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ARTICLES

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SHIFTS IN EU COHESION POLICY AND PROCESSES OF PERIPHERALIZATION: A VIEW FROM CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE

Abstract. The increasing dominance of neoliberalism as the key steering mechanism of the European Union (EU) since the early 1990s has implied the competitiveness-oriented reshaping of cohesion policy. The aim of this paper is to initiate a debate from a critical political economic perspective on the implications of this shift for Central Eastern European (CEE) member states. To this end, the paper discusses the formation of EU centre-periphery relations from a CEE point of view and formulates some preliminary suggestions as to how cohesion policy would need to be rethought in order to ensure the better integration of lagging CEE regions.

Key words: EU cohesion policy, EU integration, centre–periphery, Lisbonization, place-based development, Central Eastern Europe (CEE), Visegrad Group (V4).

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, several political economic analysts warned that the neoliberal restructuring of the European Union (EU) would enhance uneven development and, especially following the accession of Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, would institutionalize a deepening West-East division between richer and poorer countries and regions (see e.g. Budd, 1997; Agnew, 2001; Hudson, 2003). More than ten years after the Eastern enlargement of the Union these prophecies seem to have proven right: although there has

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been a partial national level convergence in terms of GDP across the Community, regional patterns of uneven development have clearly deteriorated (see e.g. Smith and Timár, 2010). Furthermore, cohesion policy, once conceived to address the regional problem at the EUropean scale, has gradually become reframed as a key instrument to achieve economic competitiveness objectives and, as such, it has further reinforced regional disparities.

This paper has been motivated by the observation that there is a lack of critical political economic studies that discuss the above trends from a specifically CEE perspective. The aim of the paper is then to start filling this gap by reviewing the underlying processes of CEE peripheralization in the light of the competitiveness-oriented reshaping of cohesion policy. In doing so, we draw mainly on our research on spatial policy in Hungary, but we also refer to developments in other CEE countries to provide a more general discussion that is valid for the whole region. Also, we formulate some preliminary suggestions as to how cohesion policy would need to be rethought in order to ensure the better integration of lagging CEE regions. Given that shifts in cohesion policy and CEE (regional) economic restructuring have already been widely discussed in the literature, we refrain from a detailed account of these issues. The paper is thus admittedly not a closely argued empirical study, but a piece intended to start a debate – one hopefully involving more contributions from CEE – on how cohesion policy should look like in order to tackle core–periphery differences within countries and across the EU.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF EU COHESION POLICY: FROM SELECTIVE REDISTRIBUTION TO GROWTH-ORIENTATION

In order to develop our argument, let us begin with sketching a concise overview of some key trends in cohesion policy in order to contextualize our assessment of the link between shifts in policy and processes of peripheralization. EU cohesion policy has played a crucial role in the process of EU integration. Its objectives, that is, the reduction of disparities between regions and countries can be traced back to the Treaty of Rome of 1957. The first policy instrument appeared with the creation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 1975, but the institutionalization of a genuine 'EUropean' cohesion policy gained momentum only in the late 1980s following the accession of poorer Mediterranean countries and the prospects of adopting the single market programme (Bachtler and Mendez, 2007). The Single European Act of 1986 (Art. 130a.) identified economic and social cohesion as fundamental Community objectives, and in 1988 a major reform of the Structural Funds was undertaken. From then on, the regional problem has been

dealt with from a Community-wide perspective, within multi-annual integrated programmes and along a number of key principles.

While these principles (i.e. programming, subsidiarity, partnership, concentration and additionality) have remained in place throughout the past decades, one could witness a gradual change of objectives as well as a shift in the 'spatial perspective' of cohesion policy. As to the former, the original overarching aim of cohesion policy from the late 1980s was to secure a balanced growth between regions. In fact, the Structural Funds were meant to compensate for the impact on less developed areas of being part of a wider and integrated EUropean economy in which economic gains are divided unequally (Dunford and Perrons, 1994; Allen, 2005). Structural aid was thus selectively targeting lagging areas and areas with special needs in order to help creating the necessary institutional, infrastructural, social etc. preconditions for growth in these regions – often without sustainable results as the specific needs of territories were not taken into account. Nonetheless, cohesion policy (especially the Cohesion Funds) has significantly helped to close the development gap between wealthier and less developed member states and has thus greatly contributed to the overall territorial integration of the Community. Concerning the spatial perspective of cohesion policy, that was initially framed in regional terms. The Maastricht Treaty (Art. 198.) set up the Committee of the Regions, and regions became involved in the planning and decision-making processes related to Community Support Frameworks. In view of the new range of opportunities for regions it became commonplace to speak of the 'Europe of regions' (Borrás-Alomar *et al*., 1994) and many envisioned a federal Europe with the regions as the third level (Keating, 2008).

A (still ongoing) shift from this redistributive, regional approach has taken shape gradually in the context of globalizing pressures, EU enlargement and, most recently, the 2008 economic crisis. Following a series of positive assessments of the Structural Funds in successive Cohesion Reports in the late 1990s and early 2000, debates on the 2007–2013 Financial Perspective brought up concerns with the effectiveness of cohesion policy. In response, the Commission shifted the focus of the Structural Funds towards supporting the 2005 relaunch of the 'Lisbon agenda' to promote faster growth and more employment (Bachtler and Gorzelak, 2007). This has had three interrelated implications for cohesion policy. First, territorial solidarity and selective redistribution to less developed regions has been pushed in the background by an increasing emphasis on endogenous growth in all regions, and the focus on competitiveness, apparent already from the early 1990s (Vanolo, 2010), has become strengthened. Second, cohesion policy has acquired a more strategic orientation. The 2006 reform introduced the Community Strategic Guidelines and National Strategic Reference Frameworks, which were meant to provide a national framework for steering programmes towards Lisbon objectives (Mendez, 2011). On the whole, the 'Lisbonization' of cohesion policy has

implied the transformation of cohesion policy from a traditional regional policy field on a supranational scale into a set of instruments put at the service of general EU political-economic and governance objectives (Mendez, 2013). Third and concerning the spatial perspective of cohesion policy, attention has turned away from regions to cities and city-regions that are considered as key nodes of economic activity and growth in the globalizing space-economy (see e.g. Scott, 2001). The idea of 'Europe of regions' has thus faded away without having a significant impact on the spatial organization of EUrope.

The post-2013 reform of cohesion policy has brought about a revival of the territorial approach through the 'place-based narrative'. Principally, a 'place-based policy' refers to "a long-term strategy aimed at tackling persistent underutilisation of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places through external interventions and multilevel governance" (Barca, 2009, p. VII). While at first this suggested a return to the founding ethos of the 1988 reform, in its implementation, the place-based approach has fallen short of providing a coherent, 'territorially sensitive' framework (cf. Mendez, 2013). In the context of the Europe 2020 strategy, launched (after the failure of the Lisbon strategy) in 2010 to create the conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, cohesion policy has maintained an emphasis on competitiveness, a focus on cities and city-regions, and has remained subordinated to overall EU policy objectives (see CEC, 2014, p. XXXIII). In fact, "the increasing dominance of a master narrative on Europe 2020" (Mendez, 2013, p. 640) coupled with crisis-induced budgetary pressures have turned cohesion policy to a largely 'space-blind' policy field that is primarily managed at the national rather than subnational level. A key principle of the cohesion policy package for 2014–2020 is macro-economic conditionality, in order to ensure that the effectiveness of the five European structural and investment funds is not undermined by unsound macroeconomic policies. Furthermore, the Commission has formulated country-specific recommendations and has concluded a Partnership Agreement (PA) with each member state to define the commitments towards the Europe 2020 objectives. As it has been argued by Mendez *et al.* (2013), the dominant focus on Europe 2020 objectives and targets implies less attention to the territorial dimension; furthermore, the focus on the national level ignores the range of territorial differences within member states and hinders a place-based approach tailored to territorial needs and potentials.

The impact of these recent trends on patterns of regional disparities is especially worthwhile investigating from the point of view of the 'Friends of Cohesion Policy', i.e. member states that are net beneficiaries of cohesion policy (see Baun and Marek, 2014) and where heavy dependence on EU funding implies a stronger pressure to adapt to new policy frameworks. From the above coalition of countries this paper focuses on the new member states of CEE that form a distinctive group as in their case regional patterns of development have been

shaped both by processes of post-socialist economic transition and EUropeanization (Monastiriotis, 2001). This paper assumes that the specificities of economic transition are key to understanding the – as it will be argued, negative – effects of cohesion policy change in the CEE context. Hence the next section offers a succinct discussion of this issue.

3. THE "INTEGRATION" OF CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPEAN SPACE-ECONOMIES INTO EUROPE

While in the early 1990s hopes were high concerning the quick economic integration of CEE, towards the end of the decade it had become clear that the adhesion to neoliberal market principles had not led to convergence but to a new economic divide between the West and 'the rest' (see e.g. Agnew 2001). As analyses pointed out already in the early 2000s, foreign direct investment (FDI) has not provided a vehicle of regional development as appropriated surplus value has flown in an East-West direction. Similarly, trade liberalization and financial capital flows have favoured the old member states (Sokol, 2001). Indeed, the fact that "the integration" of CEE economies was steered from outside by the strategies of powerful financial, economic and political institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and the EU resulted in what Nölke and Vliegenthart (2009) have termed 'dependent market economies'. This means, above all, that the primary means of raising investments is linked to foreign direct investments (FDI) and foreign-owned banks, and that corporate strategies are adopted in foreign TNC headquarters (ibid.). The export rate of CEE countries into the EU-27 has not increased since their accession to the EU in 2004; since the outbreak of the financial crisis it has even diminished (Kengyel, 2014, p. 495). With their comparative advantage lying in their cheap and relatively well-qualified and productive labour force and (in international terms) average levels of technology transfer, CEE countries have practically become assembly platforms of transnational corporations (TNCs). TNCs generally import key technological and organizational innovations and know-how from abroad and are not motivated to develop intense R&D cooperation with local suppliers and universities (Ženka *et al.*, 2014).

The EU accession process was characterized by asymmetric power relations (and a willing attitude of CEE national political elites, see Balázs, 2014) and implied fitting candidate states into the 'Maastricht straight-jacket' (Budd, 1997). The imposition of fiscal and monetary discipline has substantially reduced the room for manoeuvre of economic policies and has further reinforced relations of dependence. In particular, low rates of domestic savings and fiscal constraints on government investment made CEE countries become more dependent on FDI.

Post-socialist transition processes and the way in which CEE economies have become incorporated into EUrope have produced radical changes in spatial development and have significantly redrawn the map of regional inequalities. More concretely, three main trends have been observable: the appearance of an East-West gradient, with Western parts of CEE countries outperforming Eastern parts; a growing divergence between well-performing urban regions benefiting from the bulk of FDI on the one hand and (peripheral) rural regions on the other; and a polarization between CEE countries' main metropolitan areas (usually the national capital) and 'the rest' (Ehrlich *et al.*, 2012). On the whole, even though there has been evidence that in terms of GDP per capita, the gap between Western European and CEE countries has been closing, this partial national level convergence has been coupled with the aggravation of sub-national patterns of uneven development (Smith and Timár, 2010). Or to refer to Monastiriotis (2011, p. 23), convergence dynamics have been coupled by processes of cumulative causation especially in early and, later-on, in more advanced stages of national development where the importance of agglomeration and, importantly, demand-side market-size effects is increasingly heightened. In concrete terms this has meant that (taking NUTS3-level data for the period 1990–2008), regional income disparities in all CEE countries rose on average by 80% (50%) between 1990 (1995) and 2007 (Monastiriotis, 2011, p. 5). As to the East-West divide at the Community level, only some capital regions in CEE member states do record a GDP per inhabitant in purchasing power parities terms that is above 75% of the EU average; the majority does not and qualifies thus as less developed. In 2011, from the 76 NUTS2 regions falling in this category in the whole EU, those 20 having a GDP per inhabitant less than 50% of the EU-28 average were all located in Eastern Europe (Eurostat, 2015).

4. SHIFTS IN COHESION POLICY AND EUROPEAN CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS

Trends of peripheralization and the related increase in regional disparities should not be seen simply as the result of structural economic "integration" processes but as being institutionally mediated by a range of policy interventions (Ehrlich *et al*., 2012). Ironically, the competitiveness-oriented reshaping of cohesion policy, which is explicitly meant to tackle the above trends, has in many respects reinforced them.

To be sure, the preparation for EU accession – especially through the Phare and twinning programmes – contributed to the institutional modernization of domestic regional policies and territorial administration systems in the (then) candidate states. However, the prospects of EU funding and the Commission's emphasis on compliance with EU guidelines implied a hastened introduction of

policy frameworks modelled at an alleged EUropean 'best practice' that did thus not consider the specificity of development problems in the context of transition (Bachtler and Downes, 2000). Also, the initial concern of the Commission with regional administrative capacity-building gave later way to a preference for governance arrangements ensuring absorption capacity (Grabbe, 2001; Bruszt, 2008). Coupled by various domestic political factors (see e.g. Varró and Faragó, 2015) this has meant that regional involvement in (spatial) development matters remained often weak and that 'regional strategies' have been rather funding-driven, pragmatic and ad hoc responses to EU policy requirements (Bachtler and McMaster, 2008; Dąbrowski, 2014). It is only in Poland that substantial decentralization to the regional level has taken place; elsewhere in CEE, centralization tendencies have prevailed.

By advancing an agenda of knowledge- and innovation-based growth, the 'Lisbonization' of cohesion policy further reinforced the lack of attention to the diverse nature of the EU's economies and industrial structures (Budd, 2007). Furthermore, coupled by the imperatives of fiscal and monetary discipline, this agenda diminished the room for elaborating genuinely *spatial* strategies in CEE member states. For example, in Hungary the increased emphasis on the contribution of cities to the Lisbon Agenda (CEC, 2005) brought about a revival of urban network policy and instigated new plans aiming at strengthening regional urban centres ('development poles') so as to lessen the socio-economic dominance of the capital (see Radvánszki, 2009). Eventually, however, due to the Commission's preference for the supply-oriented development of urban infrastructures, as well as the fact that the government of the time was under pressure to work out a convergence update, 'pole development' became reframed in terms of cluster development and university-business cooperation (see Varró and Faragó, 2015).

Surely, domestic factors, in particular aspects of (party) political struggle (Varró and Faragó, 2015) also contributed to the gradual diminishing of geographical concerns. Furthermore, in Hungary as in other CEE countries, policy actors have been too keen to uncritically adopt the notion of regional competitiveness and related concepts, disregarding thus the fact that CEE regions are 'plugged in' to the global economy through different sets of linkages than their Western European and North American counterparts where these concepts originate from. This has implied, among others, an excessive focus on the establishment and support of clusters and Regional Innovation Strategies, regardless of whether the necessary conditions for the development of these are given or not (Ženka *et al*., 2014).

Arguably, the above problematic aspects of EU cohesion policy will be further reinforced in the 2014–2020 period. The European Commission set the aim of ensuring a more effective spending of funds under the Community Strategic Framework (CSF) through a strong alignment with the policy priorities of the Europe 2020 agenda, i.e. macroeconomic and ex ante conditionality, thematic

concentration and performance incentives. As a result and in contrast to the Community Strategic Guidelines for the 2007–2013 period, the CSF does not include any territorial cohesion objectives; rather, CSF funds are now expected to become "a catalyst for growth and jobs" (CEC, 2012, p. 2). The 'territorial thinking' of the Commission became limited to formulating key country-specific challenges in 'Position Papers' that were sent to each Member State prior to the formal negotiations on the PA and Operative Programmes. Actually, however, country-specific challenges refer to national level economic policy interventions related to tackling budget deficits, job creation or innovation, among others, that are seen as necessary to comply with EU 2020 objectives. No notice has thus been taken of country-specific characteristics of (spatial) development implied by particular development trajectories or geopolitical relations.

Concerning CEE countries in particular, it has been ignored that the growth process of CEE regions is qualitatively different to that of the regional economies of older, more advanced capitalist economies and that despite their spectacular growth in the pre-crisis period, CEE economies are still in a phase of development and restructuring (see Monastiriotis, 2011). Also, although the share of new member states has slightly increased in the overall – in comparison to the 2007–2013 period, reduced – cohesion policy envelope, the introduction of a more rigorous capping to lower the level of accessible funds negatively affects slower growing CEE countries such as Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Ferry, 2015; see also Mrak *et al*., 2015). At the same time, in CEE countries the reliance on EU transfers to fund policy instruments is particularly strong and the limited availability of domestic funding has been exacerbated by co-funding requirements; in fact, most prominent domestic instruments have been subsumed into EU programmes (Ferry and McMaster, 2013). Added to the dependence of CEE economies on FDI, this reliance of the public domain on EU funding has actually created a state of 'double dependence' and has further strengthened centre-periphery relations.

A crucial issue is furthermore the 'space-blindness' of the current cohesion policy approach that implies a lack of attention to a set of (interrelated) *spatial* development challenges specific to the CEE region such as the weak position of second- and third-tier cities in national and European urban networks (Gál and Lux, 2014), the impact of the out-migration of qualified workforce to Western Europe (Borén and Gentile, 2007), or issues such as the spatial segregation of the Roma population and the regeneration of high-rise housing estates built during socialism.

The dominance of the EU 2020 discourse and the related strengthening of national level (economic) policy actors raises serious doubts concerning the room for genuinely place-based development, although this has figured as a key leitmotiv in post-2013 cohesion policy reforms (Mendez, 2013; Mendez *et al*., 2013). One of the main reasons for low levels of cohesion policy effectiveness in CEE countries

has been the lack of strategic planning. This has resulted partly from the Commission's strong emphasis on absorption and its attachment to rigid monitoring and evaluation processes (Ferry, 2015). On the other hand, as Dąbrowski (2014) argued in his study of three CEE regions – in Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary – a lack of strategic capacity at the subnational level in particular has been a key obstacle to implement place-based approaches to regional economic development. Given the prevailing emphasis on macroeconomic conditionality on the one hand and the lack of strategic guidelines tailored to the specificities of the CEE spatial context and geared towards bringing about long-term structural readjustment on the other, the effectiveness of the place-based approach in CEE countries remains questionable in the current programming period.

5. DISCUSSION

Key to the transformation of EUropean cohesion policy in the past decades has been the reframing of the notion of territorial cohesion as coherent with neoliberal competitiveness. However, contrary to what the currently dominant policy narrative suggests, territorial cohesion and competition are not easily reconciled; rather, they are contested terrains of political agency and public discourse (Vanolo, 2010). The aim of this paper is to emphasize the need to address the complementarities and trade-offs between the objectives of economic competitiveness and territorial cohesion from a specifically CEE perspective. Scholarship on economic development has repeatedly shown that the assumption that growth will trickle down from wealthier European regions to poorer ones does not hold (see e.g. Dunford and Perrons, 1994; Budd, 2007; Monastiriotis, 2011). Yet, cohesion policy seems to remain underwritten by a belief that the equalizing force of the market will help less developed CEE regions to catch up with their more prosperous Western (and Central Eastern) counterparts. According to the latest Report on Cohesion, competitiveness remains low in most CEE regions with the exception of capital city regions and for the most part these "do not *as yet* generate any measurable spillovers to benefit other regions" (CEC, 2014, p. XXX, emphasis added).

Addressing the link between competitiveness and cohesion implies making political choices. We would like to suggest that in order to strengthen the EU as a political community, cohesion policy should be remodelled as a more solidary and redistribution-oriented policy field; one that better acknowledges the gains from economic integration are divided very unequally across EU regions. Key to this approach would be the recognition of a variety of possible regional development trajectories and that these are shaped simultaneously by the historically evolved qualities and attributes of regions on the one hand and by

interconnections with other regions and extra-regional processes at different spatial scales on the other (Massey, 1979; 1984; 2001). To this end, cohesion policy should accord CEE regions greater room to devise strategies that 'correspond' better with their specific trajectory of development and that allow them to enhance their territorial capital as they see it fit. As one of the first steps towards this more flexible approach, CEE member states – and, possibly, other groups of countries with similar development challenges, such as Mediterranean states – should be given the freedom to formulate specific goals for one part of their indicative financial frameworks. Also, concerted efforts from both EU and national levels are needed to improve the administrative capacity at the sub-national level and to raise awareness of the benefits of strategic planning among local and regional stakeholders (cf. Dąbrowski, 2014).

Furthermore and crucially, given that more prosperous regions in the old member states tend to benefit more from the inter-regional flows of goods, services and people generated by integration processes, it would be imperative to replace the universality of spatial coverage by the selective targeting of less developed regions. This latter view has been dismissed by various arguments. Barca (2009, p. XIV), for example, argues that the Union needs to ensure that citizens, including those of rich regions, have an equal chance of benefiting from the opportunities and of avoiding the risks related to market integration. Similarly, Ferry (2015) contends that EU-wide coverage is necessary to ensure commitment to cohesion policy and to prevent it from being seen as a kind of welfare policy compensating less prosperous regions. As he further notes, maintaining a common policy framework facilitates sharing experience and knowledge exchange on regional development across the EU and this is particularly beneficial for CEE countries. Finally, concerns with absorption capacity also often imply an opposition of the selective privileging of lagging regions.

Yet there are several counterarguments that have been largely overlooked by the mainstream scholarly literature. To begin with, ensuring "continued interest in and commitment to the [i.e. cohesion] policy" (Ferry, 2015, p. 26) could (should) be possibly also ensured by a wider and more explicit acknowledgment of the fact that subsidies accorded to CEE regions do not only benefit the regions in question but also wealthier regions, and that they help enhancing economic and social integration across the whole Union. As a study evaluating the impact of the implementation of cohesion policy in the Visegrad Group countries (V4) in the EU-15 showed, economic growth resulting from EU-financed projects in the recipient countries creates additional demand for certain goods and services. Also, the increase in demand may lead to increased trade (exports) between countries of the EU15 and the V4 in specific economic sectors. In addition to this, there are also positive externalities in the form of increased potential for

innovation and science across the EU, increased ecological safety and the development of international transport networks (Ministry of Regional Development of Poland, 2011).

Second, the link between a common cohesion policy framework and knowledge exchange needs to be put in a more critical light. By now there have been more and more studies emphasizing the need to attend to the way in which spatial development knowledge is created, contested, mobilized and controlled across the governance architectures of the Union, and to how these processes are still characterized by the inequality of West-East relationships. According to Timár (2004), for example, since the early 1990s unequal political economic relations have engendered the formation of a Western hegemony of spatial knowledge production with so-called 'EU experts' as key actors who have often been practically ignorant of the region and the country which they are supposed to study. In spite of calls for the need of a more reciprocal approach in developing a "systematic exchange of [spatial] planning knowledge" (Pallagst, 2006, p. 264), the divide between agenda-setting 'Western' experts and 'executive' Eastern actors having little to no chance of substantial policy-shaping impact has largely prevailed. Surely, there is evidence of an increasing and more proactive involvement of CEE actors in spatial policy development (for example in the ESPON 2013 programme), yet their influence over the actual evolution of cohesion policy framework is still far from straightforward (Cotella *et al*., 2012). Given the previously discussed, persisting lack of consideration of CEE spatial development specificities in designing cohesion policy measures, it is far from obvious how the universality of eligibility criteria would contribute to more balanced West-East relations in policy knowledge creation. What is needed to achieve the latter is a long-term commitment to processes of institution-building, social capital creation, and the strengthening of civil society in CEE countries (Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi, 2004) – these would actually also contribute to enhancing administrative capacity. Furthermore, it would be crucial to design consultation and decision-making mechanisms that allow for drawing on to spatial knowledge that has been marginalized to date.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The increasing hegemony of neoliberalism as the key steering mechanism of the EU since the early 1990s has gradually pushed concerns with redistribution in the background, and this has had particularly unfavourable consequences for the way in which CEE regions have become part of EUrope. Indeed, as Agnew (2001, p. 34) remarked, Eastern enlargement "has come at a particularly inauspicious time in the evolution of the EU". However, warnings that the attachment to neoliberal principles would lead to a fragmented Europe (Agnew, 2001) have found little

resonance in EU political circles. As Jean-Claude Juncker, the current President of the European Commission made clear in his opening statement to the European Parliament delivered as a candidate for the above post: "We do not necessarily all have to move at the same speed – the Treaties provide for that and we have seen that we can work with different arrangements. Those who want to move further, faster, should be able to do so" (Juncker, 2014, p. 12).

This paper has been based on the conviction that the above idea of a EUrope at various 'speeds' undermines the overall economic and geopolitical position of the EU in the long term, and that the strength of the EU as a political community depends on tackling the growing (West-East) centre-periphery gap. We argued that this necessitates a more solidary and redistribution-oriented cohesion policy that is sensitive to both the historically evolved particularities of regions and to the way regional development paths are interconnected.

In order to accomplish such a rethinking of cohesion policy, CEE member states will need to join forces to ensure a better representation of their common interests with regard to the future shaping of cohesion policy. Surely, in spite of their concerted action as the 'Friends of Cohesion Policy' for the preservation of the weight of cohesion policy expenditures, the reality of CEE cooperation in this regard appears not too promising. Following the covergence of national regional policy systems until 2006, one could witness an increasing divergence of policy-making trajectories across the region (Ferry and McMaster, 2013), as well as a diversity of standpoints concerning cohesion policy objectives (for example during the negotiations on the 2014–2020 multi-annual financial framework, see Mrak *et al*., 2015). Arguably, however, this divergence and diversity, and the failure to develop a more harmonized CEE standpoint cannot simply be explained by differences in institutional legacies, levels of own funds and different priorities, although these have certainly been key factors. What has also played an important role is the previously mentioned state of 'double dependence' in which CEE states have come to find themselves, where the disciplining force of EU policy imperatives has favoured quick national policy responses and has left little room for exploring synergies that contribute to macro-regional cohesion.

Recently, however, one can observe attempts to mobilize CEE policy-makers around the idea of a more self-reliant CEE region. For example, the so-called High Level Reflection Group, created by the Central European Policy Institute in Bratislava, and demosEUROPA, Centre for European Strategy in Warsaw issued an agenda-setting document focusing on the V4, arguing that "Central Europe should develop and cultivate its vision of its own region" and that "[t]he region also needs home-grown aspirations" (High Level Reflection Group, 2014, p. 6). Also, there have been calls from academics for more cooperation and the harmonization of national development and priorities (e.g. Káposzta and Nagy, 2015), and large-scale international research projects have been launched to formulate socio-economic

and political responses to regional polarisation in in CEE (see e.g. http://www.regpol2.eu/). It is a crucial task for especially (but not exclusively) CEE – scholars dealing with issues of spatial development in the EUropean context to keep up this momentum and to ensure that there is an ongoing critical and constructive debate on the implications of cohesion policy for the better integration of CEE regions into EUrope.

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