

For a critical approach of the governance of core-periphery relations in Central and Eastern Europe

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1st draft (do not quote)

Introduction

Islands are often a metaphor for isolation, distinctiveness, yet their isolation is often more a myth than a reality (...). Proximity and distance to the mainland are not given, but constructed. (...) For Hvar, Brač, Korčula and the hundreds of smaller islands in the area, this centre, for centuries, was a city by the sea: Venice. (...) Islands, thus, were not remote outposts of a land power, but places at the core of a maritime power. (Bieber 2014)

This very first quotation represents a good introduction for this article about the governance of core-periphery relations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Although Florian Bieber actually writes about Croatian islands, what he says directly concerns the questions of periphery¹, peripherality and peripheralisation². He highlights several important aspects of it. First, the peripherality of islands -as much as other peripheries according to me- is constructed towards power relations between core(s) and peripheries that define, contest, reaffirm permanently which territory dominates the other(s). In other words, peripheralisation is relational (i.e. linked to centralization) and multi-scalar (at and between different scales) (Kühn 2014). Second, this domination is relative through time: a territory that have been a core for centuries may turn to become a periphery and reversely. As Manfred Kühn point out, peripheralisation is thus process-centred (following dynamics of rise and fall of spaces) and temporal (deperipheralisation is possible) (Ibid.). But let us come back to the core of this article connecting our first words on peripheralisation with the concept of governance starting with a question. Is a new article on the so-called concept of governance is necessary and why? And why choosing to focus on the theoretical foundations of the governance of core-periphery relations in the context of CEE?

In the last decade, despite European regional policy supposedly having heavily supported territorial cohesion, regional polarisation has increased at the economic level, in particular but not only, in CEE. When cores, most of the time capital/metropolitan regions, have known an impressive increase in their GDP, peripheries economic performances appear as much more limited (Blažek and Macešková 2010; Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012). The disparities between Western and Eastern European countries have generally decreased, but regional disparities within CEE countries has increased (Benedek and Kurkó 2012; Finka 2007). Regions of CEE close to the Western

¹ Indeed, "islands, mountainous, border, rural, old industrial, structurally weak, remote or marginal areas of Europe and the world are often perceived as peripheral" (Lang 2011).

² By peripheralisation, I mean the production of peripheries through social and political relations and their spatial implications –based on Manfred Kühn definition: (Kühn 2014). By peripherality, I mean the complex individual and/or collective relations to the peripheries ; those peripheries being at the same time politically (re-)produced and socially practiced, contested, exceeded – based on Guy di Méo definition of territoriality (Di Méo 2004, 101).

borders and the main metropolitan areas (very often the capital-cities) are more and more concentrating economic activities (Maurel 2004; Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012).

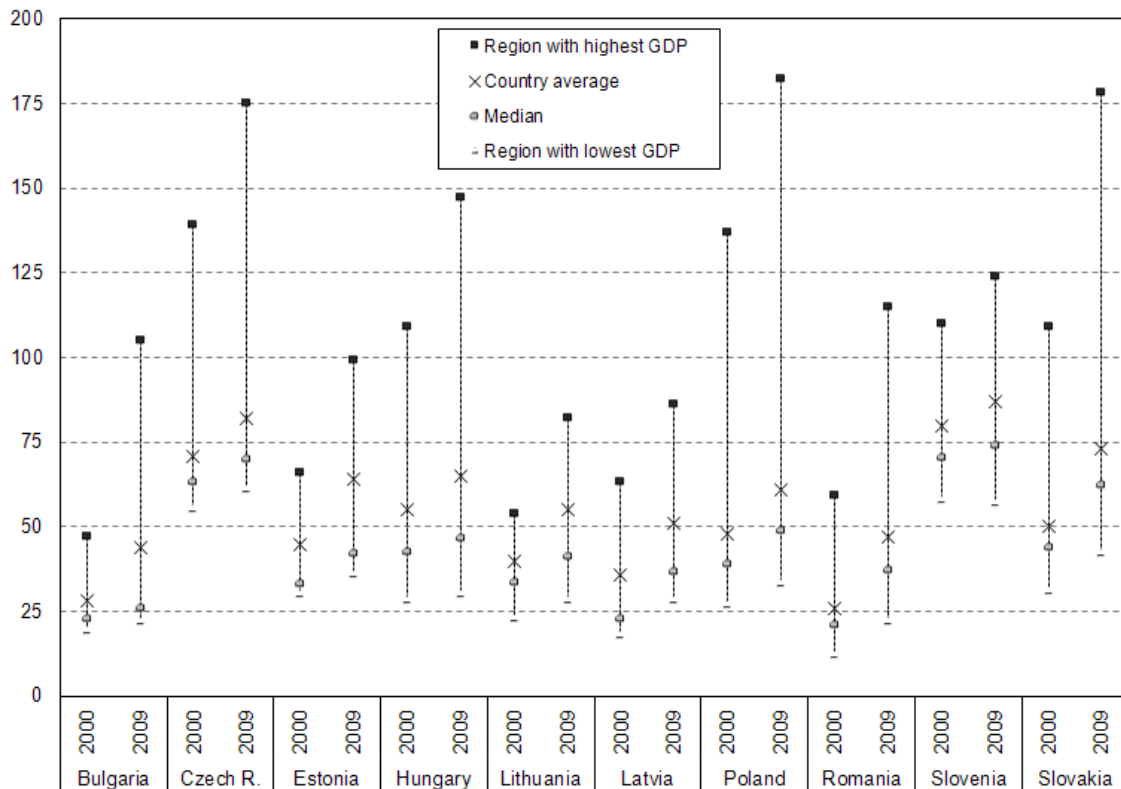


Fig. 1: Increase of regional polarisation in GDP per capita, Nuts 3 regions 2000 and 2009 - Source: (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012, 78), data source: Eurostat.

Nevertheless, most of these analyses have concentrated on the economic consequences of peripheralisation at the national level, and have mainly mobilised market-oriented indicators (GDP, GDP/head). Only few research, so far, have adopted a comprehensive approach of the social and political production of core-periphery relations, especially in the context of CEE (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012; Lang 2011). In particular, social (marginalization), political (powerlessness) and communicative (social image) dimensions of peripheralisation appear as key understudied issues to address, along with traditional economic approaches of the question (Lang 2013; Meyer and Miggelbrink 2013). This paper offers a theoretical critical and constructivist reflexion that I claim to be relevant when aiming at deepening the understanding of political and communicative dimensions of peripheralisation. I defend first that the widely used concept of governance may be useful to that extent, but only if critically mobilised. To do so, an epistemological break is needed, in order to get rid of the dominant normative and ideological conceptualisations of this concept. Then, I advocate for more attention to be focus on symbolism and dominance/resistance when critically assessing the governance of core/periphery relations in CEE.

1. The need for an epistemological rupture in the approach of governance in Europe

In the past decades, the role of the State has evolved, in particular through decentralization or devolution of certain of its prerogatives to local and/or regional scales but also through integration to supranational unions such as the EU (Brenner 2004). These transformations have come with reconfigurations of political regulation and public action –the space of public policies dilated horizontally and vertically– but also with societal changes (Le Galès 2013, 290). New terms, such as governance, have appeared in order to provide researchers and practitioners with a better comprehension of these new phenomena (Simoulin 2013, 13). Because it emerged in particular in Europe, European studies researchers have been very eager to use this new terminology. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger named this as the “governance turn” (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006). Boussaguet and Jacquot more bitterly consider it as a “scientific industries” with its own stars, language and journals (2009) According to disciplinary but also theoretical positioning, it grasps very different significations, different practices and usages and hence corresponds to different interests for researchers. In such a context, it may appear difficult to base a reflection on the concept of governance to go beyond the contradiction between the making of public action and the making of sense (Simoulin 2013).

Nowadays, most of the researches on governance at the European level are based on the concept of good governance or multi-level governance, pretending these approaches are technical or neutral. I oppositely claim they are normative and ideological, most of the times heavily linked to the EU neoliberal agenda. This may explain the actual limits of tautological researches on governance in Europe. Indeed, most of them adopt, reproduce and promote without critically assessing the definition widely used by academics and policy-makers (Dabrowski, Bafail, and Bachtler 2014, 356). Doing so, they are most of the times explaining limited economic development and/or increases of social-spatial inequalities by an insufficient adaptation to supposedly good precepts of multi-level or good governance. Most of these evaluations forget to call into question the model in itself. Maybe the initial precepts are the problem.

With a critical perspective, it is possible to claim that multi-level and good governance may contribute, through complexification of decision making, to less democracy and less accountability, in particular but not exclusively in CEE (Grabbe 2001, 1029). Theses systems, by introducing private and community interests in public policy, may also blur the common good. EU integration in particular has been a major tool to export European vision of governance in Eastern countries, but Bohle seriously doubt this has been

conducting in the CEE interests: “Exporting the core of the EU’s deregulatory programme serves the interests of transnational capital, whereas not extending the redistributive acquis and blocking labour mobility protects the existing bloc’s weaker forces” (Bohle 2006). In our specific case, it might be possible to consider that the exportation of multi-level and good governance principles in CEE is one factor explaining the deepening of the dominance of cores on peripheries in this region. I will in this part demonstrate the normative limits of approaches based on Multi-level and good governance and advocate for a critical sociopolitical approach of the concept of governance.

1.1. Good and Multi-level governance normative and ideological limits

Good governance is more linked to public management and to the public choice theory. In that context, the governance question is seen as a problem of accountability and coordination in public action. Good governance aims at the enactment of new rules, supposedly apolitical, that make more efficient the game between the market and actors by reducing the costs of transactions and improving public policy through reorganized concurrency between agencies (Le Galès 2014, 302–303). Very much based on the neo-classical approach of economy and often articulated with liberal democratic values, good governance is supported at the European level, and declined in very different fields. This is for instance the case of the Council of Europe with local authorities³. The EU is also heavily using this concept in various fields, for instance in sport⁴. These conceptualizations and uses of governance have led these institutions to pay more attention to procedures and instruments rather than contents (Boussaguet and Jacquot 2009). This perspective relies on the strong normative assumption that governance is only a question of coordination of multiple actors (not of collective choices) to reduce costs (supposing that costs has always to be reduced) in order to become good. Actors are invited to follow the so-called best practices, as if this good behaviour is

³ I refer here to the strategy for innovation and good governance at local level based on 12 principles, encouraging local authorities to reach “governance excellence” by delivering a label to the best ones. For more information, see the Council of Europe webpage on the question: http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/localdemocracy/strategy_innovation/12principles_en.asp, accessed on 20/10/2014

⁴ an EU expert group has adopted in Septembre 2013 recommendations on the principles of good governance, defining this latter as follows: “The framework and culture within which a sports body sets policy, delivers its strategic objectives, engages with stakeholders, monitors performance, evaluates and manages risk and reports to its constituents on its activities and progress including the delivery of effective, sustainable and proportionate sports policy and regulation” (EU expert group “good governance” 2013).

reproducible anywhere regardless of spatial, social, historical specificities, an idea that Le Galès considers as absurd and illusory (Le Galès 2014).

Multi-level governance may be described as “a policy-making system based on vertical and horizontal interactions and interdependencies across levels of government and sectors” (Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014, 356). This specific terminology is even more linked to the EU and to EU studies since it is perceived as a “palatable, easily digestible paradigm for grasping how the European Union (EU) works in practice” (Stephenson, 2013: 817). It is praised as giving more scale flexibility through subsidiarity but also as increasing the effectiveness of policy implementation. Promoted at the EU level⁵, this model is supposed to redefine policy making in Europe through new vertical linkages, with the reinforcement of sub-national actors, and through enlarged horizontality, with more permeability to private and civil society interests (Le Galès 2014, 305; Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014, 358). Some enthusiastic authors see in multi-level governance both “multi-levelness, which blurs the centre–periphery divide, and network governance, which blurs the state–society divide” (Papadopoulos 2010).

Nevertheless, beyond these ideological assumptions, several recent in-depth case studies have come with more circumspect conclusions. Authors have pointed out the high variability of institutional, spatial and social contexts and consequently the differences in induced effects from one country, one region to another (Bache 2008; Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014). Romain Pasquier et Julien Weisbein underlines the differentiated capacity of intermediary territories in conducting contemporary public action: “the dynamics of the new territorial governance produce (...) a new cartography of political domination, more unpredictable than standardized, more asymmetrical than uniform, but real” (2013: 287).

The contribution of multi-level governance to the production of more equity, more efficiency or more democratic and sustainable accountability is also questioned since these objectives appears to push in different directions (Perron 2014; Milio 2014). It may instead lead to the reproduction and the deepening of the “domination by the established groups of societal partners resulting in exclusion of the weaker stakeholders” (Perron 2014)⁶. Dabrowski et al. highlight in particular the need for calling into question the “widely shared opinion that partnership tends to work better in countries or regions with traditions of cooperation⁷” (2014: 359); that means to

⁵ in particular through the partnership approach in the Cohesion Policy framework

⁶ quoted by (Dabrowski, Bafoil, and Bachtler 2014)

⁷ quoting for instance the work of Maura Adshead on Ireland (Adshead 2014).

question the wide-spread explanation that post-socialist countries are doing less well with Cohesion Policy because of weaker democratic habits (are the Western countries really doing better?). Furthermore, Andreas Faludi also makes a point when highlighting that the multi-governance model comes with an underlying hard conception of the territory as “nested jurisdictions” rather than “the variety of ‘soft’ spaces that overgrows the fabric of any multi-level polity” (Faludi 2012, 20)⁸. Finally, multi-level governance appears as an unsuitable paradigm to question the reality of regionalization and regionalism in CEE because it takes as granted the polity change in the States internal politics and the institutional changes (and underestimates path dependency) (Pasquier and Perron 2008, 10; Bafoil 2010, 13)

1.2 So which definition of governance to adopt then?

With such limitations, may the term governance be of any use to research on the reconfigurations of public action in Europe and in particular in CEE?

On a first glance, it would be easy to answer no, since scientific objectification requests precisely to make more stable and consistent the phenomena under scrutiny. Governance would turn to be, as some argue, just another of these fuzzy concepts that “make the job of coming up with evidence much more difficult”, which results in the “toleration of (...) misguided policy” (Markusen 2003, 713).

Nevertheless, social scientists adopting a relational approach, as I do here, would argue that the meaning of a concept “is defined by its relational context (...), the task of the analyst is to demonstrate why it takes *that* meaning in *that* context” (Hudson 2003, 746). Indeed, the softness of the term of governance comes also with advantages. Its plasticity allows more transversal and more transdisciplinary discussions. Its epistemological fuzziness also simply corresponds to the complexification of the modes of political legitimation to describe (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013). Being conscious of the possible negative effects of certain dominant models of governance previously mentioned does not mean denying that public action is changing towards the integration of local, but also private actors to the decision process (sometimes, in some context).

The position we defend here is to critically assess the practicalities of the transformations but also the constancies of public action in CEE, the whys and hows. It means not to consider them as being good (or bad) by nature, but to construct a theoretical relational approach that permits to better understand than to praise for the

⁸ To go further with this idea, see also the extensive work of the French geographer Martin Vanier on the concept of interterritoriality (Vanier 2008).

evolution of governance. To do so, I advise here to rely on the open definition given by Patrick Le Galès⁹, one of the most prolific researcher on that question in France at the moment:

Governance may be defined as a process of coordination between actors, social groups and institutions, in order to reach collectively defined and discussed goals. It grasps the whole institutions, networks, directives, rules, norms, political and social uses as well as public and private actors that contribute to the stability of a society and a political regime, its orientation, its capacities to direct, to provide services and to ensure its own legitimacy¹⁰ (Le Galès 2014, 301).

Four features seem important to better qualify the recent evolutions in the conceptualisation of governance in Europe:

- Institutional complexity (literally “institutional polycentrism”), i.e. the scattering of power;
- a bigger inclusion of private actors and civil society in the decision process;
- the raising importance of procedures, in other words, more importance is given to the form and to instruments than to actual content of public action;
- the relation to constraint and authority is more horizontal and less vertical (Boussaguet and Jacquot 2009).

European territorial governance has evolved in the last decade towards a new mosaic of intricate scales and organisations, characterized by multiple relations between territories and circulations (Le Galès 2013, 291). A critical approach of (territorial) governance may thus allow to question the socio-spatial logics driving the actual redistributions of political resources: “when analysing territorial governance, one also chart the new territories of leadership and domination” (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013, 281). Indeed, the growing complexity of territorial organization, as well as the rising competition between social groups representing fragmented interests in public policy making, appears as accentuating the necessity for questioning the power relations between territories: “neither all individuals, nor all territories have the same capacities or the same strategies to adapt to this new context” (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013, 285). In some of his precedent researches, developing what he claimed to be a political sociologist approach, Romain Pasquier has defined the EU capacity of (French, English, Spanish) regional actors as resulting from “a complex interaction between inherited practices and beliefs and new dynamics of political change and encompasses both formal and informal institutional processes” (Cole and Pasquier 2012, 176; Pasquier 2004). This socio-political process is rooted in identities¹¹ and in “an on-going social construction of territories and centre-periphery relationships” (Ibid.). If the European

⁹ Referring to the large definition given by Leca on the French case; see: (Leca 1996, 339).

¹⁰ Translated by the author (as every quotation of French authors later in the text).

¹¹ That the authors described as “a set of socially constructed practices, beliefs and visions of the world which shape and guide the strategies of regional actors” (Ibid.)

Union may indeed impact on the development of multilevel politics, it is doubtful that changes in power relations really and equally benefit to (all) local and/or regional actors. On the contrary, in a recent piece of work questioning the link between EU regional policy and policy change at the regional level in France and United Kingdom, Romain Pasquier and Alistair Cole assert that “the management of structural funds mainly reaffirms pre-existing national patterns of centre-periphery relations” (Cole and Pasquier 2012).

So, coming back to our initial question in this part, in some recent works, several researchers have demonstrated a dynamic, practical, pragmatic¹² and “exoticised”¹³ approach of territorial governance may contribute to a critical¹⁴ understanding of policy making, its successes and its failures. They have also demonstrated that in Western Europe, European regional policy has reinforced the pre-existing polarizations. Thus, their theoretical assumptions may represent relevant foundations for those willing to question socio-political dimensions of peripheralisation in CEE. Yes, but only under certain conditions, I will advocate in the next part.

2. Symbolical and power aspects of core-periphery relations in CEE

In this part, I will present what may be two significant (to me) theoretical assumptions when trying to critically assess the governance of core-periphery relations and to break with predominant discourses and paradigms. What should we pay attention to, when trying to better understand the whys and the hows of policy responses to intensifying regional polarization in CEE?

Peripheralisation is a complex process and an interesting concept for those seeking for a “relational understating of spatial disparities” (Lang 2011). The governance of core-periphery relations is one socio-political aspect of this complexity (together with other dimensions, such as economic for instance, which is less our focus here). In the precedent part, I advocated for a larger and less normative comprehension of the concept of governance in order to better understand and not to reduce this complexity.

¹² Pasquier and Weisbein advocate for a “scrutiny of public policies on the making, as close as possible to their collective construction”, in particular when they are the object of “the processes of bricolage, mistake, adjustments” (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013, 270).

¹³ Following Bourdieu’s recommendation to sociologists when having a too familiar knowledge on his/her object by trying to “exotise” their perspective, breaking with his/her intimacy with it (Bourdieu 1984, 289).

¹⁴ Avoiding the normative shortcomings of multi-level or good governance (Le Galès 2013, 289).

According to Kühn, the centre-periphery relation is “less a spatial fact than a social configuration resting on unequal power relations and leading to uneven spatial development” (Kühn 2014, 10). It has been portrayed as a question related to power in the centre and “powerlessness” (Ibid) or “dependence”¹⁵ at the periphery (Nagy, Nagy, and Timár 2012, 93). But both of these contributions, and others, have highlighted the need for more in-depth analysis. While researching in particular on the governance of core-periphery relations, I argue it is important to take into consideration symbolism, as well as dominance and resistance aspects in these relations.

2.1. Symbolism, between relative facts, discourses and mobilisations

Peripheries are associated with backwardness, underdevelopment and marginality (Kühn 2014, 3; Nagy, Nagy, and Timár 2012, 93); which make cores, by opposition, the spaces of modernity, of social and economical progress (Beetz 2008)¹⁶, in other words, the places to be. Yet in 1992, Benko and Lipietz were observing the neoliberal turn valorising the supposedly winning regions, competitive and attractive, most of the times metropolis, as opposed to the supposedly losing regions, i.e. the uncompetitive, unattractive peripheries (Benko and Lipietz 1992).

My point here is not to romanticize the vision of peripheries that are probably concerned by some of the above-mentioned problems. But, so do the cores too. When approaching peripheries, one should be highly conscious that these spaces are subject to many clichés. With a critical perspective, it is central to distinguish (i) the contextually constructed facts on peripheries (problems and advantages) from (ii) the discourses on peripheries (clichés and values), but also from (iii) the effects of these discourses on the governance core-periphery relations. I invite this way to take into consideration more seriously but also more clearly the symbolical aspects of peripheralisation.

By contextually constructed facts (i), I mean that researches on, but also policies for, peripheries are mobilizing mostly neoliberal economic indicators. These latter are used to characterize the qualities of spaces according to a capitalist set of values (accumulation of wealth). This is for instance the case of the European regional policy that supports “less developed” (mostly Eastern) regions according to the GDP/head

¹⁵ Nagy, Nagy and Timar make here a reference to the work of the Hungarian geographer Nemes Nagy (1996) that considers social (or political power-related) as one of the three approaches to the core-periphery relationships.

¹⁶ Quoted by: (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012)

when European objectives are supposedly much larger¹⁷. Consequently, as the Newtonian system is in physics only a simplified representation of reality, what is qualified to be a periphery in a capitalist system is only relative and contextual, not an absolute truth (Lang 2011; Nagy, Nagy, and Timár 2012). In another system that would consider the environment quality as being the most important indicator, actual peripheries would probably turn to be the winning regions and some actual cores, backward polluted regions. Furthermore, in a recent work, Olivier Bouba-Olga and Michel Grossetti seriously call into question the economical advantage of bigger agglomerations, inviting to “get rid of the so structuring, taken for granted, but so empirically wrong certitude that the bigger you are, the more competitive your are” (Bouba-Olga and Grossetti 2014). Hence, according to the focus, a research on peripheries and peripherality should start by questioning the reality of the advantages that the cores enjoy in this domain (and that the rest of the territory does not have).

(ii) These supposed facts should be distinguished from discourses on peripheries (and cores). This is important for those willing to understand peripheralisation. Whatever the relativity of this dichotomous structuration bad peripheries/good cores, the most significant aspect is the socio-cognitive transformation of that structuration by individuals into preferences, i.e. images and values (and into socio-spatial practices)¹⁸. Indeed, communicative discourses on peripheries participate to their social construction (Meyer and Miggelbrink 2013; Lang 2013). This distinction between questionable facts and discourses would prevent certain confusion between the complex individual and collective relations to peripheries (peripherality) and the discursive and practical processes that generate them (peripheralisation), to which practitioners and academics participate. Hence, when approaching core-periphery relations, researchers should in particular be more reflexive. Otherwise, their work would constitute a vector for the diffusion of the dominant ideology¹⁹ and clichés on

¹⁷ Actually, none of the five targets of the Europe 2020 strategy is directly related to GDP growth. They concern employment, R&D, climate change, education and poverty fighting. Should not territorial cohesion in Europe also be based on social and environmental indicators?

¹⁸ I am here mobilizing the recent works of Thierry Ramadier on the concept of mobility (residential or commuting). When observing the preferences of some individuals to move to a place, he claims it is simultaneously necessary to investigate the cognitive and affective structures as well as social logics that condition these preferences: “because preferences are values, i.e. social constructions, transformed or projected into acts. The analysis of the socio-cognitive accessibility to the geographical space allows to characterizing the sociological and psychological conditions of spatial practices. Reversely, it also permits to understand how the geographical space condition/influence the sociological and psychological structures that each individual is subjected to” (Ramadier 2011, 8–9)(translated by the author).

¹⁹ This affirmation refers again to the critical approach of Ramadier et al. of the concept of mobility (Courty, Borja, and Ramadier 2014).

cores and peripheries, participating to the construction of the phenomenon they are pretending to analyse.

(iii) To better comprehend the governance of core-periphery relations, it is necessary to identify the dynamic mobilisation of values and imaginations of peripheral spaces in societal and political discourses (Lang 2013). Who says what? In which contexts? For which purposes?

As Michon and Koebel underline, the whole of the representations of a space²⁰ (although they have different importance and different potentials to transform it) contribute to its construction. In this respect, the discourses of political and social leaders are crucial to analyse, as much as the social and political use, transformation of and resistance to them. Peripheralisation is a matter of material dispersals, socio-spatial practices and representations; but more crucially, these are the reinterpretations of these properties that contribute to reinforce or contest core-periphery relations.

Public action, in its implementation, is not neutral. It relies on some particular (quite often dominant) perceptions and representations of the space on which it intervenes. The symbolical aspect of a public intervention may even sometimes contribute to reproduce and more deeply anchor anterior socio-spatial representations that were specifically targeted. This is for example the case of the *politique de la ville* in France which was set up to reduce socio-spatial injustice between urban peripheries and cores privileging physical to social interventions. In spite of these promising intentions, it fails to change the social perception of the *banlieues*. On the contrary, by delimitating the spaces concerned by its special concern, the State has engraved in space social inequalities and reinforced marginalisation of peripheral inhabitants (Donzelot 2006; Michon and Koebel 2009).

The EU is one significant producer of spatial representations in Europe through ESPON cartographies but also through its Regional Policy (see map below). One may ask if such representations of the West/East divide is not contributing to anchor peripheralisation in Europe at least at two levels, between the North-Western core and the South-Eastern periphery, and between Eastern capitals and their national peripheries. Marking a region as peripheral run indeed the risk that “the blame for continuing socio-economic development problems will thereby be shifted to the region and its inhabitants”. It is

²⁰ By the whole of the representations, they mean: “the representations of those who live in and those who do not live in, of those producing simplistic judgements, of the media shaping these images in a certain way, and of the political representatives who have a responsibility in transforming it, because their own representations will contribute to shape the projects they will implement to transform it” (Michon and Koebel 2009, 58) (translated by the author).

also very reductive because it presumes “the existence of a shared regional interest – which is rarely if ever a valid assumption” (Hudson 2010, 1158).

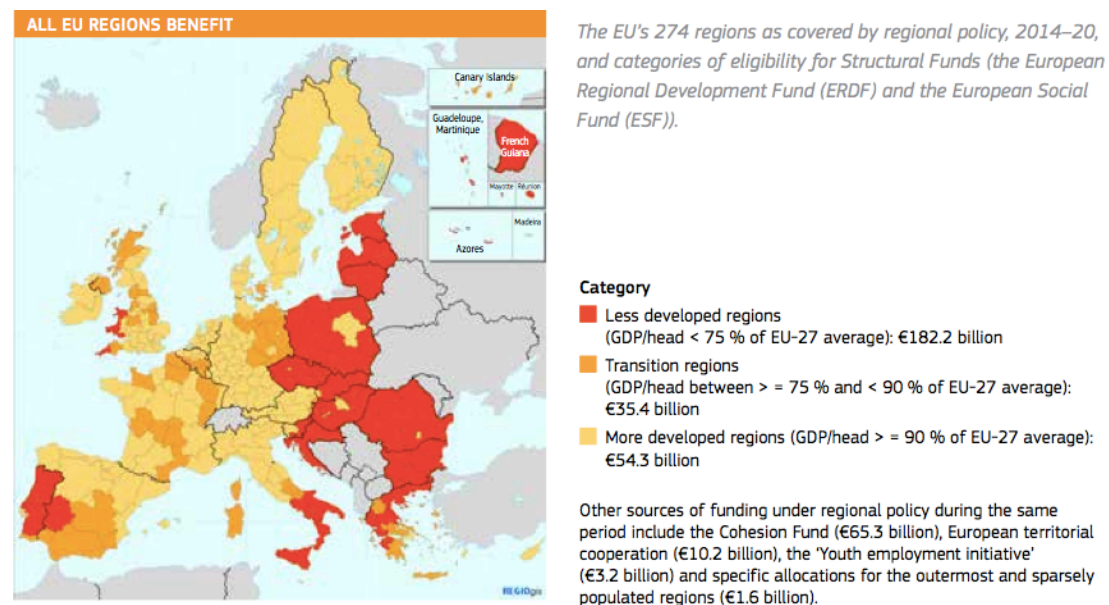


Figure 2: Eligibility to European Regional Funds in the EU for 2014-2020

Source: European Commission website, Europa.eu

The territorial agenda of the EU is more broadly pushing towards the development of more competitive regions. Based on a neoliberal vision of territorial development and on management principles, this discourse has become hegemonic in Europe. The contradiction with the objective of territorial solidarity, which is the very basis of the European Regional Policy, seems flagrant: How can every European region be a winner (Bristow 2005)? Oppositely, Gillian Bristow argues that regional competitiveness is “demonstrably a limiting, growth-first discourse, with the potential to effect and enhance uneven development between places, whilst simultaneously failing to address more fundamental social and ecological matters concerning a place’s development” (Bristow 2010, 156). In other words, the political (mis-)use of a dominant economic discourse of regional competitiveness may lead to foster spatial inequalities. Nevertheless, this critic should not be as dogmatic than the dominant discourse it denounces. As Bristow points out herself, “whilst there is convergence around the discourse of competitiveness, actual economic and policy practices are much more variegated and diverse” (Ibid.).

Polarisation and peripheralisation is “multi-dimensional”; they characterize a number of overlapping social, spatial and political processes, and “regional policy has only a share in this complex system” (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012, 80). To that extent,

the power issue is very much a capacity issue, namely the capacity of national, regional and local actors to deal with evolving game rules (europeanisation, post-socialism, neoliberalism) (Bafail 2009, 83; Cole and Pasquier 2012; Rey 2004, 7).

Thus, peripheralisation has very much to do with the construction and the mobilisation of spatial representations in societal and political discourses. The relation between cores and peripheries are challenged, maintained, reinforced through the capacity of political (and social) actors to use or not, to distort, these representations. This discursive capacity is very much determined by the access of these latter to the political agenda, which really depends on their power: “the emergence of peripheries and disparities is (...) a question of power (...) in the overall societal discourse, within which peripheries are or become meaningless” (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012, 79). Indeed, peripheries are often depicted as powerless (Kühn 2014; Lang 2011) and reciprocally, cores as powerful, making core-periphery relations a question of dominance and resistance. To go further than this first incentive to take into consideration symbolical power of the actors’ discourses in the construction of peripheries, I will open my theoretical discussion in the next part to more structural aspects of power (institutional change, evolution in intergovernmental relations).

2.2. Dominance & Resistance, the capacity of territorial actors in question

As I advocate in the first part, the recent complexification of territorial governance has changed and even heightened the question of power relations (Pasquier and Weisbein 2013, 285). Observing this theatre stage from a neo-Gramscian perspective conducts to highlight more the dominance and resistance relations between cores and peripheries, but also to further critically assess the phenomenon under scrutiny and to better take into consideration the potential specificities of the CEE context. This is the second theoretical foundation that I defend in this article.

In a pioneer work questioning the pertinence of transferring Western-based theoretical framework to analyse regionalization and regionalism processes in CEE, Perron and Pasquier have identified six transversal variables that integrate the CEE specificities: the political and institutional national paths (1); the territorialisation of capitalism (2); the politicization of identities (3); the impacts of European integration (4); the national political agenda (5); the regional policies and institutions (6) (Pasquier and Perron 2008, 15). Using this framework, I will mobilize in this sub-part recent research on the evolution of territorial governance in CEE since 1989, highlighting in particular dominances and resistances of, and between, cores and peripheries.

During the European integration process and until 2007, the promotion of the European model of local autonomy has paradoxically led to reinforce centralisation in most of the CEE countries (Rey 2004, 13; Bafoil 2010, 9; Grabbe 2001, 1029)²¹. In Estonia for instance, EU regional policy has produced “no significant changes in territorial governance” (Kettunen and Kungla 2005, 373). Instead, the EU arguments “ have been used to promote some reforms that have contributed to centralization rather than decentralization” (Ibid., 374). Other research have depicted similar situations in the two other Baltic countries, Lithuania and Latvia (Bafoil 2010, 9), in Bulgaria (Boulineau 2004, 39), in Romania (Boulineau and Suciú 2008) or in Czech Republic (Perron 2013). In most of the cases, the European incentives have led to the creation of a new administrative level without real power, very few prerogatives and almost no financial devolution (Bafoil 2010), in other words “regions without territories” (Groza and Muntele 2003).

Several explanatory factors have been advanced to explain the impediment of the decentralization dynamic. In Czech Republic, the political leaders of the *transition* period (namely then the ruling party ODS and Vaclav Klaus) have resisted to the initial EU push towards power sharing with the civil society, the trade unions or the regions: “ for these liberal and centralistic heirs to the communist period, regionalization has represented an unbearable intrusion of the EU into domestic affairs” (Bafoil 2010, 8). Unsuitable for the CEE context, the EU integration agenda did not take enough into consideration “the particular weight of history (...): the demands of identity, the impact of national sovereignty, and the strategies that ensue from it –in other words *path dependency*” (Bafoil 2009, 209). In several cases, national authorities have indeed resisted to imposed regionalisation because they were fearing that minorities concentrated in certain peripheral regions would claim for more regional autonomy, for instance in Estonia (Kettunen and Kungla 2005, 375), or in Romania (Boulineau and Suciú 2008). Furthermore dominance and resistance towards change has also been observable in the relations between core and local political leaders. For instance, Grabbe notices that the accession process has reinforced “the tendency towards a *core executive*” that have incited to exclude “sub-State elites from processes of sub-State reform” (Grabbe 2001, 1028–1029). In Estonia, the local governments leaders themselves have strongly resisted to the strengthening of the regional level, fearing that it would be conducted at their own expense (Kettunen and Kungla 2005, 375).

This latter situation demonstrates than it is necessary to go further than a Manichean view that would point out the cores actors the only responsible for peripheralisation.

²¹ Poland is often presented as a counter-example of successful regionalisation (Bafoil 2010).

Peripheral actors may also, in some cases, be the ones resisting to change, paralysed by conservatism. This is important not to simplify complex power relations between overlapping leaders holding sometimes local and national mandates. The governance of core-periphery relations may be thus characterised by its diversity, related to the differences in political leaders attitudes towards institutional change, but also linked to the heterogeneity in the people receptions towards societal changes –in both cases, often linked to their relations to the past and their hope for the future (Marcou 2004, 167; Lacquement, Maurel, and Raybal 2011, 51; Hudson 2010, 1158). Besides, the limitations described below might evolve, and regionalism may appear with time:

Despite the very great number of difficulties, the new administrative configurations now exist (...). Despite their formalism, which some find objectionable, we may suppose that, with time, these regional configurations will be capable of engendering process of identification. A number of region in the West, which were just as formally created, have already given proof of this (Bafail 2009, 103)

In Czech Republic, during the 2007-2013 European programming period, Catherine Perron has observed a move towards more decentralisation. It has been associated to a rise of political and financial resources for regional actors (Perron 2013). Consequently, this example shows that the domination/resistance game between cores and peripheries may evolve and lead to political and institutional situation more favourable to peripheries. But this relative *success* should not be associated too quickly to deperipheralisation, since it is reversible (peripheralisation is permanently renegotiated) and since polity is only one dimension of the process (polity change does not mean necessarily socio-economic improvements for the local population). I will now precisely discuss these two last points more extensively.

About the reversibility first, the recent economic crisis has impacted public budgets, and this financial tightening often affect more strongly local territories (Le Galès 2013, 299). New forms of centralisation are appearing. In France, Renaud Epstein announces the end of territorial governance and the time of *gouvernement à distance*. He defines this *hands off* policy as the renewed capacity of States to engage in territorial policies not directly but via (often private) agencies, norms and standards (Epstein 2013). This renewed State constraint create less favourable conditions for local leaders that may impact their capacity of innovation, and their capacity to elaborate projects (not only financially) (Le Galès 2014, 299). Is it the same in CEE?

Thus, institutional change, and in particular empowerment of local actors, are not enough per se to lead to deperipheralisation (and here I come to our second and last point). What is in real capacity and possibility of actors of peripheries to resist to

peripheralisation in an (neoliberal global) environment making competition and profit more and more the norms (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012), in particular in CEE? The recent work of Nagy et al. on a peripheral border region of Hungary is one first answer that confirms the relevance of this question. They observe that, despite the empowerment of local communities, “such changes produced uneven development at regional scale (due to the different conditions in border regions) as well as in the town–hinterland nexus (favouring urban centres as nodes of knowledge and information flow)” (Nagy, Nagy, and Timár 2012, 103). EU and national policies appear as still favouring centres “with a critical mass of knowledge, expertise, institutional capacities and local fund” but still do not help the “permanent crisis of red-lined rural regions where such conditions are missing” (Ibid.).

Conclusion

In this article, my first point is to highlight the normative and ideological limits of approaches based on Multi-level and good governance, but also the unsuitability of this concept to critically assess policy change in CEE. I suggest rather a critical and relational approach of the concept in order to better deconstruct the political dimension of the process of peripheralisation in CEE

To do so, I give then what I consider to be two main theoretical foundations for those willing to elaborate a research on the governance of core-periphery relations in this region. Rather than reproducing clichés on periphery, we should approach them as spaces of culturally contextual and politically contingent peripheralities²². It means that peripheralisation has very much to do with the construction and the mobilisation of spatial representations in societal and political discourses. It means also that peripheralisation has very much to do with power and capacity (of cores and peripheries actors). But, in an increasingly neoliberal environment, which is the real political and social capacity of local, national and European actors to deal with peripheralisation and deperipheralisation?

²² Stretching here the reflection of Gerard Toal on deterritorialisation (Toal 2000).

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