble of local authorities ... then the Regions will always try to get the upper hand in the numerous local authorities (smile).
 (Interview with a civil servant in charge of the coordination of a European fund in a French ministry, anonymity required, second semester 2019, Paris)*

The second phase of the national implementation of European local development policies revolves around the design of operational programmes (thus operationalizing European local development policies). This action consists for the managing authority of the European fund (i.e., the Regions) to gather a partnership of territorial actors and to build in full cooperation a programming document.

Thus, for our case study in a Region, it is a partnership communicated to the European Commission made up of more than 1600 actors. However, if we look at this document sent to the Commission, by analyzing the listing of these actors, we can understand that 335 of them are actors of the regional institution itself (i.e., about 20%). This Region has therefore decided to initiate as soon as possible consultation bodies to prepare the renewal of these policies for the 2021–2027 programming period. These bodies are composed of two levels: a technical level, where technicians and local actors meet to discuss and raise the financing needs of the territories in a pragmatic way and a political level. These two bodies are organized on numerous occasions to support the construction of operational programmes in the regions. Like at national level, exchanges in the territories regularly take the form of settling accounts between territorial actors in the Region. The sub-regional players thus consider this type of body as *“big masses where you come to sit down, where you listen to the Region talking one way, knowing that you will not be*

listened to in return. But the Region will nevertheless communicate to the Commission by saying that it has concerted. So that it has done the job.”¹⁸

A consensus can be noted on the respect of the regional technical level, in opposition with the political game play by the regional elected representatives. Regional technical agents must in fact deal with local actors whose exchanges are passionate, and above all with regional political authorities that respond to political and electoral logic, which places the latter in sometimes uncomfortable positions vis-à-vis their partners.

These disagreements, however, transcend political parties. The empiricism of our study allows us to affirm that there is no “left/right” marker in the political management of these issues.

’ (...) the local elected representatives are grassroots people ... if there’s money to be taken ... they take it ... it doesn’t matter whether you are from the left or the right...’.
(Interview with an elected representative of one of the Departments of New Aquitaine, anonymity required, second half of 2020)

The construction of these programmes, subsequently validated by the European Commission, is according to European regulations supposed to be built “from below” and in a relatively joint consultation with local institutions. Nevertheless, local territories do not feel that they are sufficiently listened to by regional bodies and consider these negotiating bodies as “deceptive.”

“If the Region’s objective is to tell the European Commission: look, we have concerted... Yes, on paper they have done it. They put 200 people in a room, they made them sign at the entrance. But afterwards nothing was retained, and they didn’t listen to us (...) The only elements that stand out are, as always, those who pay for the competences of the Region (...) It’s a little bit like the substitution of European credits to finance themselves.”
(Comments made in a political meeting by a President of a department of the New-Aquitaine Region, Anonymity required)

¹⁸ Interview with a technical agent from a local authority during a partnership consultation, second half of 2020, Anonymity required

The objective of these institutions is indeed to integrate in the operational programmes actions in their field of competence and their public in order to maximize the financial gains and legitimize their action with the citizens¹⁹.

“You know, in our territory it’s a bit like the Gallic village; everybody gets their paws pulled in, Department, metropolis, PLIE; but when you’re facing the State, there, we’re all together!” (Interview with a local councillor in charge of European issues in a Breton territory, Anonymity required, second semester of 2019)

The mobilization of these actors is notably reflected in coalitions of causes within the logic of cooperation (Dagnino, Roy, and Yami 2007; Roy and Yami 2007). Local actors thus organize themselves at the territorial level to fight at the same time what they consider to be a legitimate struggle. Nevertheless, although they share the same strategic vision of their alliances, they are aware that once the foundations of the negotiations have been laid, competition for European funding and the capture of European resources will resume. Thus, the Regions are seeing the emergence of coalitions of causes of communities of municipalities, conurbations, Departments²⁰, or even associations wishing to bring forward elements to be integrated into these programmes. By widening the spectrum and questioning actors from other French Regions, the interviews once again highlighted the deceptive nature of these consultation bodies, insofar as this document is subject to “political arbitration” by the President of the Region ex-post.

“It is rather comical to see the President of the Region writing a column in a newspaper criticizing the Jacobinism of the State, whereas a few days later, he makes the choice to centralize all European questions at home without even consulting his territories and the whole partnership.” (Public intervention of an MEP at a political conference of a regional partnership for the construction of an ERDF-ESF operational programme; anonymity required, second semester 2020)

Thus, it appears that the European Commission’s desire for partnership is in fact based on a tutelage of the managing authority—in this case the Regions—over the other territorial

¹⁹ One of the avenues of reflection would be to look at this legitimacy with regard to European territorial issues. What about electoralism, leadership, or institutional legitimacy?

²⁰ The Departments of New Aquitaine named their coalition body: the G12; reference to the G7.

authorities. This element takes shape through the porous nature of this arbitration and the unknown that defines decision-making on programmes.

The competition at work in these territorial consultation bodies is thus important to respond to these multiple institutional dimensions. The EFSIs no longer appear simply as “aid from Europe,” but as a real institutional, financial, and political lever at national level. Territorial competition mainly revolves around the representation of territorial interests vis-à-vis the Regions, and various accusations of failure to respect territorial differentiation through the inclusion in European regional programmes of elements related to regional competences.

“The decentralization of the management of European funds at regional level has not solved all the problems, because it is incomplete, but also because, on its own, it is not enough to take into account the diversity of territorial realities, particularly in regions that are now often much larger²¹.” (Senate information report by Ms. Colette MÉLOT, on behalf of the MI Sous-utilisation des fonds européens, tabled on 25 September 2019)

This phase is comparable, not for the ERDF in the regions, but on the ESF with the state entities. While a relative *status quo* for the governance of the cohesion policy is in the air (currently being arbitrated at the time of writing), sub-regional intermediary bodies support state management of the ESF, fearing that, like the ERDF, there will be a regional stranglehold on this fund and a progressive appropriation of European funding on regional competences.

These coalitions of intermediary organizations thus appear as pro-State and anti-Region (on the subject of Europe only) which is sometimes fuelled by State agents, by a practice of pro-State lobbying towards departmental entities. The latter defend a Jacobin management of the French administration and argue that these negotiations are an advancement of decentralization towards the Departments.

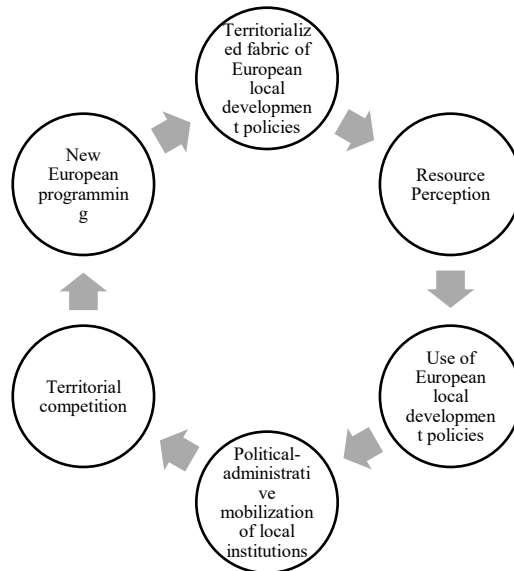
However, although the intermunicipalities and the Departments wish to give priority to state management of European issues—by agreeing on the already established and regional

²¹ Information Report No. 745 (2018–2019) by Ms. Colette MÉLOT, made on behalf of *MI Sous-utilisation des fonds européens*, submitted on September 25, 2019.

management of the ERDF, without, however, mobilizing themselves to go against it—the rural actors who are embodied by the “countries” see the Region as a faithful ally. Indeed, it appears that the Regions, sometimes in institutional opposition from the Departments and municipalities, due to the lack of a territorial base, rely on the “*Pays*”²² to coordinate territorial action, bypassing and to the political detriment of the existing territorial authorities, in order to strengthen their power of action “at the local level.”

It seems important to note that this mobilization of European territorial actors seems to represent a cycle. Indeed, the notion of use that territorial actors make of European local development policies refers to their necessary mobilization, which leads to competition or cooperation during the construction and the making of these policies, referring itself, *in fine*, to the use through the perception of European resources.

Figure 1—Cycle of politicization of European local development policies



²² *Pays* are territories that are neither territorial authorities, nor cantons, nor public establishments for inter-municipal cooperation (EPCI) with their own tax system, but are a French administrative category of territorial planning.

CONCLUSION

This research is intended to be part of the sociology of public action approach on territorialised European public issues. This research is intended to be part of the continuity of the work of authors such as: Jacquot, Woll, and Balme 2004; Pasquier and Weisbein 2004; Rowell and Mangenot 2010; Lebrou 2015b. This research is based on a case study of 24 months of participant observation in a territorial institution, and 42 semi-structured interviews. We were able to follow and participate in the consultation bodies on the future of European policies of territorial development, in the Region and on the national territory. The purpose of this research is to look at the transformations and changes in public territorial action 7 years after the regionalization—for the most part—of European structural and investment funds. The case study made it possible to integrate *in situ the actors who make Europe far from Brussels*. We first outlined the motivations that generate the politicization of the European stake for territorial actors (progressive loss of financial autonomy, fear of decentralization, succession of territorial reforms and a need for local actors to legitimize their actions on their territorial competences). Then, we analyzed the changes at work of local actors during a period of preparation of European policies of local development. This analysis has notably revealed that the French governance of European issues is at the heart of an inter-institutional battle that is being fought, on the one hand, between the Regions and the State, and, on the other hand, between the territories themselves and the Regions. The analysis highlights the emerging idea that the Regions no longer embody the notion of “local” and “territorial” in the eyes of local actors (for the EU territorial issues). Particularly since the Act III of French decentralization, due to the geographical and institutional expansion of certain French Regions, which have become even more imposing than certain EU Member States. They are thus considered to be too far away from the territories. It can be seen that at the heart of the EU’s territorialised public policy making, many issues are actually at stake, such as the redefinition of the governance of the EU’s financial instruments, or the appropriation of European logic to support the institution’s territorial competences. These mobilizations are characterized by an operational opposition between sub-regional territories, some of which wish to return to state management (contrary to the conclusions of the reports of the National Assembly and Senate calling for the continuation of the regionalization of

European funding). We nevertheless qualify this opposition of management to the entities “territorial authorities,” and not necessarily to all the “local authorities,” so great is the territorial disparity within the territorial *millefeuille*, and the French administrative apparatus.

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