Patterns of Europeanization in Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction: Challenges of Europeanization in Central and Eastern Europe

This book focuses on a debated, yet insufficiently explored field of European studies, namely the mechanisms of Europeanization in Central and Eastern Europe. Why should we assume that Europeanization takes different shapes in CEE countries? What qualifies these countries as "special" recipients of European integration? There is a growing consensus that the "younger", the "new" member states, such as Romania, underwent a European integration process that is inherently influenced by both their recent history and current geopolitical position on the "unquiet frontier" of the Western world. This is not an easy position and recent history has made no exception in highlighting this uneasiness. Facing numerous political crises and a turmoiled Eastern flank, CEE countries have been subjected to blaming narratives, which have fuelled the perception that the 2004 and 2007 European extension adds to the "elephant in the room" when it comes to assessing the latest EU progress. Blaming narratives concerning CEE countries were built on that "they have been admitted to the European Union prematurely" (Zielonka & Rupnik, 2020, p. 1074), being often seen and treated as "Trojan horses" eroding the European convergence from the inside (Kelemen 2017; Matthijs, 2020). The announcement concerning the "multi-speed Europe" made in March 2017 by the President of the European Commission fostered the idea that CEE countries are at the periphery of the EU, and thus incompatible with deepened integration. However, assigning the entire blame for the EU's disorder to the CEE "periphery" is neither productive, nor in line with the EU's recent past.

The two waves of Eastern expansion (i.e. 2004 and 2007) partially overlapped with the global recession that burst in 2007, a phenomenon considered as an unprecedented downturn in the post-war economic history (Eichengreene & O'Rouke, 2010). Many EU states faced depression then. Western countries in particular were seriously hit by the financial crisis, which eventually caused many social and

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economic problems, ranging from unemployment and skyrocketing sovereign debt, to anti-European feelings and Eurosceptic movements. Constant disagreement as to the causes and solutions for the crisis became business as usual amongst the "older" Member States, such as Germany, Italy, or France. EU policy-making degenerated into pessimistic scenarios in which certain member states would go bankrupt and leaving either the Eurozone or the Union, while "debt had become so widespread that by 2011, total debt as a percentage of annual economic output had risen above 300% for France, Italy, and Spain and above 250% for Greece. Even in fiscally conservative Germany, total debt as a percentage of annual economic output was approximately 240%" (Esposito et. al., 2014, p. 3). Although much more is to be said about the 2007 crisis and its effects, the debate over the role played by the new Member States in the "implosion" of the European project is definitely extremely complex and sensitive, and should be judged by looking at all relevant contextual factors.

Definitely, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a contested space, whose geopolitical, political, and cultural boundaries have been continuously drawn and redrawn either as a result of forced integration (i.e. empire domination, Soviet domination), or of a consented one (Ash, 2004). The 11 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (the "new" Member States of Central and Eastern Europe) were all members of the former Soviet bloc and had a simultaneous transition from a centralized economy to a market economy led by a series of rapid liberalization measures, that were even qualified as brutal by some; they also made a simultaneous transition from the newly emerging sovereign states to the status of Member States of the European Union, which meant the transfer of considerable parts of sovereignty to the EU's transnational institutions, especially in economic policy (taking over the capacity of these states, as well as the weakened economic policy-making during the transition period). For all these states, EU membership meant economic gains, the promise and hope of prosperity, plus, at the same time, a kind of cultural and historical rehabilitation, a "return" to the "cultural West", a return to the "civilized world" (Bottoni & Lambert, 2017; Kundera, 1984; Rupnik, 2018). It should be noted that during the timeframe that started with the fall of communism, continued with the transition to NATO and the EU accession negotiations and, finally, ended up with the much-desired and sometimes confusing accession process to NATO and the EU, the "West" meant both the European Union and the United States of America. Over that time, all the 11 new Member States in CEE saw their hopes of security and prosperity fulfilled by a "homogeneous West", made up of the European Union (EU) and the US acting together. It can be argued that this permanent comparison with the "West", doubled by the development and perception of the accession to both the EU and NATO as a kind of "historical rehabilitation" or "cultural return" have slowly become a kind of state of mind, a pattern of thinking for the CEE countries; the paradox is that it is not these states as a whole that have sought to define themselves exclusively in relation to the Western model, but each country separately: "each national entity tends to compare itself first, often exclusively, with the Western model, and much less to compare with neighbouring countries, to say nothing about non-European ones" (Șandru, 2012, p. 5).

The 11 new Member States have been characterized by common socio-economic trends since their EU accession such as: the mobility of the population (especially the active, skilled population) towards more prosperous regions of the Western part of the EU and the subsequent labor shortage; the dependency on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI); the foreign ownership of banks; the integration into Western (German) export-based modes of production; the reduced Research and Development (R&D) capacity, not so much due to weak budget allocations, but rather due to weak positions in production chains at both European and global level; the difficulties in achieving the goal of reindustrialization and convergence due to the vicious circle created by all of the above. These states are also experiencing some common consequences of globalization, transnationalisation and free trade, de-industrialization and, more recently, digitalization/ automation. From this point of view, the new Member States offer a unique encounter of interrelated phenomena: the transition from communism to the market economy driven by an "orthodox" neoliberal recipe, globalization and European integration, with a corresponding negative reaction, sometimes random, against these "forced" phenomena.

The orthodox – some might even say aggressive – neoliberalism has steered public discontent in many CEE countries. Citizens reacted under the pressure of the economic turmoil caused by the European recession, and that added up to their already precarious quality of life. The escalation of the public debt, doubled by the harsh austerity measures imposed by domestic governments between 2010 and 2012 were not only difficult to grasp by most social categories, but also came to be perceived as the expression of a failed road towards the so much dreamed and promised Western welfare. Therefore, the EU started to be regarded as a generator of economic shocks, rather than an entity capable of generating economic and social benefits for its states and citizens. The golden era of European integration, when the EU membership automatically implied net financial, social, and political benefits, was short-lived by CEE countries. In the aftermath of the economic crisis, the perception that EU failed its mission to achieve greater cohesion became popular in most EU countries, especially in older Member States; it was only a problem of time until political stakeholders started to capitalize upon the raising public discontent and hard feelings, which created room for Eurosceptic leaders and parties in countries such as Germany, Spain, Greece, and Italy. And this happened before nationalist feelings have started to emerge in CEE countries.

Following the social unrest in some CEE countries, in the past 10 to 12 years, a legitimate consensus has emerged amongst scholars and decision-makers alike that democracy in CEE is not in its best shape, that it is on the point of collapsing or "backsliding" (Kochenov, 2008; Sedelmeier, 2014). The argument of democratic "backsliding" in CEE countries has two limits or flaws, in our view. First, if public discontent and Eurosceptic feelings are a marker of democratic backlash, then most Member States could qualify as loose democracies or illiberal bridgeheads. And, second, this emergent explanatory model has focused – sometimes disproportionately – on the two most dramatic cases: Hungary and Poland (Cianetti et *al*., 2018; Herman, 2016; Kelemen & Orenstein, 2016), being labelled as an illiberal post-communist counter-revolution. But, as Jan Zielonka and Jacques Rupnik

recently observed, "the liberal order is now under fire in key liberal strongholds: Washington, London, Berlin, Paris and Rome. Attributing this historic counter-revolution to a handful of politicians in Central and Eastern Europe would be too flattering to them" (2020, p. 1075). Amidst Poland and Hungary are the "vanguards of the illiberal drift" (Zielonka & Rupnik, 2020, 1077), Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes emphasize that the so-called illiberal turn in CEE „cannot be grasped apart from the political expectation of normality created by the 1989 revolution and the politics of imitation that it legitimized" (2018, p. 118).

However, the topic of illiberal counter-revolution and its impact upon the emerging Europeanization processes becomes of foremost importance in the current context, which places the EU under multiple pressures and overlapping crises (i.e. the Covid-19 crisis, the "multi-speed Europe" and the East-West divide, the Brexit, the conflict in Ukraine, the "refugees crisis", the constant ascent of Euroscepticism, increasing public permeability to populist discourses and extremist movements), which impact upon how citizens relate to the EU and to the benefits of European integration. Certainly, CEE is part of the global/ liberal/ European crisis, with relevant local differences related to historical, geographical, cultural and development patterns. The reality and the perception that emerges from this, namely that globalization and European integration, respectively, create winners and losers (i.e. citizens, groups, and lagging countries) should be publicly recognized and debated. In the new Member States, there are resentments and dissatisfaction related to the fact that the new order established after the fall of communism favored a small, cosmopolitan, mobile elite, creating a second-class membership for the new countries of CEE in general and for their citizens. So far, it seems that Western efforts to respond to the unrest in these CEE states rarely went beyond stereotypes and demonization, and when they did, they were based almost exclusively on the lack of nostalgia for communism and/ or on the fear of Russian force (Gudzinskas & Bekišas, 2018). Introducing the issue of stereotyping and demonization does not mean that political actors in the CEE countries do not consider the EU "a permanent scapegoat for their internal problems" (Schweiger, 2018, p. 21). The unrest in the new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe is discussed mainly in political terms, while the structural causes are socio-economic. It is always tempting to talk about political things to the detriment of structural socio-economic causes.

Therefore, we can say that the CEE countries are subject to many opposing forces that they needed to manage in a very short time-span. This book seeks to grasp the patterns of Europeanization in CEE. In general, Europeanization is regarded as a process that orients domestic policies to match the requirements, and the demands of the European Union, which makes it a top-down exercise. Ladrech (1994, p. 70), for example, defines Europeanization as a "slow process that reorients policies to the state that the political and economic dynamics of the Economic Community become part of organizational logic and of national policy". For CEE countries, we pose that Europeanization was mainly framed as a process taking place from top to bottom or top-down (Ladrech, 1994; Hix & Goetz, 2000). According to the aforementioned authors, Europeanization is a process that occurs, at the same time, on the upper level (supranational institutions), and on the lower level (national poli-

tics). The inherent limitation of this perspective is that it ignores the reverse contribution and how domestic politics supports or not the EU policies. This could become a neuralgic point and might cause dissatisfaction and frustration, even though CEE countries seem rather used to being approached like this on the international stage. There seems to be an agreement that "the EU has remained the primary source of international policy diffusion" (Woźniakowski, Schimmelfennig, & Matlak, 2018, p. 8), and that that "Europeanization had a strong and systematic impact on domestic institutions" (Zubek & Goetz, 2010).

Woźniakowski, Schimmelfennig and Matlak (2018) highlight that Europeanization should be regarded both as a process employed by the EU to disseminate its policies, but also as an outcome, measuring the extent or state of policy alignment with the EU. This approach is very shallow in CEE. Europeanization as a two-way street encompassing both "uploading" and "downloading" mechanisms (Risse & Borzel, 2000) is a paradigm that is far from how CEE countries positioned in relation to their membership. In other words, Europeanization should be about the manner in which national policies become part of the European rules and, also, about the way in which European rules become embedded into the national policies of the Member States.

Although an important premise at the heart of the European integration process was to enhance the welfare of its Member States and their citizens, gains and losses were unevenly distributed across social groups, creating both "winners" (e.g., managers, owners of business, professionals, white-collar workers) and "losers" (e.g., old, unemployed, long-term ill, etc.) in Europeanization. We argue that this perception is particularly acute in CEE. There are deep divisions between lower status groups and higher status groups in the way they feel affected by European integration (Fligstein, 2008). Furthermore, the uneven distribution of costs and benefits results in different stances of public support towards the EU and its policies. In this respect, the literature generally assumes that the privileged strata of society are in favour of integration whereas the lower status groups view the EU with scepticism. Sara Hobolt (2014, p. 678), for example, argues that "the winners of the integration process want to consolidate and strengthen the union, but close the door to additional (poorer) member states". Yet, how citizens rate the integration process as it affects them personally might be equally or more relevant for their support for integration than belonging to a certain social status group.

Europeanization as such is a contested and fluid notion. This could also be due to its multiple facets, which makes it a rather unstable concept. Adding to the already puzzling approaches of Europeanization in CEE, most of the teaching, debates and research on Europeanization employ the concepts and theories developed by scholars in Western and Northern EU, thus matching the explanatory requirements and integration logic of those regions that are naturally perceived as more mature in terms of their capacity to absorb European policies, values, and norms. Exploring Europeanization of the CEE countries with a dedicated "toolbox" comprised of specific concepts, theories, and explanatory paradigms, creates the grounds for better grasping the drivers of Europeanization in CEE. Europeanization is indeed "a set of puzzles" (Radaelli, 2004, p. 2), and assembling it proved no easy job