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Partnership in implementation of the Structural Funds in Poland: 'shallow' adjustment or internalization of the European mode of cooperative governance?

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Abstract

The ongoing debate about the future of EU cohesion policy includes the voices of critics questioning its effectiveness, as well as those praising its contribution to regional development policy. The proponents specifically acclaim its enhancement of inter-institutional cooperation and coordination in the delivery of the regional development policy through the partnership principle. However, the legacy of centralism, lack of traditions in collaborative policy-making, and weakly institutionalized sub-national authorities in Central and Eastern Europe prompt questions about the transferability of the partnership approach to the new member states, the main recipients of cohesion funding. What is the impact of EU cohesion policy's partnership at the sub-national level? What are the mechanisms of the sub-national actors' adjustment to this EU-imposed practice and what is the scope for its institutionalization? By investigating sub-national partnership arrangements in Poland, the paper sheds light on these under-researched issues. It also offers a valuable contribution to the debates on the future of EU cohesion policy and the logic of the domestic policy actors' adjustment to externally imposed policy norms.

The paper draws on the concept of Europeanization, understood as the domestic impact of EU policies, to examine the implementation of a horizontal partnership in an unprecedented way by focusing on the strategies, preferences, and attitudes of the sub-national actors involved. It reveals that initially their adjustment to EU cohesion policy's partnership tends to be strategic and interest-driven. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that partnership can be internalized over time provided that it is in line with the actors' interests and there are specific incentives for cooperation. These findings show that strategic adjustment of domestic actors to European policy framework does not exclude socialization and internalization of the related norms and practices, as these processes can indeed be intertwined.

General note:

*Opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author
and not necessarily those of the Institute.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of post-crisis public spending cuts, EU cohesion policy, which absorbs the lion's share of EU budget, is an object of an increasingly heated debate revolving around the issues of its effectiveness and impacts. The policy attracts criticism on the grounds of its questionable contribution to bridging the development gap between the regions of the EU, excessive bureaucracy, and the fact that the new member states are its principal beneficiary at the expense of the cash-strapped net contributors to the EU budget. In response to such critiques, the proponents of EU cohesion policy advance arguments about its added value for the member states and positive spin-offs for policy practice and the domestic institutions involved in its implementation (Leonardi, 2006; Mairate, 2006).

EU cohesion policy not only offers unprecedented opportunities for boosting regional economic development in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) and decreasing the development gap with Western Europe, but also involves pressures for major changes in their domestic regional development policies and administrative structures. In fact, the prospect of gaining access to EU structural funds (SF) stimulated development of regional policies in CEECs, while the adjustment to the EU cohesion policy framework and its subsequent implementation lead to diffusion of new policy norms and practices within the territorial administration (Hibou and Bafoil, 2003; Ferry, 2007; Hughes et al., 2004; Keating, 2006; EPRC, 2009). In particular, by enforcing the partnership principle - one of the governing rules of the SF1 - EU cohesion policy has the potential (and ambition) to promote a multi-level and participative mode of governance in the member states.

The partnership principle has attracted considerable attention of scholars considering EU cohesion policy and its cooperative mode of implementation as a test bed for multi-level governance in the EU (Hooghe, 1996; Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Bache and Flinders, 2004). In fact, the principle requires close cooperation between the European Commission, the authorities at national, regional, and local levels in the member states from program formulation to its management and monitoring. Over time, the horizontal dimension of partnership was strengthened by the inclusion of a plethora of regional stakeholders as well as economic and social partners in the policy process. The EU cohesion policy's partnership principle created particularly strong pressures for institutional and policy changes in CEECs, being at odds with their long-standing traditions of centralized administration and policy implementation. As a consequence, the implementation of the SF impacted upon the center-periphery relations in the new member states, creating scope for a growing role of the regional

¹See Council Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999 of 21 June 1999, laying down general provisions on the Structural Funds, Article 8.

tier and greater bottom-up regional involvement in economic development policy (Bachtler and McMaster, 2008; Bruszt, 2008; Baun and Marek, 2008).

However, existing studies highlight numerous adjustment problems to the EU cohesion policy framework and implementation of the SF in CEECs (Baun and Marek, 2008; Kozak, 2007; Paraskvopoulos and Leonardi, 2004), predominantly as a result of limited learning and adaptation capacity of the domestic institutions involved. This casts doubts over the transferability of the partnership approach to the Central and Eastern European context. These developments also chime with the arguments advanced in the literature on Europeanization in CEECs. According to this literature, institutional legacies of the communist period and the nature of the conditionality-driven adjustment to EU requirements would preclude mechanisms of socialization with the EU-imported policy rules (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). This in turn would lead to 'shallow' Europeanization (Czernielewska et al., 2004) and creation of institutions lacking in 'substance' and in policy impact (Grabbe, 2006). Yet, some authors advanced a hypothesis that once these countries become members of the EU, the sociological mechanisms of Europeanization could become more prominent over time. Hence, after the accession domestic actors would become involved in implementation of EU policies and gain an opportunity to learn and socialize in the new EU-imposed policy environment (Goetz, 2005; Sedelmeier, 2006; Bafail and Surel, 2008). This could lead to gradual internalization of EU-imported practices, which in turn would favor effective implementation of EU policies in question.

Nevertheless, given the scarcity of studies investigating the application of partnership as part of EU cohesion programs in CEECs after their accession, it remains unclear what the depth of changes introduced in response to this new approach and the degree of its institutionalization within the regional development policy systems in these countries. In particular, there is a shortage of research on the implementation of horizontal partnership at the sub-national level. In a situation where partnership is considered by the domestic actors as an irksome duty, it may be counter-productive. By contrast, internalization of the partnership approach by the domestic actors is a precondition for effective implementation of EU cohesion policy and creation of added-value through improved transparency and efficiency of regional policy-making. What are the mechanisms for the sub-national actors' adjustment to the partnership principle? Do they comply with the partnership principle reluctantly, considering it as an EU-imposed rule being at odds with their 'ways of doing things'? Or, is the partnership principle internalized over time and becomes an integral part of the domestic approach to regional development policy?

The paper addresses the above questions by drawing on a qualitative study of the sub-national actors' strategies, preferences and attitudes towards partnership in the context of implementation of EU cohesion policy in Poland. It tests the abovementioned hypotheses of

'shallow' Europeanization and gradual shift from 'strategic' adjustment to the EU policy rules towards the internalization of these rules. The findings of this study resonate well with the argument advanced by March and Olsen (1998), which follows that both behavioral logics, the logic of consequentiality and the logic of appropriateness are complementary. As they argue, any action most likely involves elements of both strategic pursuit of one's interests and obeying the rules that the actors consider as appropriate and legitimate, even though "the relationship between the two is often subtle" (March and Olsen 1998, 952). This article presents new empirical evidence which sheds more light on this relationship.

The key finding of this study is that the logic of the Polish sub-national actors' responses to the partnership principle can shift from strategic and interest-driven adjustment towards social learning and internalization. The actors studied initially tended to get involved in partnership, either because they were obliged to do so or because it was necessary to gain access to EU funding, which often resulted in superficial change of practices. Nonetheless, the study also reveals that socialization and learning mechanisms can indeed become more prominent over time – provided that the domestic actors consider it as being in line with their preferences. Thus, involvement in partnership in many cases leads to a gradual internalization of this new mode of operation: the actors tended to express positive opinions about partnership as a 'good practice' useful for improving their 'end product' (i.e. delivering a better policy, carrying out a more impactful project) and in some cases they continued cooperating with their new partners as part of other initiatives, also beyond the Structural Funds.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The subsequent section will review the existing research on the impact of EU cohesion policy on the domestic policy actors involved in its implementation, with an emphasis on the role of the partnership principle. This will be followed by a discussion of the concept of Europeanization in studies focusing on the impact of EU cohesion policy and an explanation of the research design used in this study. The subsequent empirical section will present the evidence from research on partnership as part of the SF programs in Poland, which will be followed by concluding remarks on transferability of the partnership approach to CEECs and mechanisms of post-accession Europeanization at the sub-national level.

2. THE PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE: PROMOTING MULTI-LEVEL AND PARTICIPATORY POLICY-MAKING

Many commentators (Ferry, 2007; Hughes et al., 2004; Keating, 2006; Marek and Baun, 2008) stressed the influence of the SF on the establishment and development of regional policy in Poland and other CEECs. In addition, the SF has been credited for generating ‘operational-’ and ‘learning added-value’ (Bachtler and Taylor, 2003) by supporting improvement of administrative capacity and catalyzing processes of modernization of administration involved in their management. This is achieved through the imposition of new standards and organizational practices, echoing the New Public Management paradigm and promoting a strategic approach to developmental projects (EPRC, 2009; DG REGIO, 2010).

Yet, it is the EU cohesion policy’s partnership principle which has the most far-reaching impact on the domestic administration involved in regional policy delivery and the mode of governance. The partnership principle has been praised for improving administrative actors’ institutional capacity and creating opportunities for boosting innovation and learning across organizational boundaries (Kelleher et al., 1999). Moreover, by imposing cooperation between a variety of institutions as part of the policy process, the partnership principle has the potential for inducing an important shift in the patterns of governance, particularly in the CEECs (Bachtler and McMaster, 2008; Bruszt, 2008) and South-East Europe (Bache et al., 2011) where traditionally policy-making tends to be based on centralized decision-making, relatively isolated institutions that concentrate on their particular restrained fields of activity and a lack of openness towards the influence of non-state actors.

That said, the application of partnership varies considerably across the member states. Studies focusing on EU15 show that long-established traditions of cooperation between public and non-state actors in countries such as Ireland (Adshead, 2005) or Scotland (Danson et al., 1999) facilitate compliance with the partnership principle. By contrast, in traditionally centralized countries with hardly any experience of collaborative and inclusive policy-making, such as Greece (Getimis and Grigoriadou, 2004) or Portugal (Nanetti, 2004), partnership is undermined by the weakness of local governments dependent on the state and weak organization of non-state actors. Yet, even in those countries one can observe incremental learning of partnership working with growing experience of the actors involved (Nanetti, 1996; Kelleher et al., 1999; Getimis and Grigoriadou, 2004), which could eventually allow for overcoming of the difficulties linked with the prevailing political culture.

Similar conclusions are drawn from research focused on CEECs sharing a legacy of centralized administration, the lack of cooperative policy-making traditions, and have relatively low administrative capacity, all of which were likely to hamper the functioning of

partnership institutions (Hibou and Bafail, 2003; Marek and Baun, 2008; Czernielewska et al., 2004; Dabrowski, 2010). As a consequence, the policy actors' adjustment to EU-imposed norms that refer to inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making or transparency could remain superficial (McMaster and Bachtler, 2005). Partnership implementation could also be prone to irregularities due to incompetence, lack of trust and high levels of corruption (Grosse, 2007; Brennek, 2007). In other words, one can express doubts about the potential for the successful transfer and institutionalization of partnership to the new member states. Indeed, the partnership approach *"assumes a political commitment, capacity, and resources at [the regional level, which may not exist]"* in the Central and Eastern European context characterized by *"long-standing traditions of centralized, sectoral policy making, while the regional institutional capacity is often weak"* (Bachtler and McMaster, 2008: 402).

3. EUROPEANIZATION AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF EU COHESION POLICY

The impact of EU cohesion policy on domestic regional policy and institutions is often analyzed using the concept of Europeanization (Hughes et al., 2004; Ferry, 2007; Mendez et al., 2008; Bache et al., 2011). The term is most often understood as the influence of European-level public policies on the domestic policies, institutions and politics of the member states, the outcome of which depends on the way the European policy framework is institutionalized and interpreted according to embedded domestic institutional arrangements and the actors' preferences (for a review see Graziano and Vink 2007, Sedelmeier 2011). In the context of CEECs, Europeanization can also be considered as a positive external shock for the established domestic structures, triggering administrative restructuring and construction of institutional capacities, both at national and sub-national levels of government (Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi, 2004). The concept of Europeanization draws heavily on the insights of the new institutionalism, particularly its sociological and rational-choice variants (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Thus, one can distinguish between rationalist mechanisms of Europeanization and sociological mechanisms of Europeanization (see e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2003). In the case of the former, EU policies change the domestic opportunity structures, and the domestic actors' responses to EU policies are based on cost/benefit calculations or are driven by constraint. This corresponds to the logic of consequentiality, whereby actors change their behavior strategically in a new policy context. By contrast, through sociological mechanisms of Europeanization - reflecting the logic of appropriateness - EU policy rules affect the domestic actors' preferences and are internalized through processes of social learning.

It can be argued, however, that EU cohesion policy affects domestic policy actors through a combination of different mechanisms (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002; Radaelli, 2003). It imposes a specific policy framework on the member states' managing authorities, who distribute the SF, involving Europeanization by compliance with EU-imposed rules. Moreover, the SF reflects the 'carrot and stick' logic, which involves offering rewards for compliance with their rules. Thus, the availability of the SF creates a new opportunity structure by providing a novel source of funding for public (e.g. local authorities) and private actors of regional policy (NGOs, firms) who *may* choose to apply for it, which in turn would oblige them to comply with the SF-related norms imposed as part of the funding eligibility criteria. Lastly, EU cohesion policy has a normative dimension and explicitly aims at transforming the domestic patterns of governance via the partnership approach, which can alter the domestic policy actors' beliefs and preferences.

While the issue of pre-accession Europeanization in CEECs has been thoroughly explained (Hughes et al., 2004; Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005) – highlighting the role of rational choice mechanisms of adjustment to external incentives – there are few studies exploring the patterns of Europeanization after accession. The existing studies revealed problems with application and internalization of EU rules imposed on them as part of the pre-accession conditionality due to the limited effectiveness of institutional arrangements hastily put in place in response to Brussels' requirements (Goetz, 2005; Bugarcic, 2006; Pridham, 2008; Falkner and Treib, 2008). Consequently, the conditionality-based 'hard' transfer of EU rules was driven mainly by rationalist mechanisms of Europeanization and did not leave much room for institutionalization of these rules by the involved policy actors (Grabbe, 2006; Sedelmeier, 2006; Börzel, 2006). This could result in producing new institutions that are not be 'filled with substance' (Bugarcic, 2006). Concerning specifically EU cohesion policy, the limited learning capacity of the domestic policy actors, combined with the legacy of centralized and inflexible administration, was expected to result in 'shallow' Europeanization (Czernielewska et al., 2004) or superficial change 'on the margins' (Bruszt, 2008). However, some authors hypothesized that sociological mechanisms of Europeanization involving social learning, which were marginal in the pre-accession period, might come to the fore once the CEECs join the EU and their policy actors become actively involved in the implementation of EU policies (Goetz, 2005; Sedelmeier, 2006; Bafoil and Surel, 2008). This could favor internalization of EU policy norms, standards and 'ways of doing things' and hence improve the effectiveness of implementation of EU policies in the new member states.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper aims to test the above hypothesis through a qualitative investigation of the impact of the EU cohesion policy and its partnership principle in Poland. Unlike most studies on the domestic impact of EU cohesion policy, it focuses on the sub-national level of administration and the point of view of the regional and local actors' involved in SF programs. In this research, EU cohesion policy framework and its partnership principle are considered as an independent variable, while the changes in the patterns of sub-national governance and in development policy practice are considered dependent variables. The study seeks evidence of adjustment to the EU cohesion policy's partnership approach and aims to determine the mechanisms and depth of these changes. It also endeavors to identify the key intervening variables that affect these processes.

As Bache argued, *"understanding the type of learning that has taken place is the key to understanding whether Europeanization has been transformative or not"* (2008, p. 18) In order to operationalize the mechanisms and depth of adjustment to EU cohesion policy framework, one should distinguish between 'thin' and 'thick' learning (see Radaelli, 2003, p. 52). The former corresponds to a strategic reorientation of policy practices driven by constraint or interest, without changing their core features in order to accommodate EU-imposed policy rules ('shallow' change). By contrast, 'thick' learning involves internalization of EU-imposed practices, whereby these practices are considered as appropriate and become part of the actors' mode of operation. This results in transformation of pre-existing 'ways of doing things' and a change in the actors' preferences regarding a given policy ('deep' change).

The study used three test variables to distinguish between rational choice and sociological mechanisms of Europeanization. First, the research investigated the actors' motivation for adopting the partnership approach. Hence, adoption of partnership driven by the desire to acquire EU funds and/or obligation was considered as an indicator of strategic adjustment. By contrast, adoption of partnership corresponding to the actors' desire to improve their policy practice and its outcomes was considered as an indicator of internalization of this EU-imposed practice. Second, the actors' perceptions of the usefulness and appropriateness of the partnership approach were considered as another indicator of sociological mechanisms of change and internalization of this new practice. Third, a further indicator of internalization of EU policy practices was their voluntary use outside of the SF programs or a given EU-funded project. Thus, the study sought evidence of spin-offs of the partnership approach, such as continuing cooperation of partners after the completion of a joint EU-funded project or use of the partnership approach in domestic policies and initiatives.

The research was conducted in two contrasted regions of Poland, the main beneficiary of EU cohesion policy. Poland is also an interesting case study because of its relatively high degree of

decentralization of territorial administration, which implies a more important role played by the regional authorities in management of the SF. The regions studied were Lower Silesia in the South-Western, more economically developed part of the country, and Lubelskie, Poland's poorest region located in the East. The investigation was predominantly based on 72 semi-structured interviews conducted within the institutions distributing the SF at the regional-level, local authorities, and NGOs benefiting from EU funding as well as with officials from the Ministry of Regional Development and independent experts. In order to cross-check the findings from interviews, additional data was gathered from secondary sources, such as evaluation reports, strategic documents and press articles.

Before proceeding with the empirical section, it is worth clarifying that the study focused on the 2004-2006 and the 2007-2013 programming periods. In the first period, the SF were implemented as part of six centrally managed sectoral OPs as well as the Integrated Regional Operating Program (IROP), the biggest program in budget terms. The IROP was managed centrally by the Ministry of Regional Development (MRD), but with participation of the Marshal Offices (MOs), which are elected regional authorities, and Voivod Offices (VOs) representing the central government in regions. In the subsequent programming period, a partial regionalization of SF management took place. Thus, the MOs took the responsibility for preparation and management of the Regional Operating Programs (ROPs), which correspond to roughly a quarter of the funding allocated to Poland for 2007-2013.

5. PARTNERSHIP AS PART OF THE STRUCTURAL FUNDS PROGRAMS IN LOWER SILESIA AND LUBELSKIE REGIONS

This section presents the empirical evidence on the impact of partnership in Lower Silesia and Lubelskie regions. First, it looks into the functioning of regional-level horizontal partnership in the management of the IROP and the inclusion of regional stakeholders in formulation of ROPs. Second, it discusses the evidence concerning partnerships as part of EU-funded developmental projects at the local level.

5.1. Horizontal partnership: a mixed picture

5.1.1. Stimulating new forms of cooperation between the regional actors

Ensuring horizontal partnership in implementation of the SF at the regional level involved the establishment of the Regional Steering Committees (RSCs) and the Monitoring Committees (MCs) for the regional component of the IROP. Both institutions comprised representatives of the central government, regional and local authorities, as well as various non-state actors.

The RSCs were involved in project appraisal; its members assessed and voted on recommendations for eventual changes in the ranking list of projects to receive funding established by the Panel of Experts.² The list of projects was initially approved by vote by the RSC, and was then reassessed by the Board of Voivodship (regional executive), which made the final decision on the choice of projects. The role of the RSCs was to make sure that the selected projects responded to the regions' developmental needs and conformed to the priorities of the regional development strategy. These Committees, albeit negatively assessed by many interviewees for having limited powers and being affected by politicization, offered some limited opportunities for the regional stakeholders to exert an influence on decision-making regarding implementation of regional development policy and distribution of European funds.³

The MCs were involved in the supervision of progress in achieving the IROP's aims and the absorption of the allocated funds. They could also recommend changes in the procedures for the implementation of the program.⁴ Despite some hurdles stemming from lack of preparation of its members, the MCs created an additional channel for participation of regional stakeholders in policy implementation and the assessment of their functioning was

² See IROP, p. 494.

³ See also DWORAKOWSKA et al., 2006:55-56.

⁴ See IROP, p. 506.

more positive than that of the RSCs; 63 percent of officials interviewed expressed positive opinions about their effectiveness (EGO S.C., 2010, pp. 76-77).

The imposition of the partnership principle as part of the SF framework also contributed to the increase in public consultations. The consultations of OPs for the 2004-2006 period were rather limited, particularly at the regional level, and consisted mainly of organizing information meetings for prospective beneficiaries. By contrast, the formulation of ROPs for 2007-2013 period involved wide-spread consultations offering genuine opportunities for influencing the shape of the programs.

Finally, in an indirect manner, the SF spurred new interactions between the regional policy stakeholders. Participation in the emerging SF-oriented associations of local officials and in a variety of SF-related training courses and conferences created new opportunities to foster informal links and networks. These emerging networks were appreciated by the local authorities, who perceived them as useful forums for the dissemination of knowledge on the SF and 'good practice':

“When there is a training session, there may be 150 Mayors in the room [...] there are opportunities to talk, exchange information, informal advice, hints. This is very important.”⁵

5.1.2. Horizontal cooperation: necessary evil or useful practice?

As an interviewee argued, partnership is “*something very exotic in the Polish context*”⁶ and can be perceived as an unnecessary hassle. However, it is also Brussels' requirement with which the institutions involved in administration of the SF programs must comply. This substantiates the argument that CEECs may not offer a favorable environment for partnership due to their long-standing traditions of centralized policy-making and weak institutional capacity of regional stakeholders.

The Polish regional authorities reluctantly complied with the ministerial requirement to include the RSCs in the decision-making process, considering them as an obstacle for swift absorption of the allocated funds. Hence, the MOs welcomed the government's decision to abandon the RSCs in the 2007-2013 programming period and to restrict the realization of the partnership principle to the MCs participating in establishment of the eligibility criteria for projects and monitoring of the ROPs.

From the point of view of the members of the RSCs and MCs, in most cases, their participation in these partnership bodies was interest-driven. The representatives of local

⁵ Interview: local official (Lubelskie).

⁶ Interview: expert (Lower Silesia).

authorities were motivated mainly by the prospects of potentially influencing decision-making, lobbying in favor of their own projects, or obtaining valuable “*first-hand information*”⁷ on how the projects were selected, helpful in obtaining grants. Some interviewees claimed that participation in the RSC or the MC was also a source of prestige, while only few of them argued that they were motivated by the desire to represent the interests of a wider group of their peers and exert social control on the distribution of EU funds.

Regarding partnership in the formulation of ROPs, the interviewed representatives of MO affirmed that the EU-imposed consultations were a helpful means of gathering information and enhancing the connection between the region’s needs and the priorities outlined in the program. Thus, while partnership via the RSCs was perceived as a hassle, this aspect of partnership was seen as worthwhile and useful:

*“We perceive the consultations as a means to improve our end product [...] We think that this is a very good practice.”*⁸

Likewise, the majority of beneficiaries of the SF interviewed expressed positive opinions about the consultations of the ROPs, praising their inclusiveness and their positive impact in on promoting cooperative governance involving the regional stakeholders through various channels. Firstly, consultations of ROPs involved numerous meetings and conferences gathering sub-national officials and non-state actors. Secondly, the MOs collected informal input from various regional policy stakeholders and expert working groups comprising economic and social partners or academics. Finally, the ROPs were consulted *via* online forums, where virtually any actor could submit suggestions and remarks regarding the program and the related guidelines for beneficiaries.

One of the examples of influence exerted by local authorities was the introduction of revitalization of urban areas as one of the areas eligible for funding by the Lower Silesian ROP. Moreover, the consultations stimulated mobilization and cooperation by local actors. For example, unofficial consultation groups were organized by and between various stakeholders in Wałbrzych sub-region of Lower Silesia in order to foster common views and formulate recommendations regarding the ROP.

Moreover, interaction and discussion among the regional policy actors during these consultations favored fostering relationships based on trust which were conducive to the exchange of knowledge and mutual understanding. This indicates that the partnership in program formulation involved dynamics of social learning.

⁷ Interview: local official (Lower Silesia).

⁸ Interview: official at Marshal Office (Lubelskie).

In short, the investigation of the actors' responses to the horizontal partnership principle in the case study regions revealed an ambivalent picture. Formalized partnership in the RSCs was not internalized because it was at odds with the priority of swift implementation, suffered from irregularities, and its role in decision-making was very limited. This fuelled the dissatisfaction of the actors involved. Nevertheless, while the RSCs were far from being a 'success story,' the findings on the inclusion of regional stakeholders in the formulation of the ROPs for the 2007-2013 period showed that the partnership principle could be successfully implemented in the Polish context. This form of partnership was internalized by the regional authorities and became an integral part of their approach to policy-making, because it was perceived as a useful practice. Moreover, unlike the RSCs, it was not conflicting with their priorities and interests. Partnership in program formulation was also internalized by the regional stakeholders. They perceived it as a beneficial practice offering ample possibilities for participation and, notably, making it possible to successfully influence the contents of the program 'from below.' However, the study found little evidence of a spill-over of partnership in policy formulation, apart from the increasing use of public consultations organized by the local authorities preparing their local development strategies. Nevertheless, "*these are still more 'consultations' rather than 'partnership' (joint decision-making)*" (EPRC, 2009, p. 64).

5.2. Project-level partnerships: from reluctance to durable cooperation?

5.2.1. Encouraging partnership-based projects

The availability of structural funding after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 also prompted new forms of cooperation between local actors as part of the EU-funded projects. Inter-institutional partnerships were specified as potential beneficiaries of funding as part of the IROP.⁹ Depending on the priority of the IROP, this could occur in the form of alliances between local authorities (e.g. infrastructural projects) or inter-sectoral partnerships that bring together public authorities, NGOs and/or firms (e.g. human resources development projects). In the case of the IROP and other OPs, partnership was not mandatory but merely mentioned as a possibility. That said, it was encouraged for projects that benefit from the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of Priority 2 of the IROP, and in some cases it was a precondition for receiving funding (e.g. in LEADER+ initiative). By contrast, partnership-based projects were encouraged more explicitly in ROPs for 2007-2013 period.

⁹ The eligible actors and eligibility criteria for each of the IROP's priorities are specified in an additional regulatory document entitled *Uzupełnienie Zintegrowanego Programu Operacyjnego Rozwoju Regionalnego 2004-2006* available from: http://www.zporr.gov.pl/NR/rdonlyres/9660670F-0909-43CC-9AF9-B18757470C31/37191/ZPORR_uzupelnienie_03092007.pdf [Accessed October 2010]

5.2.2. *The logic of adoption of the partnership approach to developmental projects*

During the 2004-2006 period, partnership-based projects involving several Communes were rather unpopular. Frequently, the local authorities lacked any experience in inter-institutional cooperation and did not see any purpose to getting involved in joint projects. Such projects are time-consuming and require increased efforts.¹⁰ Additionally, there were few incentives for partnerships in the project selection criteria for the IROP.

Moreover, the popularity of partnership projects was further undermined by competition for structural funding between the local authorities and lack of trust in other actors. This quote summarizes this situation well:

“There are hardly any partnership-based projects [...] There are a lot of small projects spread around the region and they are not interconnected. [...] Most often one Commune builds two kilometers of a road here, another one 3 kilometers there [...] That is because people just did not understand the idea of partnership. Everyone preferred investing in their own backyard to make the inhabitants happy and boost the popularity of the local government.”¹¹

In many cases, the decision to implement a project in partnership was made because partnership was required in a given scheme. Moreover, many of the partnership projects were somewhat ‘artificial’ since their only *raison d’être* was to obtain EU money. Such initiatives tended to fall apart as soon as the project terminated. Thus, given that in these cases introduction of partnership was motivated by external incentives – either by constraint or prospective financial gains – the emerging partnerships were often ‘institutions without substance’ (Bugaric, 2006).

Nevertheless, the situation changed in the 2007-2013 period with the introduction of both explicit and implicit incentives for partnership-based projects to the ROPs.¹² Thus, additional points are attributed to cooperative projects and the threshold in terms of the projects’ impact on the region’s development is higher. This favors projects of greater value that cover a wider

¹⁰Due to an overall emphasis on bureaucratic procedures and control (see EPRC, 2010; Dabrowski, 2010) these kind of projects required producing a substantial amount of additional documentation for each of the partners.

¹¹ Interview: Marshal Office (Lubelskie).

¹²For instance, the Lower Silesian ROP highlights the opportunities for the region’s development stemming from partnership-based projects bringing together local authorities and NGOs (p. 47). Moreover, inter-institutional partnership is part of the eligibility criteria for funding in priority 6.5 concerning infrastructure for tourism and culture, while in priorities 2 (information society) and 3 (transport) above-local impact is stated as a requirement, which creates incentives for pooling resources in bigger joint projects. Sources: http://dolnyslask.pl/upload/RPO/07_komitet_monitorujacy/posiedzenia/100909_kryteria_czysta.pdf http://dolnyslask.pl/upload/RPO/03_dokumenty_i_wytyczne/iz/rop_21_08_2007_en.pdf [Accessed October 2010].

territory and puts small-scale projects and individual projects at a disadvantage. While a number of local authorities still prefer to apply for EU funds on an individual basis, these changes encouraged many of them to prepare partnership projects as part of inter-communal consortiums in order to boost their chances for obtaining a grant.

Interestingly, the fact that the local authorities were encouraged to cooperate by prospective gain does not exclude processes of learning and gradual internalization of a cooperative approach to investment projects. There is evidence of learning and a growing awareness that partnership solve problems that could not be solved by an individual actor. The local authorities' *"approach to partnership is very pragmatic"* and they become involved in such projects when they *"can clearly see tangible economic benefits of such cooperation."*¹³ That said, for some local authorities involved in joint projects, the *"partnership logic already becomes a natural way of operating,"*¹⁴ which is evidence of gradual internalization of this practice despite the initially interest-driven cooperation.

In some cases, inter-communal cooperation can outlive the project's intended purpose. Even though partnership can initially be motivated by the increased likelihood of obtaining funding (rational choice mechanism), the actors involved learn how to cooperate with each other, discover and appreciate the gains of collaboration, and build a more durable relationship, serving as *"a platform for a more long-term cooperation"*¹⁵ (sociological mechanism). Such partnership experience can also involve mutual learning and exchange of know-how, which *"can encourage cooperation in other fields, not only with a given project."*¹⁶ Such continuing cooperation and use of the partnership approach beyond the implementation of EU-funded projects (e.g. in own developmental projects or inter-communal cooperation initiatives) demonstrates the possibility of internalizing partnership in Polish regions. Most importantly, perhaps, several interviewees argued that participation in successful partnerships fostered relationships based on trust, a major catalyst for further cooperation. This, in turn, indicates that partnership promoted as part of the SF framework can create conditions favorable to the building of social capital.

5.3. Factors limiting the scope for diffusion of the partnership approach

The study also reveals that the positive impact of the partnership principle on the Polish regional actors was limited by a set of domestic intervening variables corresponding to the embedded features of the Polish political and administrative culture. In other words, there are

¹³ Interview: official at Voivod Office (Lubelskie).

¹⁴ Interview: local official (Lower Silesia).

¹⁵ Interview: local official (Lubelskie).

¹⁶ Interview: employee of Regional Development Agency (Lower Silesia), similar opinions were expressed by employees of the Lower Silesian Marshal Office.

still important barriers to wider diffusion and internalization of the partnership approach, which should be tackled by the policy-makers.

5.3.1. Politicization and clientelism

To begin with, the process of selecting projects to receive European funding remained affected by politicization and clientelism, hampering the functioning of partnership in implementation of the IROP. For example, in Lower Silesia in 2004 the newly appointed Board of Voivodship fired 8 out of 26 members of the RSC associated with the opposition, including representatives of local governments and NGOs (Majewska, 2004a). They were replaced by local leaders and representatives of organizations linked with the parties represented in the regional executive (Kokot, 2004).

Furthermore, there were examples of blunt instrumental use of the SF by the regional authorities for satisfying the regional political clientele. For instance, decisions on distribution of grants taken by the Board of Voivodship often ignored the opinion of the RSC and were based on political criteria, as illustrated by developments in Lubelskie. This defied the purpose of horizontal partnership, which is supposed to ensure transparent and unbiased distribution of the SF in the regions. As a result, the members of Lubelskie's RSC "*understood that the Committee had no influence on the distribution of funds,*"¹⁷ which led to disillusionment as well as problems with ensuring a quorum. Likewise, the Lower Silesian Board of Voivodship made attempts to secretly influence the Panel of Experts, a body responsible for assessment of projects prior to voting in the RSC. The vice-Marshal arranged a meeting between the members of the panel and a regional politician, who was able to successfully lobby in favor of a bid for funding submitted by his company. Following the disclosure of these events in the media (Majewska, 2004b; Kokot, 2005) the vice-Marshal was forced to quit the RSC; nevertheless, the project in question still received the funding.

Finally, the RSCs of both regions were themselves affected by favoritism and could serve as an arena for lobbying for one's projects. As an interviewee suggested, projects of Communes represented in the RSC were more likely to obtain funding than those of other Communes which "*lacked the capacity to be heard by the decision-makers.*"¹⁸

In sum, due to the influence of politics and clientelistic networks, the RSCs were an example of institutions created as a result of adjustment to EU policy rules which formally complied with the partnership principle, in practice, their role was limited and their functioning remained rather awkward.

¹⁷ Interview: local official (Lubelskie).

¹⁸ Interview: official at Voivod Office (Lower Silesia).

5.3.2. Mistrust and reluctance to cooperate with potential competitors

Pervasive reluctance to cooperate, resulting from mistrust and competition for scarce EU funding, was another factor undermining the diffusion of partnership among the regional actors, as illustrated by this comment:

“We still think that if one is to cooperate with someone then this person will do something funny, so one prefers to do things on one’s own.”¹⁹

Such attitudes reflect the statistical data on the level of trust and perceptions of corruption in Poland. For instance, a study conducted by Czapiński and Panek (2007) showed that in 2007 only 11.5 percent of Poles think that ‘most people can be trusted.’ In addition, 89 percent of Poles surveyed by CBOS (2009) declared that corruption was a big or a very big problem in Poland, while Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer²⁰ indicated that in 2009 Poles perceived the public administration as the sector most affected by corruption.

Another barrier to diffusion of partnership-based developmental projects is competition for European grants, exacerbated by the predominant perception among the beneficiaries that the SF is mainly a new attractive source of funding for basic infrastructural needs. In such a context, partnerships are difficult, because, as one interviewee pointed out, *“doing a project in partnership means less money for me.”²¹* Consequently, most beneficiaries preferred to implement projects on their own to avoid sharing the acquired funds with partners. As argued above, however, the introduction of clear incentives for bigger inter-communal projects into the OPs during the 2007-2013 period encouraged many of the local authorities to cooperate instead of compete with one another.

Similarly, competition for the SF among the local authorities also negatively affected interaction and collaboration between each other in order to exchange know-how or to agree on common positions in order to exert a greater influence on the process of consultations of the ROPs. Such cooperation tended to wane when new calls for projects were published and the Communes started competing with each other. Thus, the spirit of partnership could suddenly be replaced with the spirit of (often ruthless) competition precluding cooperation.

¹⁹ Interview: NGO (Lower Silesia).

²⁰ http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/gcb/2009 [Accessed October 2010].

²¹ Interview: expert (Lower Silesia).

5.3.3. Patchy participation in Structural Funds programs limiting the exposure to partnership

Last but not least, roughly 22 percent of Polish local authorities did not acquire any EU funding in the 2004-2006 period (MRD, 2008) due to their lack of capacity or desire to participate in SF programs. Such local authorities were hardly exposed to the influence of the SF framework and the practices it promoted. They were also generally less interested in participating in events and activities linked with the SF, such as the consultations of the ROPs, which allowed for voicing one's interests and served as a platform for engaging in new forms of inter-institutional cooperation. In fact, their mayors tended to assume that they would not be able to become beneficiaries of these programs. The evidence yielded by the interviews suggests that this inability or unwillingness to use the European funds by certain local authorities can be a matter of insufficient local funds to provide match-funding, insufficient administrative capacity to cope with preparation of a bid for funding, and/or a passive and risk-averse attitude of the mayor precluding efforts to apply for grants.

6. FROM 'SHALLOW' ADJUSTMENT TOWARDS GRADUAL INTERNALIZATION OF THE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH IN THE NEW MEMBER STATES?

This paper investigates the Polish sub-national actors' responses to the partnership approach promoted by the EU cohesion policy. By doing so, it examined the extent to which such a cooperative mode of policy implementation was transferrable to CEECs, and provided new empirical evidence on the mechanisms of post-accession Europeanization, and the logic of the domestic actors' adjustment to the partnership principle.

The study reveals that the imposition of the SF framework based on partnership prompted important changes in the mode of governance imposing increased interaction and cooperation between the policy actors at different levels of administration, from central to local. In conformity with the partnership principle, formal partnership-based institutions were put in place to allow for participation of regional policy stakeholders in project appraisal and program monitoring. In addition, widespread public consultations of the ROPs were organized to gather feedback from a variety of interested parties on the programs' priorities and procedures. Moreover, despite an initial reluctance, the SF encouraged the local authorities to pool their resources and skills to conceive joint developmental projects.

These results show that partnership can work in the Polish context, albeit with some caveats. On one hand, the study pointed to 'formal' and 'shallow' compliance with the partnership requirement in implementation of the SF, as in the case of partnership committees participating in project appraisal (RSCs). On the other hand, in other areas, as for example in program formulation, partnership was keenly adopted, which suggests that this new practice can be successfully transferred to the Polish policy arena, providing that the actors involved consider it in line with their interests and preferences. The same can be said about partnership in developmental projects among local authorities, which becomes increasingly popular as officials realize its potential to generate synergies and, more importantly perhaps, to increase the chances of obtaining funding.

This points to the importance of efforts in improving awareness of the purpose and potential benefits of partnership as well as the clear incentives for cooperation in joint projects, in order to facilitate institutionalization of this approach in the new EU member states. The evidence suggests that the 'carrot and stick' approach characterizing the SF framework can be effective in promoting the partnership approach thanks to the learning dynamics that it stimulates. Thus, in countries lacking institutional capacity and traditions of cooperation, implementation of partnership-based regional development policy measures may not immediately produce the same results as in the Western European countries. However, as the

findings from Lower Silesia and Lubelskie attest, such initiatives can still be effective as they create incentives for cooperation and favor building inter-institutional relations based on trust. In other words, in countries such as Poland, partnership-based policy may lack the social capital to draw upon, implying the possibility of initial difficulties in its implementation, but over time it can create conditions conducive to its development. These findings echo studies focusing on countries such as Greece or Portugal, suggesting that in places lacking cooperative political culture, working in partnerships can only develop incrementally and build upon growing experience of the policy actors involved (Kelleher et al., 1999; Getimis and Gridoriadou, 2004).

What do the findings presented in this article tell about post-accession Europeanization in CEECs? The study shows that the patterns of Europeanization are complex and may involve a mixture of rationalist and sociological mechanisms of adoption of EU policy rules. Thus, it provided new evidence on the interplay between the logic of consequentiality and the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1998) that guide the policy actors' adjustment to externally imposed policy frameworks. Thus, working in partnerships initially tended to be adopted as a result of top-down constraints or in response to the opportunities that it created, corresponding to a rational-choice adjustment. For example, the regional authorities had to comply with the requirement imposed by the government to establish RSCs and thus share decision-making powers regarding distribution of the SF with regional stakeholders. Likewise, the new opportunities for acquiring European grants for developmental projects spurred new forms of cooperation between the local authorities preparing partnership-based bids for funding. These developments resonate with the model of Europeanization by external incentives (see Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005), whereby adoption of EU policy rules by the domestic actors is driven by constraints imposed as part of the policy framework and/or prospective rewards for adoption of these rules.

The argument that adoption of EU rules by CEEC policy actors driven by constrain or interest remains superficial was partly confirmed by the findings from this study. When partnership was against the actors' interests or preferences, they reluctantly complied with it, often implying purely 'formal' and 'shallow' adjustment. This type of adjustment was illustrated by the awkward functioning of the RSCs, considered to be *façade* institutions imposed from above, hindering swift disbursement of the SF. Similarly, some beneficiaries of the European funds considered partnership as part of EU-funded projects to be a 'necessary evil,' which one must accept in order to benefit from grants.

As evidenced by the study, however, such rational-choice driven adoption of working in partnerships did not preclude gradual internalization of this new approach over time, showing that the logics of consequentiality and appropriateness can coexist and intertwine. Accordingly, horizontal and sociological mechanisms of Europeanization were gradually

becoming more prominent in cases where partnership was in line with the interests of the actors concerned and was perceived by them as beneficial and useful. For instance, inclusion of regional stakeholders in project appraisal hampered the regional authorities' objective of rapid and effective absorption of funds. As a consequence, the RSCs were abandoned after the initial programming period. By contrast, the horizontal partnership formula was internalized and perceived as appropriate when it came to program formulation, because it matched the interests of the regional authorities, who were keen to take advantage of their suggestions to improve the program's priorities and implementation procedures. In a similar fashion, internalization of inter-communal partnership as part of joint EU-funded projects was possible only after local officials realized, either through their own experience or by learning from the experiences of their peers, that such cooperation could help them gain access to the SF and implement developmental projects with a wider impact. While, in cases where local authorities did not see any tangible benefits to cooperation, they tended to steer clear of any form of partnership.

Furthermore, the SF had other, rather indirect, influences on the patterns of interaction between the local authorities. As a spin-off of their involvement in SF programs, they started cooperating within the emerging inter-communal associations and informal forums, helping them to pursue their joint interests within the regional arena and to acquire knowledge and 'good practice' used in managing EU-funded projects. This, in turn, is an example of horizontal dynamics of Europeanization inducing change without explicit adaptation pressure from above.

Lastly, the findings presented in this paper show that the outcome of Europeanization may be multi-faceted, particularly in the case of policies such as EU cohesion policy affecting a variety of actors by different mechanisms, including imposition of a framework for implementation of the SF, provision of financial incentives, and normative influence. The actors involved in the policy process respond differently to the norms and practices promoted by EU cohesion policy, with some of them complying only superficially with them, while others internalize their logic. The 'depth' of their adjustment to the EU-imposed policy rules varies depending on their preferences and interests. It also depends on their capacity to participate in the SF programs, which is in turn determined by their financial and administrative capacity, as well as their attitudes. Moreover, their responses to EU-imposed policy norms may change over time. As a consequence, the impact of the partnership principle, and more widely the EU cohesion policy and the norms it promotes, remains uneven and differentiated across the affected sub-national policy actors.²²

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