

Socio-economic and political responses to regional polarisation and socio-spatial peripheralisation in Central and Eastern Europe: a research agenda

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Abstract

In the past years, new patterns of regional disparities between metropolised core regions and the remaining parts of Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) have emerged. Such spatial disparities have lately fuelled concerns about further regional polarisation and the peripheralisation of non-metropolitan regions in particular. This is the case although balancing spatial development has been a major goal of European Regional Policy. The paper argues that there is a clear need to better understand the social, economic, discursive and political processes constituting regional polarisation and to conduct further research on approaches to deal with and respond to peripheralisation. The proposed research agenda focuses on a multi-scalar relation between core and peripheral regions and applies a process based dynamic understanding of peripherality and centrality. Following this, peripheralised regions bear agency capacities and cannot be seen as powerless victims of some overarching processes associated with the globalising economy. Applying the notions of polarisation and peripheralisation to guide further research, offers multi-dimensional, multi-scalar and process based conceptualisations of regional development research. With the proposed research agenda, I would like to open up the discussion on new interpretations of the terms peripherality and centrality, rurality and urbanity, border and rural areas, core and peripheral regions, and contribute to the development of new approaches in multi-level governance and ultimately in regional policy.

Keywords: territorial cohesion, regional policy, spatial disparities, uneven development, peripheralisation, polarisation

Introduction

In the past 10–15 years new forms of disparities have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) but remained largely unnoticed by both the public and scientists in geography and regional studies: a strong socio-economic spatial polarisation between metropolised core regions and the remaining parts of the CEE countries (KRÄTKE, S. 2007; DUBOIS, A. *et al.* 2007; LANG, T. 2011). Such disparities have not only become a striking feature of the current settlement system but in the face of the ongoing economic, financial and national debt crisis have fuelled concerns about further polarisation and the peripheralisation of non-metropolitan regions. It is

striking that we can observe these processes and discourses although balancing spatial development to achieve territorial cohesion has been a major goal of European Regional Policy in the past years (EU 2011). As such, patterns of increasing socio-economic disparities combined with regional polarisation do not remain restricted to CEE, but rather can be found throughout the European Union and beyond, albeit at different degrees.

Against this background, there is a clear need to:

(1) better understand the social, economic, discursive and political processes constituting regional polarisation and interrelated policymaking processes in different contexts,

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(2) produce better knowledge on different disciplinary and cultural planning and policy traditions in the EU,

(3) communicate relevant information and improve multi-agent decision making for regional policy under uncertain framework conditions.

To achieve this, this paper proposes to enhance research on socio-economic forms of and processes interlinked with regional polarisation and peripheralisation, their wider impacts on society and everyday living as well as the (intentional and unintentional) responses and strategies conveyed by social, economic and political actors as well as ‘ordinary people’ in order to better deal with these phenomena. This includes research on (discursive and material) practices of the production and reproduction of peripherality and centrality as well as the logics of responses at multiple scales. With such a research agenda, a network of regional development experts throughout Europe suggests to respond to new patterns of regional disparities in CEE and beyond.²

Following this introduction, I briefly outline some empirical observations about socio-spatial polarisation in CEE and depict four main gaps in research on socio-spatial polarisation and issues of regional policy in Europe. Section two introduces polarisation and peripheralisation as analytical concepts. The following three sections are outlining propositions for further research in three interconnected fields:

- evolution, reproduction and persistence of centrality and peripherality,
- governance of core-periphery relations and
- adaptation, strategies and potentials.

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Some empirical observations and current shortcomings in polarisation research

CEE countries currently show strong evidence for three main spatial development characteristics (KOMORNICKI, T. and CZAPIEWSKI, K. 2006): First, there are profound differences in development between urban core regions and peripheral rural regions with the urban regions performing much better. Second, these countries demonstrate strong trends towards polarisation between their main metropolitan area (usually the national capital) and the rest of the country, and third, an east-west-gradient can often be found within the countries with the western parts performing better than their eastern regions. As a consequence of these developments, today only one or a few strong economic ‘engines’ stand out against a growing number of regions with low economic dynamics which become perceived as less attractive locations for people and business. Thereby the sharp increase of regional disparities stands against the diminishing socio-economic differences between old and new member states on the national level (FINKA, M. 2007; MONFORT, P. 2009; CHILLA, T. and NEUFELD, M. 2015).

As a result, already existent patterns of regional polarisation have experienced a strong intensification in recent years (GORZELAK, G. and GOH, C. 2010), resulting in disproportionately high increases of regional disparities in the CEE countries compared to the EU15 states, measured e.g. in GDP-data (*Figure 1*) or in unemployment data (see DUBOIS, A. *et al.* 2007; ARTELARIS, P. *et al.* 2010; LANG, T. 2016; for the critics see OPENSHAW, S. 1984; for alternative measurements see e.g. PERRONS, D. 2012; OECD 2014).

Parallel with the growing concentration of economic activities in metropolitan areas current demographic developments further exacerbate problems of deepening polarisation (FILIPOV, D. and DORBRITZ, J. 2003; STEINFÜHRER, A. and HAASE, A. 2007). CEE population is increasingly concentrated in a diminishing number of prosperous areas, particularly the capital regions, in contrast

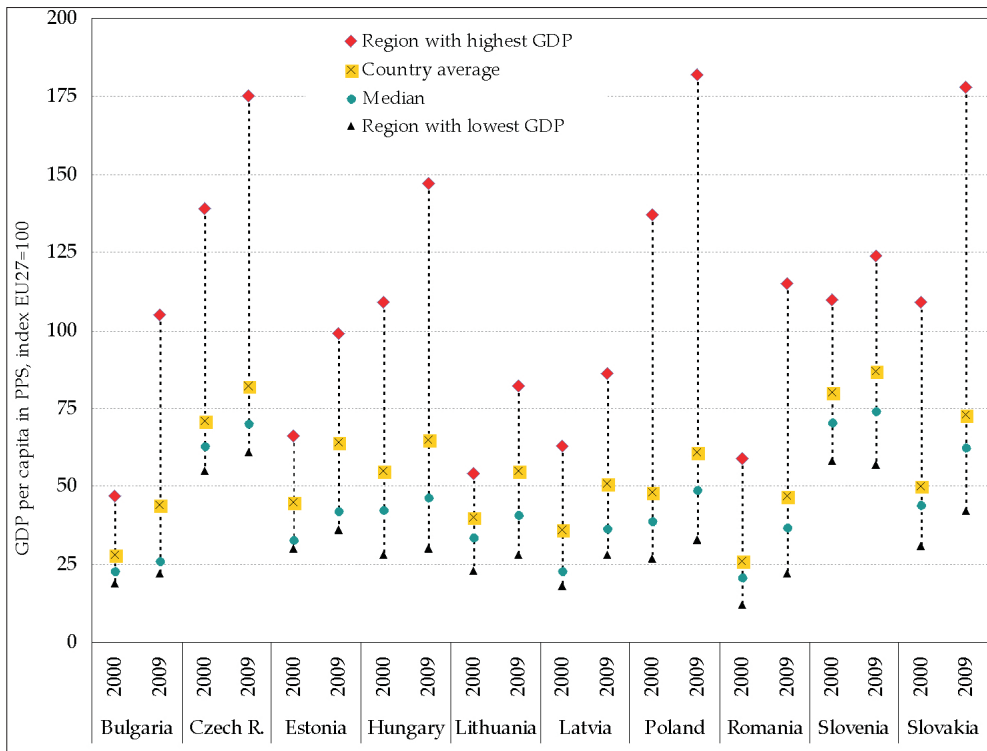


Fig. 1. Increase of regional polarisation in GDP per capita, NUTS-3 regions 2000 and 2009 (calculated by Tomas HANELL and Stefan HAUNSTEIN, data source: Eurostat)

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, stratified labour mobility and an overall decline of birth rates which is particularly sharp in CEE. The decrease in population has been particularly pronounced in structurally disadvantaged rural and deindustrialised regions as well as many inner-city and high-rise, edge of city areas (TSENKOVA, S. 2006; STEINFÜHRER, A. and HAASE, A. 2007). These demographic developments combine with other processes of social differentiation to produce highly uneven social geographies at regional, sub-regional, intra-urban, and micro-geographic scales that intersect but do not necessarily overlap (see also PoSCoPP 2015).

Looking at forms of peripheralisation at a global scale, it is notable that CEE re-

gions play a negligible role when world city hierarchies are analysed, such as by the 'Globalisation and World Cities Research Network' (GaWC) focussing on financial services and a number of specific globalisation indicators (only Moscow and Warsaw are recognised as Command and Control Centers and as Alpha World Cities (CSOMÓS, G. and DERUDDER, B. 2014; PARNREITER, C. 2014). Following FRIEDMANN'S and SASSEN'S work on the world or global city (FRIEDMANN, J. 1986; SASSEN, S. 1991), a number of authors have argued that worldwide economic activities have become concentrated in a small number of city-regions. In the globalised economy, only a few global cities and metropolitan regions are said to be the 'control points of the global economic system' (BEAVERSTOCK, J.V. *et al.* 2000).

One could argue that CEE cities and their functional regions are being peripheralised

by the dominance of world cities in the global economy. European and national policies add a further dimension to this, as they frequently copy the model of the global city in regional policies by focusing on the promotion of growth in metropolitan areas (BRENNER, N. 2009). So far, also European regional policy programmes and the introduction of new forms of regional governance did not help to achieve more balanced spatial development and to distribute development impetus more evenly across CEE regions. This has been witnessed particularly in the aftermath of the most recent financial and economic crisis, as decision makers have been led to concentrate scarce resources on supporting development in larger cities, hoping that disadvantaged areas will profit from core-periphery spillover effects. Such policies, however, carry a major risk of further increasing socio-spatial polarisations and the peripheralisation of disadvantaged areas (for example due to disinvestment in transport infrastructures or centralisation of service provision).

In addition, in CEE prevailing negative experiences from the period of centrally planned economies have led to a sceptical perception of public sector interventions and to a general turn towards neoliberal policies during the transition period (BOHLE, D. 2006; ALIGICA, P.D. and EVANS, A. 2009). This has to be seen in relation to both, uneven power relations in the context of supra-nationally imposed institutional reforms and the active involvement of East European reformers who were adherents of neo-liberalism even before 1989. Reviewing very recent changes in European policy debates, some authors have claimed that regional policy in the EU has become more neoliberal to the extent of distributive and cohesion aspects of regional policy (AVDIKOS, V. and CHARDAS, A. 2015) making a reduction of disparities in the next years less likely.

Despite the long research tradition in geography, regional economy, political science and urban planning, and even though core-periphery relations have been studied at global, national, regional and urban levels, the research on regional polarisation processes

up to now has been characterised by four major shortcomings:

- So far the main focus has been on quantitative, regionally limited studies. Only to some extent they do raise issues of interdependencies with phenomena and institutional contexts outside the respective regions, and by trend sparsely question regional socio-economic and policy responses and their normative dimensions. Further, most quantitative studies on polarisation work with GDP and population development indicators which cannot capture the multi-dimensional complexity of the phenomena under consideration.
- The social construction of core-periphery relations has been reviewed only to a small degree, especially in the CEE context (e.g. TIMÁR, J. *et al.* 2012; EHRLICH, K. *et al.* 2012). There is a clear need for a better knowledge about predominant discourses and paradigmatic backgrounds of European, national and regional policies in particular.
- Most polarisation and cohesion research ignores the overlapping nature of core-periphery relations at regional, national, European and global levels (SELLERS, J.M. 2002a). Researching the multi-level characteristics of socio-spatial development is in particular relevant for CEE countries which underwent a rapid exposure to processes of globalisation and internationalisation after the political changes in the early 1990s and even more so after their accession to the EU.
- Moreover, the formation of regional policies at the national level in CEE is still in its early stage (FINKA, M. 2011) and there is too little known about the ways, how regional policy responses and new forms of governance have emerged in CEE during the last years and how they inter-relate with other forms of local and regional response.

Polarisation and peripheralisation as analytical concepts

The observations summarised above show that various processes lead to and interlink with socio-spatial polarisation at different in-

intersecting scales. Also apparent, however, is the need to look critically at our approaches to researching these phenomena and processes and to consider how and why different insights are produced from different perspectives. Thus, while helpful for the identification and assessment of the scope and reach of socio-economic regional polarisation, conventional indicators³ rarely capture the wide range of causes and dimensions of polarisation as a process that intersects with other aspects of inequality, uneven development and power breaching conventional territorial boundaries (see also PERRONS, D. 2012).

I suggest understanding polarisation and peripheralisation as analytical concepts that facilitate process-based relational understandings of spatial differentiation and supplement structural research approaches (see also MASSEY, D. 2009; VARRÓ, K. and LAGENDIJK, A. 2013). Although our focus lies on the regional scale I suggest a multi-level conceptualisation of the phenomena under observation. As the relation of core and periphery is immanent to the concept, peripheralisation implies processes of centralisation and thus forms of socio-spatial polarisation at various scales. Such forms of polarisation are intrinsically connected to the discourse which places higher value on particular regions and developments and thereby devalues others. Some authors define regional peripheralisation as the growing dependence of disadvantaged regions on the centre (e.g. KOMLOSY, A. 1988); hence, it is not only the simultaneity of a number of features constituting the formation of peripheries such as distance, economic weakness and lack of political power (cf. BLOWERS, A. and LEROY, P. 1994). It is often also the dynamic formation of core and peripheral regions overlapping at different spatial scales (regional, national, European and global). This multi-faceted, multi-level understanding of polarisation has the potential to identify novel starting points

for research on current regional development issues. Applying these conceptual notions offers opportunities for spatial research circumventing dichotomous ideas of urban and rural, of central and peripheral, of 'leading' and 'lagging' or growing and declining which tend to determine our methodological, theoretical and normative approaches to regional studies.

In Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on processes of polarisation provides an important starting point for critical analyses of the assumptions on which the Washington Consensus of the early 1990s was built, such as the claim that radical privatisation and the swift introduction of unimpeded market-economies would right the wrongs of state-socialism most effectively and would (eventually) deliver prosperity to, if not all, then at least a majority of people. What we have witnessed since is a much more diverse and problematic picture: whilst in terms of GDP growth, many parts of the macro region – in particular the capital regions – have indeed embarked on an upward trajectory after the initial crisis of the early 1990s, the success of market reforms to improve living standards and to ensure a more even spread of wealth amongst wider populations has been limited (SMITH, A. *et al.* 2008; SMITH, A. and TIMÁR, J. 2010; STENNING, A. *et al.* 2010).

Up until recently, spatial development in CEE has mainly been researched through the lenses of post-socialist transformation and modernisation tending to perceive all processes in CEE as being quite particular and closing up comparative perspectives in relation to similar processes outside of CEE. This has also led to a limited research interest in inter-scalar relations and tended to favour internal reasons and innate properties as explanations for problems in social, economic and spatial development. Acknowledging socialism and post-socialism as being part of CEE history but adding alternative approaches (such as those being based on the notions of peripheralisation and polarisation) enables new comparative perspectives to similar phenomena in other parts of Europe and the

³ Such as rates of inward investment, GDP growth, availability of key infrastructures and services, distance from metropolitan cores, or poor accessibility.

world and also helps to better conceptualise the role of super-ordinate processes and forces with impacts on CEE regions. This is particularly true since the 2007–2008 economic, financial and national debt crisis has shown similar economic, social and spatial impacts as well as political forms of response across Europe as a whole.

Following the outlined understanding of peripheralisation and polarisation, it is suggested to build up a research agenda based on five axioms:

(1) Socio-spatial polarisation should be seen as a multi-level, multi-dimensional process which is an intrinsic part of current capitalism and dominant market-logics. However, there is more and more empirically based research claiming that a socially and spatially more even society would also produce more growth (e.g. PIKETTY, T. 2013; OECD 2014 and 2015), adding an economic to the social argument for state intervention and regulation as well as a form of regional policy that maintains the distribution goal. Nevertheless, problematising particular forms and impacts of socio-spatial polarisation and defining urban and regional development keeps to be a social process (cf. PIKE, A. *et al.* 2007) and depends on what is seen as normal, acceptable or achievable in a societal discourse.

(2) Peripheries are made through material and immaterial processes and practices of peripheralisation and centralisation. It is these processes and practices which should be given more focus in social science based spatial research. All sorts of actors have their (implicit and explicit) shares in these processes, hence peripheralised regions cannot be seen as victims of some overarching processes beyond their control without any agency to them. Neither peripheries nor centres can be seen as static concepts with naturally given features and boundaries. Peripheralisation and centralisation are dynamic processes which can be reversed, rejected or redirected in the long run. Hence, when researching regional polarisation, we should direct our interest to these dynamic processes instead of static concepts of core and periphery.

(3) Urban and regional policy is always normative (even if its arguments are based on empirical data) and framed by individual and collective values linked to specific understandings and conceptualisations of development, desired policy outcomes and funding priorities. Such understandings, conceptualisations and priorities can be seen as the results of discourses linked to particular governance arrangements which are only partly state-led. The perceptions of acceptable and achievable forms of socio-spatial development are socially constructed and can only to a small extent be seen as the outcome of a rational process. Exactly for this reason, decision making and governance are constrained and shaped through specific institutional environments privileging and devaluing certain forms of action – certainly limiting the local and regional room for manoeuvre.

(4) There are similar – often overlooked – constraints in economic development and with regard to activities of economic agents: the economy is a social construct and can only partially be explained in terms of rational decision making; economic decisions are social decisions and reflect wider institutional and discursive constraints.

(5) Studying migration and mobility in the context of polarisation research is incomplete if it only captures quantitative processes without going deeper to conceptualise relations, motives and the circumstances of migration decisions. Migration should be seen as a (often temporary) result of subjective decisions in a household, family or social context based on personal and collective environments linked to particular place-specific values (in some cases we can talk about emigration cultures or a particular *modus agendi* inscribed to the institutional environment, see LANG, T. 2012a,b).

Following this conceptual argumentation, I suggest to focus future polarisation research on three objectives:

– to better understand the evolution, (re-) production and persistence of core-periphery relations using a dynamic conceptualisation of these relations,

- to identify and compare policy responses (and subsequent governance arrangements) to regional polarisation at different scales and understand how they emerged,
- to identify patterns of adaptation and resistance as well as strategies and potentials to overcome peripheralisation.

Evolution, reproduction and persistence of centrality and peripherality

The evolution of core and peripheral regions does not follow any ‘natural’ order. Instead, centrality, peripherality and their interrelation are produced and constantly reproduced by social interaction, territorial mobility, political and economic decisions (BLOWERS, A. and LEROY, P. 1994; NAGY, E. *et al.* 2015). Although regional polarisation in this respect can change over time, the underlying structures are very persistent and tend to reproduce themselves (GIDDENS, A. 1993) – changes are thus rather an issue of generations and less likely to occur in short terms. Further research should consider how the perception of location (dis)advantages, migration and demographic developments as well as particular policies have contributed to the evolution, reproduction and persistence of centrality and peripherality and regional polarisation.

We could learn a lot about the formation of regional disparities and in particular about the emergence and persistence of peripheralities by looking at processes of centralisation and how the intentional and unintentional concentration of resources in and positive ascriptions to particular privileged places is to the disadvantage of other places. Research on the evolution, reproduction and persistence of disparities should also deal with the question of how core and peripheral areas are socially constructed in a multi-scalar way.

A number of studies explore the discursive relationships between economic centres and peripheries and argue that peripheralisation is a process which is strongly linked to how some spaces are represented by economic

centres (MASSEY, D. 1993; JANSSON, D. 2003; ERIKSSON, M. 2008; WILLETT, J. 2010) but also from within peripheralised places themselves (MIGGELBRINK, J. and MEYER, F. 2015). Here, peripheries can find themselves described in ways that reinforce dependency through being characterised as ‘stagnant’, ‘backward’, ‘rural’ and agents of their own economic misfortune. Such dominant discourses can lead to collective orientations hindering local economic development e.g. by increasing emigration (BEETZ, S. 2009; LANG, T. 2012b) or through a reluctance of ‘core’ businesses to work with peripheral organisations (BOSWORTH, G. and WILLETT, J. 2011).

It is in particular individual and collective perceptions, ideas and values that shape spatial policies, economic and household decisions – all of which contribute (by means of their material consequences) to the production and persistence of centrality and peripherality. Perceptions, ideas and values about and ascribed to a thing (or region) are constructed through formations of power. Such ‘knowledge’ is replicated through discourse by individuals, organisations and institutions. These affect how a place is perceived by others, placing limitations (or expectations) on what people and organisations are imagined capable of (ERIKSSON, M. 2008; BOSWORTH, G. and WILLETT, J. 2011). This is an ‘othering’ process, whereby one region is presented as qualitatively ‘different’ to another, and which mirrors contemporary regional development, whereby regions are encouraged to distinguish themselves from others in order to better compete in the global market (KEATING, M. 2008).

As despite all policy efforts, regional polarisation increased during the past years, we cannot be sure, if current sectoral and spatial policies help to reduce or rather reproduce peripheralisation and polarisation. To what extent do these policies reduce, reproduce or even reinforce existing centralities and peripheralities and to what extent can this be traced in new spatial instruments (such as metropolitan regions, cf. ALLMENDINGER, P. *et al.* 2015; see also RAAGMAA, G. 2015; FINKA,

M. *et al.* 2015). In particular economic policy in Europe is said to have followed neoliberal logics, thereby concentrating resources to a smaller number of places and furthering polarisation (e.g. AVDIKOS, V. and CHARDAS, A. 2015). Thus, it is relevant to raise the question to what extent this holds true for European, national and sub-national policies. Moreover, how broad is the current toolbox for regional economic policy within the EU and how are alternative ideas of development contested?

And finally, how do locally active decision makers, economic agents and ordinary people contribute to the emergence, persistence and reproduction of centralities and peripheralities? In particular with regard to economic and migration decisions, there is a need to better understand how the interactions of ‘peripheral’ agents with ‘core’ actors and their embeddedness into various local and non-local networks reflect, reproduce or counteract centrality and peripherality. What kind of spatial perceptions and relations do influence regional mobility and investment decisions? And to what extent do these decisions constitute and reproduce such perceptions and relations?

Governance of core–periphery relations

For many authors, processes of and responses to peripheralisation are linked to issues of governance (e.g. RAAGMAA, G. 2015). Following the above outlined conceptualisation, governance research with regard to the development of peripheralised regions bears three major shortcomings: (1) instead of looking at territorially limited governance networks, a multi-directional perspective on core–periphery relations should be included; (2) the role of normative frames for the ways regional and economic policies are implemented is under-researched; (3) within governance-research, the role of single charismatic leaders is often overlooked. In general, however, the role of governance is often overestimated compared to other factors influencing local and regional development.

Although, with the Territorial Agenda 2020, the EU has been following the concept of territorial cohesion since 2010, there has been little research about the (national, regional, local) implementation of policy responses to intensifying regional polarisation. Further, regional development and planning policy in the new member states also reflects a particular turn towards neoliberal policies. “In these countries, the fragility of the planning systems following the breakdown of socialist-influenced structures led to a particular willingness to accept market economy and rather neoliberal tendencies” (REIMER, M. *et al.* 2014. p. 8). This coincides with a more general neoliberal shift in public service provision, public government and policies being catalysed through processes of “Europeanisation” (WATERHOUT, B. *et al.* 2013).

There is a tendency at EU-level, that issues of balanced spatial development and territorial cohesion are de-prioritised and replaced by the logic of competitiveness, place-based development and growth-based concentration (AVDIKOS, V. and CHARDAS, A. 2015). We could argue with SERVILLO that through discursive chains, these strategic concepts become hegemonic, making other ways of thinking, other ‘rationales’ and policy options marginal (SERVILLO, L. 2010; see also WATERHOUT, B. *et al.* 2013. p. 144) and leading to particular ways and forms of how core–periphery relations are governed. In this context, policies favouring the concentration of resources are on the rise at national and supranational level in Europe and beyond.

Some authors would see this as being linked to a process of Europeanisation through transnational learning and policy transfer (DOLOWITZ, D.P. and MARSH, D. 2002; BULMER, S. and PADGETT, S. 2005). It is suggested to perceive this process as being part of a more general shift towards neoliberal development concepts in the fate of the globalisation debate and a general global trend favouring the big cities as economic engines and attractive places to work and live in as a specific preference of the current capitalist society (see also KRÄTKE, S. 2007; WATERHOUT,

B. *et al.* 2013). It is in this context that we should analyse next to the emergence, the institutionalisation and implementation of regional policies and various forms of public interventions applying concepts of governance, path renewal and leadership.

The term 'governance' bears normative, theoretical and methodological dimensions (STOKER, G. 1998). This makes it necessary to entangle the different discourses around the concept of governance and to develop sound theoretical foundations to improve transnational comparative research on the governance of core-periphery relations. It is proposed to understand governance as a heterarchical, cross-sectoral, multi-level arena for decision making which works in specific, relatively stable network-type arrangements. When researching policy responses to polarisation and peripheralisation we should be cautious not to overlook the role of normative frames in formulating policies. To what kind of frameworks do actors refer to when they argue for particular forms of policy intervention? Which concrete planning instruments are used to achieve a more balanced development at regional level and what are the preconditions for successful collaboration within fragmented regions? Up to now only little is known about the conditions which allow for successful cooperation between actors from core and peripheralised areas that aim at balancing out regional disparities.

As differences in the economic structure of regions are often seen as one reason for increasing spatial polarisation, I suggest a particular research focus on the governance of economic development. Although there has been a lot of research on the problems of old industrial regions, still little is known about how urban and regional economies change and how this change can be governed in a positive way. What can we learn from governance attempts in successful new economy locations? How big (or minor) is the role of economic governance at all? Originating in institutional and evolutionary economics, the concept of path dependence has also been transferred to political sciences (PIERSON, P.

2000) and provides an important theoretical starting point for such types of research. It creates an opportunity to understand factors shaping urban and regional policy responses in old and new economy locations and to identify the actions and practices that may alter the current path and set the regions on new development trajectories (path renewal, COENEN, L. *et al.* 2015).

One attempt to explain differences in how localities and regions with very similar socio-economic challenges manage to regenerate is to analyse the role public leaders play (SOTARAUTA, M. *et al.* 2012). We know, how specific institutional environments limit the local room for manoeuvre (LANG, T. 2009). Nevertheless, we know little about to what extent charismatic leaders can promote institutional change and develop adaptive capacities (NORTH, D.C. 1990) to open up new development trajectories in localities with severe social and economic problems. The impact of leadership on these forms of change so far is clearly under-researched.

Adaptation, strategies and potentials in peripheralised non-metropolitan areas

Although often receiving only marginal attention in national development strategies, non-metropolitan, rural and peripheral areas are home to almost half of the European population, bear major spatial functions and in many cases play a decisive role in political, social and economic innovation processes (McCANN, E.J. 2004; MCCARTHY, J. 2005).

Questioning current paradigms which regard the city (and in particular the metropolis) as the major centre for social, economic and political innovation, non-metropolitan areas should also be considered as arenas within which future development perspectives arise (SHEARMUR, R. 2012). However, peripheralised places are often conceptualised as powerless and passive victims of some superordinate processes beyond their control. This position often makes us overlook the varied dimensions of agency and strategic

action linked to ‘peripheral’ actors. These forms of agency can range from social interaction reproducing existing core-periphery relations to specific forms of adaptation or even resistance to dominant representations. With a focus on adaptation, strategies and potentials, it is suggested to conduct more research on (the sometimes hidden) phenomena relying on local resources.

LACLAU’S and MOUFFE’S reworking of hegemony explores how the ‘powerless’ can propagate alternative forms of knowledge through networks and cooperation, challenging dominant representations (LACLAU, E. and MOUFFE, C. 1985). When applied to regional development, this indicates that the ‘knowledge’ within representations of place has particular effects, and that this knowledge undergoes processes of change and rearticulation. Instead of perceiving uneven power-relationships as something fixed, a more satisfactory analysis would explore the multi-dimensional aspects of power through mechanisms such as hegemony. Here, peripheries are not passive recipients of damaging ‘backward’ and ‘stagnant’ types of representation, but play an active role in the discursive process. This leads to questions about ‘peripheral’ strategies of reworking or resisting dominant representations (ERIKSSON, M. 2008) and opens up possibilities for a multi-scale conception of centrality and peripherality (SELLERS, J.M. 2002a,b; MCCANN, E.J. 2004; HUDSON, R. 2004, 2005).

Against this background, household practices as well as innovative activities from civil society and businesses in peripheralised spatial settings could be analysed regarding their potential for new forms of regional development and bottom-up social, economic and policy change. To what extent do ‘ordinary’ people organise their life under the conditions of peripheralisation? In what way do they rework, reproduce or resist dominant processes of peripheralisation? What kind of (alternative) futures do they aim for through every day practices? Key tasks could be to analyse households’ changing experiences and perceptions of socio-spatial polarisation,

and to explore how they overcome existing core-periphery disparities.

We should also link a number of alternative economic approaches to the household scale which stress locally rooted and embedded forms of economic activity. One example for such an approach discussed as a source for alternative economic development in rural areas is the renewable energies sector (biomass, wind, solar energy). Although in general there is a considerable job effect of renewable energy activities (and other ‘alternative’ and ‘new’ forms of economic activities) throughout Europe, it is quite unclear to what extent local communities can benefit from such activities. Hence, I suggest to differentiate community driven from externally driven initiatives. In so doing, we could conceptualise these activities acknowledging their direct local and social impact. Locally owned projects would guarantee that revenues stay in the region and also that key entrepreneurial aspects could be negotiated locally. Research could, thus, focus on the role of local potentials and resources and the ways policy makers aim at boosting life satisfaction, the living standard and to promote local and regional development.

For regions with severe social problems, also the social economy has often been seen as a normative solution. However, empirical research has concluded that the economic impact of social economy activities has mainly been symbolic (AMIN, A. *et al.* 2002. p. 116, 125). In particular when it comes to newer forms of social innovation and more recent attempts to re-invent the social economy, there is scope for more research on the role of social economy initiatives in non-metropolitan regions (EHRlich, K. and LANG, T. 2012). There are two main themes for future research in this respect: first, there should be a focus on the individual and collective drivers of a new generation of social enterprises working more and more independent from state benefits, and second, the role of the state should be carefully examined as supporting the social economy has also become a state strategy to compensate for its

withdrawal from public service provision in peripheralised areas.

Researching innovation in the *formal* economy in non-metropolitan regions, should start with reviewing the more recent literature on knowledge and innovation (BATHÉLT, H. and GLÜCKLER, J. 2011), on different types of knowledge transfer (e.g. BOSCHMA, R. 2005) as well as on critical network theory perspectives (GLÜCKLER, J. 2013). The inclusion in global networks of information flows and production chains as well as the various ways to generate innovations are completely under-researched when it comes to entrepreneurial activities in peripheral regions (as exceptions: VIRKKALA, S. 2007; LAGENDIJK, A. and LORENTZEN, A. 2007), but these aspects bear the potential to challenge dominant perceptions of the relation between the economy and space. This is all the more important since innovation can contribute to both an increased regional polarisation and a balance between core and peripheral regions. With a less normative perspective on the relation between innovation and space, policy makers will be better able to identify and utilise the economic potentials and opportunities of their regions and to promote change from an entrepreneurial bottom-up perspective.

Conclusions

Although the European Union has been following regional and cohesion policies for years and stressed the objective to achieve balanced spatial development and territorial cohesion with the Territorial Agenda, regional socio-spatial polarisation increased in the past years. In particular in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), there is a risk that spatial development further concentrates in a smaller number of (metropolitan) regions whereas more and more other regions might be affected by processes of peripheralisation. In this context, I believe it is timely to conduct further research on the relevant issues of regional polarisation and peripheralisation with a strong focus on CEE.

So far, regional development research has been interested either in ‘winning’ core regions, or in shrinking, declining or peripheralised rural, non-metropolitan or old industrial regions. By contrast, the proposed research agenda focuses on the relation between cores and peripheries (respectively processes of centralisation and peripheralisation), a process based conceptualisation of the issues to be researched and an understanding of peripheralised regions with agency capacities instead of being perceived as powerless victims of some overarching processes beyond control. Peripherality and centrality should be perceived as revisable characteristics and as socially, culturally or discursively constructed.

Applying the notions of polarisation and peripheralisation offers multi-dimensional, multi-scalar and process based conceptualisations of regional development research which are under-represented in European urban and regional studies. With the proposed research agenda, I would like to open up the discussion on new interpretations of the terms peripherality and centrality, rurality and urbanity, border and rural areas, core and peripheral regions, and contribute to the development of new approaches in multi-level governance and ultimately in regional policy.

While research on polarisation up to now has focused on a specific spatial level (mostly the region itself), I suggest to approach spatial relations from a multi-level perspective by looking at the interplay of local, regional, national and international contexts, structures and processes which affect socio-spatial polarisation. Thereby, I stress the need to tackle these issues in a multi-method and multi-disciplinary approach open to diverse conceptual backgrounds of all researchers in urban and regional studies following this agenda. I strongly believe that each disciplinary and methodological perspective has its contribution in this field. There is no ultimate truth which can be proven by any kind of (quantitative or qualitative) data. Hence, the proposed research agenda is meant to add to existing studies and should be seen as an

invitation to think differently about the phenomena each of us is going to research.

We do hope, the proposed research agenda will produce a more complete picture of perceptions, processes and understandings of regional polarisation and socio-spatial peripheralisation in CEE and beyond. I have highlighted so far under-researched issues of the evolution, reproduction and persistence of centrality and peripherality, issues linked to the governance of core-periphery relations and some aspects which might bear potentials for alternative forms of development and de-peripheralisation. This might also invite others to tackle research questions linked to achieving better futures for peripheralised regions and improving the information base for political decision making under the conditions of polarisation and peripheralisation as complex, multi-dimensional and multi-scalar socio-spatial phenomena.

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