

Regional development issues in Central and Eastern Europe: shifting research agendas from a focus on peripheries to peripheralisation?¹

In: Eröss, Agnes; Karacsonyi, David (eds.): *Geography in Visegrad and Neighbour Countries*, Budapest 2011, pp. 57-64

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Keywords: Regional development, peripheralisation, peripheries, urban-rural, territorial cohesion, polarisation

Introduction

In recent years, spatial development in the new member states of the European Union is increasingly described with the notion of polarisation. The rapid growth of metropolitan areas (capitals in particular) is accompanied by a delayed development or continuous decline of structurally weak areas and spaces outside of the large agglomerations. These increasing social and economic disparities at the regional level have lately fuelled concerns about further spatial polarisation and the peripheralisation of non-metropolitan regions (Dubois et al, 2008). Only one or a few strong economic engines stand against a large number of poor performers, and these (new) peripheries can no longer be described only in terms of (old) categories linked to rurality and poor accessibility.² Nevertheless, at the national level the gap between Old and New Member States is closing. However, this gap is closing at the expense of increasing disparities within CEE countries. As a matter of fact, the dichotomous development of individual regions relative to others has increased sharply between 2000 and 2007 in all CEE countries (see Fig. 1 below). Moreover, a number of scholars have argued that in recent decades, regional policy in the EU has become increasingly dominated by neoliberal thinking which has furthered processes of socio-spatial polarisation (Krätke 1995, Scott, Storper 2003, Weichhart 2008). Prevailing negative experience from the period of centralised planned economies has led to a sceptical perception of any public sector interventions and to a general turn towards neoliberal policies in CEE during the transition period (Bohle 2006, Aligica, Evans 2009).

¹ Parts of this paper are based on joint discussions and also text contributions of partners in the iCope consortium elaborating a FP7-proposal during 2010 and 2011; I want to thank in particular Tomas Hanell, Irma Potočnik Slavič and Tadeusz Strykiewicz for their contributions.

² E.g. in terms of global integration, some bigger conurbations and metropolitan regions must be seen as peripheral, too – despite their urbanity and good accessibility.

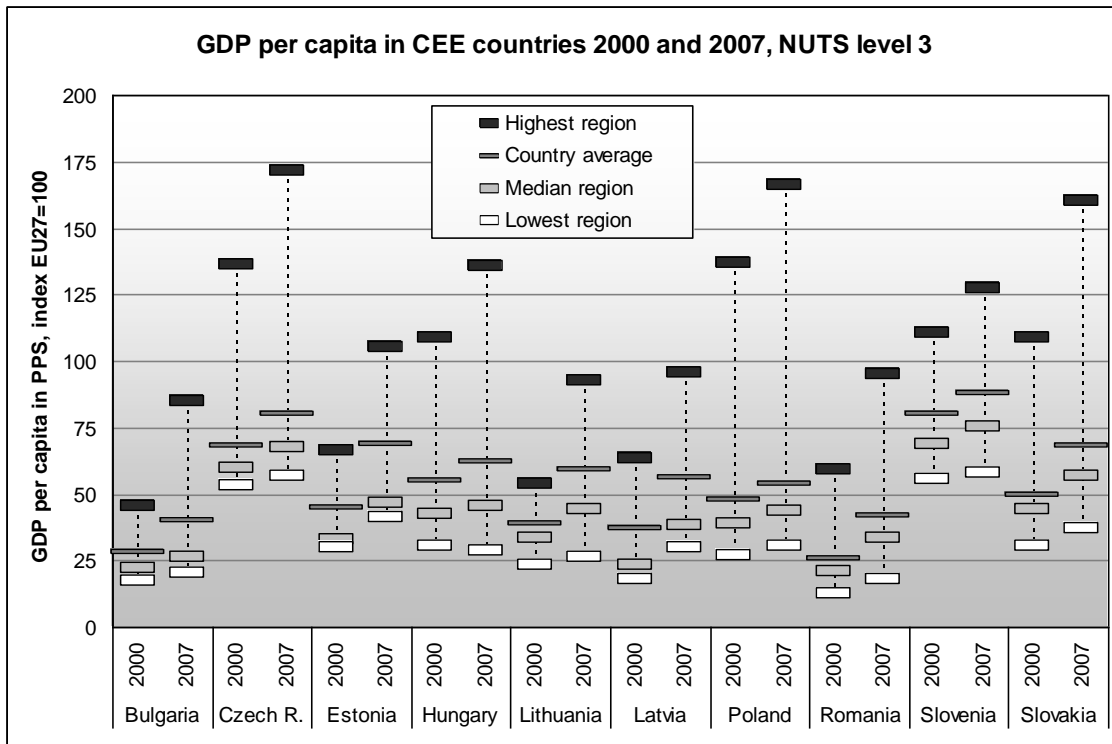


Fig. 1: Source: Eurofutures, data source: Eurostat

It is in this context that new strategies with a strong spatial focus are needed, as the described trends of polarisation constitute major threats to maintaining a key objective of EU regional policy addressed under the concept of territorial cohesion: balanced spatial development. The European Union aims to achieve more balanced development by reducing existing disparities and by “making both sectoral policies which have a spatial impact and regional policy more coherent” (Commission of the European Communities 2004: 27).

The concept of peripheralisation as a starting point for research on regional development issues

Islands, mountainous, border, rural, old industrial, structurally weak, remote or marginal areas of Europe and the world are often perceived as peripheral. Peripheries and processes of peripheralisation (depopulation, globalisation of markets, cultures and values, continuous shortage of investment capital etc.) are not a static and isolated concept. Some peripheries have a constant character due to their extreme remote location and low population densities, severe climatic conditions, a higher share of less favourable areas for agriculture etc. (Mose and Brodda, 2004). Like cohesion, periphery is also a multidimensional concept. Definitions and understandings of the concept vary (see Leimgruber 1994, 2004, Schmidt 1998, Havlíček et al. 2008). One of the key issues for future research is to identify and understand differences in the definition and social construction of peripheries. On the one hand, the way in which peripheries and cohesion are societally understood is influenced by political traditions, historical conditions and former paths of economic development. On the other hand, this understanding also has in

turn an influence on the decision-makers who implement EU cohesion policy at national and regional levels.

The analytical concept of peripheralisation facilitates a relational understanding of spatial disparities and supplements the structural research approaches currently predominantly applied in regional studies. It has a better potential to detect causal processes leading to social and economic disparities in CEE. As the relation of centre and periphery is immanent to the concept, peripheralisation implies processes of centralisation and polarisation: The logic and dynamics of spatial centralisation determine the peripheralisation of other spaces by attracting population, economic productivity and infrastructural functions to the disadvantage of other regions (Keim 2006). Furthermore, this polarisation is enhanced by national discourse which places higher value on particular regions and developments and thereby devalues others. Komlosy (1988) defines regional peripheralisation as the growing dependence of disadvantaged regions on the centre; Blowers and Leroy stress the simultaneity of a number of features constituting peripheries such as distance, economic weakness and lack of political power (Blowers/ Leroy 1994). The dynamic differentiation into "winning" and "losing" regions overlaps at different spatial scales (producing regional, national and global peripheries). This multi-faceted understanding of peripheralisation, going beyond earlier ideas of uneven spatial development (Myrdal 1957, Hirschman 1958, Krugman 1991), has the potential to define starting points for research on regional development issues in the light of dynamic disparity formation and polarisation.

Herein, it is a rather new approach to highlight the interrelation of different causal factors for the emergence of peripheries and increased polarisation between centres and peripheries. These factors range from structural development trends via the particular adaptive capacity to processes of globalisation to factors relating to the social construction of polarisation in discourse and public debate. The analytical concept of peripheralisation facilitates such a relational understanding of spatial disparities. It supplements currently dominantly applied structural research approaches because it has a better potential to detect the causal processes leading to social and economic disparities in CEE. As the relation of centre and periphery is immanent to the concept, peripheralisation implies processes of centralisation and polarisation.

Researching processes instead of structures

The emphasis on spatially relevant processes rather than the resulting spatial structures makes it easier to broach issues of discursive (political) attribution with regard to the relation between normative societal orientations and "real" developments. Peripheries should be seen as the result of processes of peripheralisation and not as structural conditions of space (cf. also Beetz 2008). The emergence of peripheries and disparities is also a question of power, not so much individual power but rather power in the overall societal discourse, within which peripheries are or become meaningless. Actors representing peripheries do not have a say in the overall (regional) policy discourse nor do they have any access to relevant decision taking networks. When it comes to locational decisions for firms, functions and infrastructures, other regions are served, and the structural problems of peripheral regions are not recognised from the outside or not seen as relevant. „Sich nicht (mehr) gegen Benachteiligungen wehren zu können, das bedeutet

Peripherie"³ (Neu 2006: 13). Similarly, Blowers and Leroy see "powerlessness" as a central feature of periphery which is strengthened by a "culture of acceptance" based on values "which predispose the community to inaction" (Blowers, Leroy 1994: 204f). Defining centrality is part of societal discourses, political negotiations and medial orchestrations (cf. Beetz 2008). Within this process, particular forms of life and work as well as images and paradigms of spatial development are seen as better, more reasonable or more significant than others. The relation of centre and periphery thus mirrors the societal construction of spatial order. The discourse around this order, however, is only implicit, in particular as the definition of centre and periphery seems to be based on structural indicators supporting the belief that this follows a kind of natural order. Very rarely, there is an explicit debate about the margins and thresholds leading to the prescription of a spatial category. Looking for example at the current process of spatial "categorisation" (Raumtypen) in the 2010 spatial monitoring of the German Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, specific, normatively defined thresholds have led to a particular categorisation of central and peripheral spaces (BBR 2009). Spatial monitoring in Germany will be organised around these attributions for the next couple of years. It is further striking that this is based on a purely national analysis without recognising e.g. the impact of Szczecin on the north-eastern part of Germany.

Comparative research on CEE states reflecting these multi-faceted viewpoints is very rare. Due to the relatively short duration of full membership of the CEE countries, there is little experience and knowledge of the territorial impacts of EU and national policies e.g. relating to the polarisation of urban and regional systems in CEE into strong, central (mainly metropolitan) areas on the one hand and peripheral areas with negative socio-economic and demographic development trajectories on the other. A working hypothesis is that there has been a strong interrelationship especially when it comes to infrastructure policies and general market-oriented neoliberal positions. However, it is already clear that the causal processes are multi-dimensional and that regional policy has only a share in this complex system. Polarisation and peripheralisation characterises a number of overlapping spatially relevant processes:

- as a consequence of the decline of traditional industries, some areas have increasing difficulty finding their places within the world economy and experience a growing dependence on transfer payments, as a competitive economic base has not yet (re-)emerged; this results not only in economic dependence and selective mobility of capital but also in one-sided political dependence with unbalanced power relations;
- the population in CEE tends to further concentrate in a diminishing number of prosperous areas in contrast to a growing number of regions suffering population decline; thereby intra- and inter-regional migration patterns overlap with international migration on the basis of age-selectivity/ labour mobility and an overall decline of birth rates which is particularly sharp in CEE;
- more recent (neoliberal) positions have led regional policy to focus on larger and prosperous centres and metropolitan areas furthering socio-spatial polarisation and also other areas' loss of importance;
- EU and national infrastructural policy have favoured some regions whereas others have become more remote due to disinvestment in transport infrastructures; infrastructure is increasingly centralised (e.g. the restructuring of high-speed transport networks alters the (relative) position of particular areas), and service provision is reduced in quality and

³ Translation: To be unable to counterbalance this form of spatial discrimination constitutes periphery.

quantity in remote places leading to a loss of urban functions and problems of accessibility;

- particular regions – e.g. some areas on the external border of the EU – are shaped by peripheralisation processes on different spatial scales (global, EU, national, regional); many share typical structural problems of industrial decline and rural depopulation.

Aspects of the social construction of space affect the above mentioned trends and thus the emergence of peripheries and the polarisation of space in CEE. In principle, the terms periphery or peripheralisation are neutral. However, due to the discursive negotiation of spatial categories, spatial structures and land use, spaces become normatively charged (and in part negatively labelled). High rates of outmigration do not constitute negative images of depopulation areas alone, but in combination with stigmatisation in public discourse and in relation to other spaces. Beetz depicts the order of centre and periphery in the context of the dominance of centres in societal discourse. Here the centres can consistently portray themselves as spaces of modernity and progress. Consequently, in symbolic terms it is of the highest importance for spaces to be part of the corporate mainstream (Beetz 2008). A good example is the current debate on metropolitan regions in Germany (cf. e.g. Schmitt 2007), which parallels similar political discourses Poland or Rumania. This indicates that not only are structural trends relevant to socio-spatial polarisation (Blowers/ Leroy 1994) but also “soft” factors such as political dependence and power, internal and external images, normative and political ideas about spaces (Lang 2010).

Conclusions

Research on urban and regional development issues should reflect the multiple character and systemic complexity of spatial challenges. In a post-industrial and post-modern world, sharpened processes of social and spatial polarisation seem to belong to the nature of to-date capitalist order. More than ever, currently dominant dichotomous ideas of urban and rural, of central and peripheral, of leading and lagging or growing and declining regions a.o. determine spatial development as well as our methodological, theoretical and normative approaches to regional studies. These dichotomies are useful to reduce complexity in modern world research, however, there might also be other ways to reduce complexity, as using dichotomous categories bears also some methodological and theoretical traps. Trying to overcome these strong categories, a process based and dynamic understanding of urban and regional research – as suggested in using concepts such as peripheralisation and polarisation – at least offers promising alternative approaches to up-to-date questions of urban and regional geography which seem worthwhile to follow. In general, space cannot be tackled as an absolute category and should be seen as socially produced (Lefebvre 1991) and dynamic; centres and peripheries are made by and depend on their contexts. Peripheries are dynamic and dependent on scale and time (Smith 1995). Furthermore, peripheries do not exist without an interrelation with the centres (Keim 2006). Hence the process-based and dynamic approach of investigating disparities from the perspective of peripheralisation and polarisation must always reflect views on periphery, centre and their specific interrelation. It is this perspective and the combination of structural and social aspects in the constitution of peripheral and central spaces which will advance the current state-of-the-art

and help to follow promising research agendas about regional development issues in Central and Eastern Europe in the next years.

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