

THE IMPACT OF EU COHESION POLICY ON THE POLISH SUB-NATIONAL ACTORS: SHALLOW OR DEEP CHANGE?

MARCIN DĄBROWSKI

Institute for European Integration Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences

Email: marcin.dabrowski@oeaw.ac.at

Paper presented at the Regional Studies Association Annual International Conference in Newcastle, UK, 18-20 April 2011

ABSTRACT

This study draws on the concept of Europeanisation, understood as the domestic impact of EU policies, to investigate the influence of EU cohesion on the sub-national policy actors in Poland. The implementation of the Structural Funds (SF) in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) is credited for diffusion of norms and practices improving the capacity of the administrative actors involved and triggering changes in the patterns of governance. However, research to date showed that the adjustment to EU cohesion policy norms in CEECs was hampered by difficulties stemming from insufficient administrative capacity of the institutions involved and institutional legacies.

In fact, one could expect that the pre-accession mode of EU policy rules transfer based on conditionality and external incentives for adjustment (rational-choice mechanism of change) would lead to hasty and superficial adjustment in the New Member States. This would result in 'formal' compliance with EU cohesion policy without fundamentally changing the pre-existing 'ways of doing things,' which in turn would be an obstacle for effective implementation of this policy. That said, one could also hypothesize that over time, once these countries become full members of the EU, sociological mechanisms of Europeanisation might come to the fore and favor internalization of EU policy rules through processes of social learning. There is a shortage of empirical studies investigating the mechanisms of post-accession adjustment to EU cohesion policy in CEECs, particularly at the regional and local levels. This study aims at bridging this research gap and testing the above hypotheses.

Drawing on the empirical evidence from Poland - focusing on the influence of EU cohesion policy in the areas of administrative capacity, strategic planning, and governance - the paper shows that adjustment to the EU cohesion policy norms initially tends to be stimulated by cost/benefit calculation or constraint, which may involve 'shallow' adjustment. However, the study also reveals that over time, provided that EU-imported norms are in line with the actors' preferences, socialization and learning mechanisms become more prominent. Moreover, the paper demonstrates that the sub-national impact of EU cohesion policy remains uneven and differentiated depending on the actors' preferences, attitudes and capacity.

1. INTRODUCTION

EU cohesion policy is one of the most important and lively debated European policies. This reflects the key role it plays in achieving the strategic aims of the EU, its prominent position in the EU budget and the controversies concerning its effectiveness. It is also a particularly interesting policy area for investigating the mechanisms of Europeanization. EU cohesion policy is a unique case because of its potential (and ambition) to stimulate institutional changes within the Member States through a combination of various means. These include imposition of a framework for policy implementation with which the actors involved in its management must comply, financial incentives for its beneficiaries to adopt its rules and even framing of the domestic actors' beliefs, e.g. through provision of training courses or pre-accession twinning exercise.

The implementation of the Structural Funds (SF) in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) is credited with the diffusion of norms and practices that improve the capacity of the administrative actors involved, such as multi-annual strategic planning or elements of New Public Management (EPRC 2009) and triggering changes in the patterns of governance (Bachtler and McMaster 2008, Bruszt 2008, Baun and Marek 2008). However, the adjustment to EU cohesion policy norms in CEECs was hampered by difficulties stemming from insufficient administrative capacity of the institutions involved and institutional legacies (e.g. EPRC 2009, Dąbrowski 2010). One could expect that the pre-accession mode of EU policy rules transfer based on conditionality (Grabbe 2001, Grabbe 2006, Hughes *et al.* 2004) and external incentives for adjustment involving rationalist mechanisms of Europeanization (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004) leads to hasty and superficial adjustment in the New Member States. This would result in the creation of institutions 'without substance' (Czernielewska *et al.* 2004, Bugaric 2006) that is 'formal' compliance with the EU policies' frameworks without fundamentally changing the pre-existing 'ways of doing things,' which in turn would limit the effectiveness of the policies in question. That said, one could also hypothesize that over time, once these countries have become full members of the EU, sociological mechanisms of Europeanization might come to the fore and favor internalization of EU policy rules through processes of social learning (Goetz 2005, Sedelmeier 2006, Bafail and Sural 2008).

There is a shortage of empirical studies investigating the mechanisms of post-accession Europeanization in CEECs that are attempting to solve these puzzles. Drawing on the findings from a qualitative study of the impact of EU cohesion policy on two Polish regions, this paper aims to test the abovementioned hypotheses of 'shallow' Europeanization in the New Member States and; the potential shift from rational-choice mechanisms of Europeanization towards sociological mechanisms creating the possibility for internalization of EU policy rules. Unlike most studies, it focuses on the sub-national level and investigates the policy actors' strategies, perceptions and attitudes in order to shed light on the mechanisms of adoption and diffusion of EU-imported norms and practices.

The study offers a fresh and nuanced perspective on the mechanisms of Europeanization and offers new insights on the impact of EU policies at the sub-national level. Its key finding is that the adjustment to the norms and practices imposed by EU cohesion policy, at first, tends to be stimulated by necessity or rationalist calculation, often resulting in superficial changes. However, socialization and learning mechanisms can become more prominent over time under the condition that the EU-imported norms are in line with the actors' preferences. Furthermore, the study adds to the literature on Europeanization by demonstrating that the 'depth' of the impact of EU cohesion policy

remains uneven and differentiated across the participating sub-national actors depending on their preferences, attitudes and institutional capabilities.

The paper is organized as follows. The subsequent section will review the literature on Europeanization in the context of EU cohesion policy implementation and present the research design for this study. This will be followed by discussion of empirical evidence on the impact of the SF on the Polish sub-national actors. It will investigate the logic of their adjustment to EU cohesion policy rules in three areas: organizational practices within the institutions participating in management of the SF, multi-annual strategic planning, and vertical and horizontal inter-institutional cooperation. The concluding section will discuss how these findings contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms of post-accession Europeanization in CEECs.

2. EUROPEANIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF IMPLEMENTATION OF EU COHESION POLICY IN THE NEW MEMBER STATES

Europeanization is most often defined as the domestic impact of EU policies (see e.g. Cowles *et al.*, 2001, Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003, Graziano and Vink, 2007). One can distinguish two logics of adjustment to EU policy rules at the domestic level: rational choice, and sociological mechanisms of Europeanization (Börzel and Risse 2003). The former involve changes driven by compliance or rational choice calculations to take advantage of the opportunities created by the EU policy in question, while the latter are based on social learning, internalization and identification with the EU-imported policy norms. In the case of CEECs, and particularly in the context of EU cohesion policy implementation, Europeanization can also be understood as a positive external shock for the established domestic structures, triggering modernization of administration and institution-building (Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi, 2004).

Thus, EU cohesion policy contributed to the improvement of effectiveness and capacity of administration, triggered changes in policy practice and provided the sub-national actors with new funding resources (Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi 2004, Hughes *et al.* 2004, Ferry 2007, Baun and Marek 2008, Bafoil and Surel 2008, Bruszt 2008). Moreover, by enforcing the partnership principle – requiring cooperation between the European Commission, the Member States’ administration at national, regional and local level and non-state policy stakeholders at all stages of the implementation cycle of the SF – EU cohesion policy imposes a multi-level mode of governance that challenges the centralist traditions in CEECs. This in turn creates the opportunity for empowerment of the regional tier and involvement of regional stakeholders in economic development policy, depending on the domestic institutional specificities (e.g. Bachtler and McMaster, 2008, Bruszt, 2008, Baun and Marek, 2008).

A number of researchers have, nonetheless, highlighted difficulties in adjustment to the EU cohesion policy framework in the CEECs and expressed doubts about the learning capacity of their administrative actors. These difficulties and doubts are due to the legacies of the past, including centralization, limited inter-institutional trust, weak civil society and relatively high corruption, bureaucratic rigidity and politicization of administration (Czernielewska *et al.* 2004, Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi 2004, Kozak 2007, Dąbrowski 2010). Such findings fuelled doubts about the ‘depth’ of institutional changes introduced in response to the EU cohesion policy framework, which could result in ‘shallow’ Europeanization (Czernielewska *et al.*, 2004) or ‘change on the margins’ (Bruszt, 2008). This chimes with the argument that the adjustments to EU rules during the pre-accession phase in CEECs were driven by conditionality and the domestic actors’ desire to acquire EU funds (rational-choice mechanisms of

Europeanization), which left little room for internalization of these rules and processes of social learning (sociological mechanism of Europeanization) and could result in superficial changes – if not compliance problems – after the accession (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, Goetz 2005, Bugarcic 2006, Pridham 2008, Falkner and Treib 2008). Yet in the case of EU cohesion policy the domestic actors still have strong incentives for compliance with its principles even after the accession. First, they face the threat of the withdrawal of allocated funding if they do not spend it in a given time frame. This threat of withdrawal is accompanied by an immense media and political pressure to swiftly distribute and make the most of cohesion funding. Second, they have strong incentives to comply with the principles of EU cohesion policy in order to be eligible for its funding programs.

One could also advance the hypothesis that sociological mechanisms of Europeanization affecting the actors' preferences through processes of social learning, which were less prominent in the pre-accession period, would come to the fore once the CEECs join the EU (e.g. Goetz, 2005, Sedelmeier, 2006, Bafoil and Surel, 2008). Hence, participation of domestic actors in implementation of EU policies and socialization within the EU cohesion policy framework may lead to a gradual internalization of EU norms, standards and 'ways of doing things.' Such internalization of EU policy practices would improve the effectiveness of implementation of EU policies in CEECs. This process would, however depend on the learning capacity of political and administrative systems, which in the case of CEECs remains low (Paraskevopoulos, 2006, Czernielewska et al., 2004). With the notable exceptions of studies by Swianiewicz et al. (2010), stressing the superficial adjustment to the EU-imposed strategic planning among the Polish sub-national actors, there are no empirical studies scrutinizing post-accession mechanisms of Europeanization in CEECs focusing on the area of regional policy. More generally, there is also a shortage of research investigating the impact of EU cohesion policy on the local level and its indirect effects on the actors involved (Bache 2007).

This paper bridges these research gaps by presenting the evidence from qualitative research on the sub-national impact of EU cohesion policy conducted in Lower Silesia and Lubelskie regions in Poland. The study aimed at investigating the mechanisms of the actors' adjustment to EU cohesion policy framework in order to test the abovementioned hypotheses of a shift from 'shallow' and strategic adjustment to EU-imposed rules towards gradual internalization through sociological mechanisms of Europeanization.

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: 52; Bache 2008: 18). Rational choice mechanisms of Europeanization involve 'thin' learning, which corresponds to an interest-driven and strategic reorientation of policy practices without changing their core features in order to accommodate EU-imposed policy rules ('shallow' change). By contrast, 'thick' learning - associated with sociological mechanisms of Europeanization - 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. Firstly, the research investigated the actors' motivation for adopting EU-imposed practices. Hence, adoption of EU practices driven by the desire to acquire EU funds and/or obligation was considered as an indicator of rationalist adjustment. By contrast, when adjustment was underpinned by to the actors' desire to improve their policy practice and its outcomes, this was

considered as an indicator of internalization of the EU-imposed practices. Secondly, the actors' perceptions of the usefulness and appropriateness of SF-related rules were considered as another indicator of social learning and internalization. Thirdly, 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 looked for evidence of spill-over of the EU-imported practices into domestic policies or spin-offs such as continuing cooperation of partners after the completion of a joint EU-funded project.

The research was based on nearly seventy semi-structured interviews with key informants within the institutions involved in distribution of the SF at the regional-level, such as Marshal Offices (regional authorities) or Voivod Offices (central government's representatives), as well as with experts and numerous representatives of Communes (local authorities), which are the main beneficiaries of EU funding. Additionally, interviews were carried out in the Ministry of Regional Development (MRD), which were complemented by secondary data from strategic documents, evaluation reports, etc. The study focused on implementation of the SF in the 2004-2006 programming period and early stages of implementation of 2007-2013 Regional Operating Programs (ROPs).

3. IMPACT OF THE STRUCTURAL FUNDS ON THE POLISH SUB-NATIONAL POLICY ACTORS

The study revealed that the SF had a significant impact in three key areas, namely organizational practices, approach to planning as well as governance and inter-institutional cooperation. The following sections will describe these changes and discuss the mechanisms of the actors' adjustment, indicating the factors which limit the scope for internalization of EU-imported norms and practices.

3.1 ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROCEDURAL CHANGES: TOWARDS MORE EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATION

Despite numerous difficulties in implementation of the SF in Poland (Kozak 2007, Dąbrowski 2010), this process triggered major organizational and procedural changes within the institutions administering the SF at the regional level and within the local authorities benefiting from European funding, which resulted in modernization and improvement of their administrative capacity.

To begin with, distribution of the SF involved creating new departments for SF-related tasks within the regional institutions, which in turn required recruiting new – mostly young and well-educated – staff, and the provision of numerous training sessions for these new employees.

Similar changes could be observed among the local authorities recruiting new staff and creating new specialized units in order maximize their chances of acquiring the EU money. However, roughly 22% of Polish local authorities did not participate in the SF programs in 2004-2006 period (MRD 2008), which limited their exposure to the influence of EU cohesion policy. These local authorities did not have strong incentives for introducing organizational changes and were not obliged to comply with the EU-imported rules of project management that were imposed as part of the funding eligibility criteria. The evidence from interviews suggests that incapacity or lack of desire to use the European funds could be a matter of lacking local funds to provide match-funding, insufficient capacity to cope with preparation of a bid for funding and/or

a passive and risk-averse attitude held by the Mayor precluding efforts to apply for grants.

Another factor that promoted capacity building within the institutions involved in SF programs was funding provided as part of the Technical Assistance Operating Program (TAOP). It provided their employees with necessary IT and office equipment – the lack of which had considerably reduced the administration’s effectiveness in the past – and allowed for deploying significant efforts to improve the skills of the officials through numerous training courses.

Additionally, participation in the SF programs involved a number of positive spin-offs, such as improvement of project management skills and increased coordination between previously isolated units, becoming drawn into the high-profile SF-related tasks. Other changes included improvement of transparency, clarification of the tasks of different units within the institution in concern and standardization of procedures through the introduction of handbooks.

Implementation of the SF also brought about a greater emphasis on the effectiveness and performance of officials involved and contributed to a change in relationships with the beneficiaries of public services being increasingly considered as customers, which echoes the New Public Management paradigm:

“The Structural Funds have taught us how to efficiently and swiftly solve problems and have changed our approach towards a more economic one [...] Our Office has become more like a firm.”¹

Nonetheless, this beneficial influence of the SF was limited by a high turnover of staff which impeded the accumulation of skills and institutional memory. In fact, a substantial share of regional officials – who acquired marketable skills related with the European funds – opted for jobs in consultancies offering services to organizations applying for SF. This was accompanied by a significant turnover on managerial positions resulting from ‘purges’ following national or regional elections, which remain one of the pervasive features of the Polish political culture.

Moreover, due to the lack of previous experience in administration of the SF, creation of procedures for project appraisal and distribution of grants required ‘learning by doing.’ Unsurprisingly, this ‘trial and error’ process resulted in many shortcomings and frequently changing regulations that slowed down the pace of absorption of the SF. Nevertheless, such experience taught the officials to become more flexible and adjust their practices according to the changing situation, which was at odds with the pre-existing bureaucratic rigidity and unresponsiveness of the administrators.

In some cases, the introduction of new standards within the units involved in SF-related tasks lead to some limited degree of spill-over of new practices across other units and prompted the introduction of further changes concerning the entire institution, such as the introduction of the ISO system, which was introduced as part of the rationalization trend initiated by the SF, even though it was not required by Brussels.

Furthermore, the impact of the SF also affected the officials’ attitudes and perceptions, which illustrates the normative aspect of EU cohesion policy’s influence. The SF contributed to the improvement of the self-image of officials involved in their management, considering themselves as the vanguard of modernized administration,

¹Interview with an employee of an urban Commune, Lubelskie, 11/01/2008.

benefiting from better working conditions and salaries² and having superior skills and higher responsibility than the officials dealing with other issues. Moreover, working with the SF was a source of a certain prestige, favoring commitment and motivation for work among the sub-national officials. In addition, hiring new – mostly young and well educated – staff to cope with the SF tasks was an ‘injection of fresh blood’ which also contributed to a departure from the inherited bureaucratic postures.

Finally, due to the immense media hype and political pressures, the pace of absorption of the SF became a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of central and regional administration. Likewise, the local authorities’ track record in acquiring EU grants became an important criterion against which the Mayors were judged by the inhabitants and (re)elected. The consequences of this situation are ambiguous. On one hand, they can be seen in a positive light because the pressure to acquire the SF by the local authorities clearly stimulates their activeness, while the compliance with the eligibility criteria and the project implementation procedures promotes the adoption of new standards and practices in terms of strategic planning or effective project management. On the other hand, the results can be surprising, if not absurd, as illustrated by the referendums on sacking the Mayors due to their alleged unsatisfactory performance in acquiring grants. Such developments encourage the Mayors to submit applications for funding that are bound to fail just for the sake of satisfying the demands of inhabitants eager to see the European money flowing into their Communes.

What were the mechanisms of the organizational and procedural changes described above? The evidence from interviews shows that the adjustment was initially driven by interest and/or necessity, which was often followed by social learning and ‘horizontal’ diffusion of EU-induced practices.

The logic of adjustment among the actors involved in administration of the SF and the actors who were their beneficiaries varied substantially. The regional-level institutions distributing the SF had to comply with ministerial guidelines imposed from above. The MRD³ was translating the European Commission’s requirements regarding the institutional architecture and procedures for implementation of the SF into specific guidelines for the regional institutions. Therefore, these top-down changes within the regional institutions administering the SF can be categorized as Europeanization by compliance (Knill and Lehmkuhl 2002).

However, once the implementation of the program was launched, the internal changes within the regional institutions administering the SF aimed were driven by ‘horizontal’ pressures for further improvement of efficiency, independent of the governmental guidance. Hence, these organizational and procedural changes gained their own momentum over time regardless of top-down pressures, which supports the view that external adaptation pressure is not a necessary condition for Europeanization processes. The desire to improve performance in management of the SF was further stimulated by the competition with other regions in terms of the pace at which funding was absorbed. Regional authorities can be stigmatized as ineffective for lagging in spending of the SF, while good performance in absorbing the EU money is a source of prestige. In addition, pressure was also exerted by beneficiaries that were expecting swift distribution of funds. This two-fold pressure encouraged the regional distributors

² For instance, in 2008 an employee of the Voivod Office dealing with the SF earned PLN 4,800 per month, while his or her colleague from a non-SF department earned only PLN 3,271 per month (Evaluation for Government Organizations 2010, 40).

³Ministry of Economy before October 2005.

of the SF to modify or simplify the procedures for funding allocation, and increase efforts in recruiting new staff and retaining the experienced employees.

Moreover, the implementation of the first round of the SF involved 'learning by doing.' Due to the lack of any similar experience, the officials were drawing lessons from their own mistakes and unforeseen problems arising from practice, which prompted further changes within their institutions that gradually improved the efficiency in distribution of EU funds. This confirms the hypothesis of gradual shift from 'thin' learning towards social learning mechanisms of Europeanization.

Furthermore, the interviewees considered the rationalization and standardization of procedures, as well as the emphasis on performance, as beneficial and appropriate. This is further evidence of internalization of the EU-imposed rules. Despite the fact that their adoption initially resulted from compliance with ministerial guidelines and pressures from beneficiaries, the EU-imposed rules eventually took hold.

In the case of the local authorities, participation in the SF programs was voluntary and there was no top-down pressure for adjustment. As one interviewee put this, "*the stimulus for introducing changes was clearly the fact that Communes want that money.*"⁴ Thus, internal reorganization within the local authorities stemmed from the Mayors' desire to win bids for funding. In fact, the prospect of having access to the SF was a powerful incentive: the Mayors calculated that it paid off to recruit new staff, create a separate unit for external funds and provide adequate training to employees if it ensured acquiring substantial grants.

Additionally, organizational changes were further stimulated by the competition between the local authorities, as well as the aforementioned pressure from the inhabitants, the media and the political opponents, to acquire as much funding as possible:

*"We submit applications for funding as part of every possible program, because this is well perceived by the local community [...] Otherwise people would complain."*⁵

Nonetheless, further adjustments were also introduced as a result of processes of learning. For example, one of the local officials argued that the challenges arising from the management of more substantial investment projects - made possible thanks to the SF - prompted the local authorities to introduce further organizational changes and recruit new employees to cope with the project management duties. Moreover, given the lack of knowledge on the SF and the absence of any organizational guidelines from above, the local authorities were learning from their own (and their peers') mistakes, and the more entrepreneurial ones experimented with new organizational solutions for improving management of EU-funded projects. These solutions were then copied by other Communes through the diffusion of 'good practice' among the local officials meeting at training sessions or exchanging information within their networks, which favored social learning.

Finally, the diffusion and internalization of 'good practice' in the management of EU-funded projects was also facilitated by the normative attractiveness of the EU. The local officials felt a certain pride for being involved in EU-funded initiatives and had positive perceptions of the changes associated with the SF.

⁴Interview with a local official, Lower Silesia, 18/10/2007.

⁵Interview with a local official, Lower Silesia, 26/10/2007.

In sum, rationalist mechanisms of Europeanization cannot fully explain the dynamics of SF-related changes within the local authorities. While they were initially driven by interest, there is also evidence of subsequent social learning dynamics, internalization of the newly adopted rules and their horizontal diffusion among the local officials.

3.2 PROMOTING MULTI-ANNUAL AND STRATEGIC APPROACH TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A MIXED PICTURE

EU cohesion policy's programming principle requires the SF allocations to be based on multi-annual operating programs that determine the domains in which the SF are to be used. This approach contrasted starkly with the ad-hoc planning based on yearly budgets which predominated in Poland after 1989. Thus, the first experience with the SF during the 2004-2006 period contributed to the introduction of a broader, more integrated and project-based approach to the administration's tasks. As an official at the MRD argued, "*this is a revolution and it goes all the way down to the local level.*"⁶

At the regional level, strategic planning was introduced in the wake of the administrative reform of 1999, creating the self-governed regional tier of administration. The newly created regional authorities were legally bound to draft regional development strategies for the purpose of the so called 'regional contracts,' which were the key domestic regional policy scheme. That said, the administrative reform itself and the introduction of strategic planning at the national and regional levels were, to a large extent, catalyzed by the prospect of EU cohesion policy implementation after accession (Hughes *et al.* 2004) and designed to cater to the implementation of the SF, which were to become the main source of funding for regional development policy in Poland (Gorzela and Kozak 2008). In the 2004-2006 period, due to the choice of a centralized approach and a single Integrated Regional Operating Program (IROP), the regional authorities were not responsible for the programming of the SF spending. However, in the wake of the programming period for 2007-2013, the regional authorities prepared their specific ROPs, which involved revising the regional development strategies to fit the priorities outlined in these programs.

The introduction of the SF also promoted strategic planning at the local level. Unlike the regional authorities, the local authorities are not legally bound to prepare development strategies. However, the vast majority of them adopted this practice because they were prompted by the prospect of acquiring EU funding. Thus, in order to benefit from the SF, the local authorities' projects need to correspond both to the criteria outlined in the relevant operating programs and to their multi-annual local development strategies. Furthermore, to be eligible for the SF a potential beneficiary also needs to prepare a study of feasibility for the project and include other documents, testifying that it is part of a wider and coherent development strategy.

What was the logic of adoption of strategic planning by the sub-national actors? The regional authorities' confront this new practice pragmatically, using a rationalist approach: regional development strategies are considered formal conditions for obtaining European funding, hence their priorities were kept as broad as possible in order to make sure that they could cover a wide variety of projects for which funding would be available. This is a testament to the 'thin' adjustment to the EU-imported strategic planning approach, which is driven by the desire to acquire as much European funding as possible. The approach reveals the regional authorities' inability to articulate

⁶Interview with an official at the MRD, Warsaw, 29/07/2008.

strategic aims and put them into coherent multi-annual strategies (Swianiewicz et al., 2010, pp. 65-66).

In many cases at the local level, the local officials paid only 'lip service' to strategic planning requirements. This resulted in the local officials designing poor quality planning documents that listed the basic investment needs of a Commune instead of presenting a coherent and well-planned strategy of local development:

*"Local development strategies of rural Communes are prepared typically as attachments for applications for funding from the EU."*⁷

In such cases, local development strategies were akin to 'wish lists' or inventories of planned investment projects corresponding to the basic infrastructural needs, which precluded deliberation and reflection on the strategic use of European grants.

The study pointed to a set of factors which inhibited the institutionalization of multi-annual planning among the local authorities and the concern for well thought-out local development strategies. First, there is an overall emphasis on quick absorption of the SF, which are considered a 'godsend' from Brussels, combined with strong pressure from the media and the local communities demanding that the Mayors acquire as much funds as possible. This pressure often precludes reflection on purposeful and efficient use of this money. Second, many local authorities adopt a 'claimant' attitude, i.e. a perception of the SF as something to which they are 'entitled.' Such attitudes imply negligence in the preparation of projects and a lack of concern for the strategic use of funding. Third, the emphasis on 'red tape' and formal aspects of bidding for funding – underpinned by fear of potential misuse of the European money – could overshadow the concern for selecting quality projects with a strategic importance for the region's development. The combination of these factors resulted in a predominance of small scale projects with limited impact on development.

Nevertheless, drafting local development strategies is now considered an appropriate practice and has become increasingly common and 'normal' exercise for local officials. The use of strategic planning as a criterion for assessment of projects to receive structural funding at the very least prompted some local authorities to reflect on Communes' development in a multi-annual perspective and include the local communities in this process, which is a departure from the predominant ad-hoc approach.

In sum, the approach to strategic planning varied across the local authorities that were studied. Many Communes adjusted to it at only the 'formal' level, while some of them initially drafted local development strategies to benefit from European funding, but internalized this new practice over time. This suggests that the patterns of Europeanization can vary depending on the actors' preferences, attitudes and resources.

This finding also *partially* confirms the hypothesis that Europeanization driven by rational choice may involve superficial change (e.g. Bugarcic, 2006, Goetz, 2005, Sedelmeier, 2006). Partially, because the picture is more complex than that: rationalist and sociological mechanisms of Europeanization are not mutually exclusive and over time attitudes towards EU rules might change once the actors in question become familiar with them and realize their potential benefit. Thus, the rules that were initially considered a 'necessary evil' that must be accepted in order to acquire European grants, may gradually be internalized through social learning (Goetz 2005, Sedelmeier 2006, Bafoil and Surel 2008). This in turn corroborates the hypothesis of a gradual "*shift from*

⁷Interview with an employee of an NGO, Lower Silesia, 17/10/2007.

instrumental to conviction-based behaviour” creating scope for deeper and more sustainable change (Pridham, 2008, p. 372).

3.3 TOWARDS MULTI-LEVEL AND PARTICIPATIVE MODE OF GOVERNANCE

EU cohesion policy restructured the exchanges between actors of governance in Poland by imposing cross-level and cross-sectoral cooperation in implementation of the SF. The imposition of the partnership principle favored a shift from a centralized mode of governance with very limited sub-national involvement in regional development policies and centrally controlled programs (Bachtler and McMaster 2008), towards a poly-centric one with increased interaction and cooperation between the policy actors at different levels of administration:

“A network of institutions was established, with more interaction between them [...] and a certain sense of partnership between these different institutions. One can therefore talk about a change of mindset towards common efforts to solve common issues.”⁸

Attributing new competences, in terms of distribution of the SF to the regional tier of government, also involved a certain empowerment of the Polish regional authorities. The authorities gained new powers and resources and became major players in the system of governance. In the 2004-2006 period, the regional authorities were responsible for project appraisal as part of the IROP, however, their role was limited because all the other functions in management of the SF were carried out by governmental institutions. This changed in the 2007-2013 period, with the introduction of a partial regionalization of managing the SF and the transfer of drafting and managing competences for the ROPs to the regional authorities. As Gorzelak and Kozak argued, this is a *“further step in the process of state devolution in Poland”* (2008, p. 159). The regional authorities also became crucial actors in the regional political arena, as they are responsible for planning how the European funding is to be used within their regions and deciding which regional stakeholders are to benefit from it.

One should bear in mind, though, that the governmental administration retains important competences in terms of certification of payments as part of the ROPs. Additionally, tensions exist between the central and regional authorities concerning their respective degree of control over implementation of the SF. Multi-level cooperation, which is part of the system of implementation of the SF, was also hampered by an overcomplicated and conflict-prone institutional system that undermined cooperation between the institutions. For instance, the unclear division of competences in administering the IROP between the Marshals and the Voivods lead to squabbles and blockages, particularly when these two institutions were dominated by rival parties, as was the case in Lower Silesia.

Moreover, in conformity with the partnership principle, formal partnership-based institutions comprising representatives of the central government, local authorities and economic and social partners, were put in place to allow for participation of regional policy stakeholders in administration of the SF. Regional Steering Committees (RSCs) could assess and recommend changes to the lists of projects that would receive funding prior to the final decision on allocation of grants made by the regional executive, while the regional-level Monitoring Committees (MCs) monitored the process of

⁸Interview with an official at the MRD, Warsaw, 29/07/2008.

implementation of the SF. In addition, during the 2004-2006 period, widespread public consultations with the 2007-2013 ROPs were organized to gather feedback from a variety of actors on the programs' priorities and procedures. These consultations provided the regional stakeholders with a new channel for exerting influence on the orientations of the regional development policy.

Lastly, the SF prompted new forms of cooperation between the local authorities, as the availability of funding encouraged some of them to pool resources and skills as part of joint EU-funded developmental projects.

The logic behind these changes initiated by the SF and the partnership principle also involved intertwined rationalist and sociological mechanisms of Europeanization and their 'depth' varied substantially depending on the aspect of partnership and the actor in question.

For instance, horizontal partnership in SF implementation through RSCs was perceived by the regional authorities as a 'necessary evil' imposed from above with which they reluctantly complied. This resulted in 'shallow' institutionalization of these institutions that were considered 'talking shops' that hindered swift absorption of the SF. Therefore, the regional officials welcomed the government's decision to abandon the RSCs in the 2007-2013 programming period and restrict the realization of the partnership principle to the MCs participating in the establishment of the eligibility criteria for projects and subsequent monitoring of the ROPs. Such a formalized partnership arrangement in project appraisal was not internalized because it was at odds with the priority of quick disbursement of the allocated funds and, in addition, it suffered from irregularities and flaws, which fuelled the dissatisfaction of the actors involved.

By contrast, the EU-imposed consultations of the ROPs with policy stakeholders were perceived by the regional authorities as a useful means of gathering valuable information and enhancing the fit between the region's needs and the priorities outlined in the program. In other words, while the regional officials perceived horizontal partnership via the RSCs as a hassle, partnership-working in program formulation was seen as a worthwhile and fruitful exercise:

*"These consultations improve our end product [...] This is a very good practice."*⁹

This form of partnership was internalized by the regional authorities because it was perceived as useful and, unlike the RSCs, was not conflicting with their priorities and interests.

A similar tendency could be observed among the local authorities for whom partnership created new opportunities, but also induced social learning mechanisms, depending on its fit with their preferences.

In most cases, the local officials' participation in the RSCs and MCs was interest-driven. It was largely motivated by the prospect of potential influence on the decision-making or obtaining valuable 'first-hand information' on project appraisal procedures, which could be used to increase the likelihood of obtaining grants for their own projects. The RSCs were not considered by their members to be a means for ensuring the selection of funding for projects that corresponded to the strategic developmental needs of the regions, but rather as an arena for lobbying in favor of their own projects, which demonstrated a lack of understanding of the purpose of horizontal partnership. Only a few interviewees stressed the beneficial role of the Committees in terms of improved transparency and social control over the way in which the SF were distributed. When

⁹Interview with an official at Marshal Office, Lubelskie, 23/10/2007.

the members of the RSCs realized that the final decisions on the allocation of grants were made by the regional executive – often ignoring their recommendations – they became disillusioned with this institution and tended to lose interest in it, which resulted in problems with quorum. In addition, politicization and clientelistic networks deeply affected the functioning of the RSCs, which involved, for instance, political bias in selection of their members or manipulating the ranking lists established by the Panel of Experts prior to debates within the Committee. In addition, the final decisions on attribution of grants made by the regional executive were sometimes based on political criteria and ignored the recommendations of the RSC, which defied the purpose of this institution supposed to ensure transparent and unbiased distribution of the SF. This ultimately added to the RSC's negative image.

By contrast, the majority of the local officials interviewed expressed positive opinions about the consultations of the ROPs, praising their inclusiveness and positive impact in terms of promoting cooperative governance. Therefore, partnership in program formulation was internalized by the regional stakeholders, because it offered a genuine possibility to influence regional policy-making 'from below' and, hence, to promote their interests.

Furthermore, in the 2004-2006 period, most of the local authorities tended to be reluctant towards partnership-based projects perceived as a troublesome or potentially risky venture that would not offer any clear reward, because there were few incentives for partnerships in the project selection criteria in the IROP. The partnership projects' popularity was also limited by competition for grants between the local authorities and the mistrust of other actors. The rare partnership-based projects implemented during the 2004-2006 period were mostly in programs where cooperation was a precondition for obtaining funding (e.g. LEADER+ initiative), or often turned out to be one-off initiatives oriented towards financial gain, which tended to fall apart as soon as the project terminated. Such partnerships were indeed, institutions without 'substance.'

However, the situation changed in the 2007-2013 period when clear incentives for partnership-based projects were introduced into ROPs and some sectoral programs. These incentives stimulated the local authorities to prepare partnership projects as part of inter-communal consortiums in order to boost their chances for obtaining a grant. That said, the fact that these collaborations were stimulated by prospective funding did not preclude the processes of learning and gradual internalization of the partnership approach to developmental projects. In fact, while the approach to partnership was very pragmatic, a number of interviewees demonstrated awareness that partnership could enlarge the impact and scope of projects and provide solutions to problems that could not be solved by an individual actor. As a local official put this, such projects may be "*driven by necessity, but maybe it will result in something sensible.*"¹⁰ Furthermore, the experience of some of the interviewees suggests that even though partnership was initially motivated by the increased likelihood of obtaining funding (rational choice mechanism), the actors involved learned how to cooperate with each other, share know-how, discover and appreciate the gains of collaboration (sociological mechanism). Such cooperation fostered relationships based on trust and favored more durable relationships serving as a platform for further cooperation, which in some cases extended beyond the SF programs.

¹⁰Interview with a local official, Lower Silesia, 16/10/2007.

4. MECHANISMS OF EUROPEANIZATION REVISITED: THE MULTI-FACETED AND UNEVEN IMPACT OF EU COHESION POLICY IN POLISH REGIONS

The objective of this article was to investigate the impact of EU cohesion policy at the sub-national level in Poland and to examine the patterns of post-accession Europeanization in CEECs.

The findings from empirical research conducted in two Polish regions revealed the multi-faceted nature of the impact of EU cohesion policy, which affected policy, polity and politics at the same time through a mixture of rationalist and sociological mechanisms of rule transfer that transcends and challenges the ideal type models of Europeanization (see e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2003, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004).

The findings from the Lower Silesia and Lubelskie regions confirmed - albeit only partially - the argument that the adjustments to the SF framework among the domestic actors in CEECs were likely to remain 'shallow' due to their limited learning capacity or tendency to produce 'dysfunctional institutions' without 'substance' (Czernielewska *et al.* 2004, Grabbe 2006, Bugaric 2006). In fact, even though there was evidence of superficial adjustment in many cases, over time, many of the policy actors learned from their mistakes and gradually internalized those SF-related rules which they considered appropriate and helpful in pursuing their goals.

The study also confirmed the hypothesis that sociological mechanisms of Europeanization would gradually come to the forefront after CEECs' accession and the initial predominance of a rational choice logic of adjustment to EU policies. Indeed, in most cases the adjustment to EU cohesion policy norms and practices among the Polish sub-national policy actors initially tended to be constraint- or interest-driven. This often resulted in 'shallow' change whereby adopting EU-imposed rules, such as the multi-annual planning requirement, was considered a formality that needed to be fulfilled in order to take advantage of the European money. Furthermore, in cases where these practices were conflicting with the actors' priorities, they could be considered a 'necessary evil,' which precluded their internalization, as illustrated by the case of regional partnership committees participating in appraisal of projects to receive EU funding. Yet the study also found evidence of sociological mechanisms of Europeanization and horizontal diffusion of EU-imported practices among the regional policy actors, which were becoming more prominent following the initial adjustment driven by rationalist mechanisms. For instance, despite the existence of several obstacles to diffusion of EU-imported norms, some of the practices introduced with the EU cohesion policy framework - such as the emphasis on effectiveness and performance of sub-national authorities in management of European funds, widespread consultations of strategic documents, or forging partnerships as part of EU-funded developmental projects - were progressively internalized over time, at least by some of the actors involved.

Therefore the study contributed to a better understanding of the patterns of post-accession Europeanization by revealing a further tendency: the gradual shift from a rationalist to a sociological mechanism of EU policy rules adoption was taking place, provided that the actors involved perceived the EU-imported practices to be useful and in line with their interests. In other words, when EU-imported practices are compatible with the actors' goals and preferences, sociological mechanisms of Europeanization through social learning and horizontal diffusion of what is considered a 'good practice' can also be initiated and intertwined with the rational-choice motivation for adjustment. By contrast, in cases where the EU-induced policy practices are conflicting with the

actors' interests, the actors tend to adjust to it only 'formally' without profoundly changing their preferences or internalizing the new practices.

Finally, the study demonstrated that the outcome and 'depth' of Europeanization among the sub-national actors varies depending on their preferences and interests, experience and capacity to participate in the SF programs, which in turn is determined by their financial and administrative capacity and their attitudes. This challenges the well-established typology of outcomes of Europeanization, distinguishing between the absorption, accommodation and transformation of domestic process as a result of adjustment to EU policies (Börzel and Risse 2003). At the sub-national level the picture may indeed be more complex and nuanced than that, as illustrated by the uneven and differentiated impact of EU cohesion policy on the Polish sub-national actors.

Acknowledgement: This research was in part funded by the University Association for Contemporary European Studies.

REFERENCES

- Bache, I. (2007) 'Cohesion Policy', in: P. Graziano and M.P. Vink (eds) *Europeanization. New Research Agendas*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Bachtler, J. and McMaster, I. (2008) 'EU Cohesion policy and the role of the regions: investigating the influence of Structural Funds in the new member states', *Environment and Planning C-Government and Policy* 26, 2: 398-427. Online. Available HTTP: <Go to ISI>://000255731600007.
- Bafoil, F. and Surel, Y. (2008) 'L'européanisation plurielle', in: F. Bafoil and T. Beichelt (eds) *L'européanisation d'Ouest en Est*, Paris: Harmattan.
- Baun, M. and Marek, D. (2008) 'EU Cohesion Policy and Sub-National Authorities in the New Member States', *Contemporary European Studies*, 2: 5-20.
- Börzel, T. and Risse, T. (2003) 'Conceptualizing the Domestic Impact of Europe', in: K. Featherstone and C. Radaelli (eds) *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bruszt, L. (2008) 'Multi-level Governance - the Eastern Versions: Emerging Patterns of Regional Development Governance in the New Member States', *Regional and Federal Studies*. 18, 5: 607-627.
- Bugaric, B. (2006) 'The Europeanisation of National Administration in Central and Eastern Europe: Creating Formal Structures without Substance?', in: W. Sadurski, J. Ziller and K. Żurek (eds) *Après Enlargement. Legal and Political Responses in Central and Eastern Europe.*, Florence: European University Institute.
- Czernielewska, M., Paraskevopoulos, C. and Szlachta, J. (2004) 'The Regionalization Process in Poland: An Example of 'Shallow' Europeanization?', *Regional and Federal Studies* 14, 3: 461-496.
- Dąbrowski, M. (2010) 'Institutional Change, Partnership and Regional Networks: Civic Engagement and the Implementation of the Structural Funds in Poland', in: N. Adams, G. Cotella and R. Nunes (eds) *Territorial Development, Cohesion and Spatial Planning Knowledge and policy development in an enlarged EU*, London: Routledge.

EPRC (2009) *Ex-post Evaluation of EU Cohesion Policy Programmes 2000-2006 Co-financed by the ERDF (Objective 1 and 2). Work Package 11: Management and Implementation Systems for Cohesion Policy (No 2007 CE 16 0 AT 034). Final report to the European Commission (DG Regio). Task 2 – National Assessment Report. Poland.* Glasgow, European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde.

Evaluation for Government Organizations, S.C. (2010) *Ocena systemu realizacji polityki spójności w Polsce w ramach perspektywy 2004-2006.* Warsaw, Ministry of Regional Development.

Falkner, G. and Treib, O. (2008) 'Three worlds of compliance or four? the EU-15 compared to new Member States', *Jcms-Journal of Common Market Studies* 46, 2: 293-313. Online. Available HTTP: <Go to ISI>://000253255900004.

Ferry, M. (2007) 'Comparing the Influence of Structural Funds Programmes on Regional Development Approaches in Western Scotland and Silesia: Adaptation or Assimilation?', *European Journal of Spatial Development* 23. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.nordregio.se/EJSD/refereed23.pdf>.

Goetz, K. (2005) 'The New Member States and the EU: Responding to Europe', in: S. Bulmer and C. Lequesne (eds) *The Member States of the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gorzela, G. and Kozak, M. (2008) 'Poland', in: M. Baun and D. Marek (eds) *EU Cohesion Policy After Enlargement*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Grabbe, H. (2001) 'How does Europeanization affect CEE governance? Conditionality, diffusion and diversity', *Journal of European Public Policy* 8, 6: 1013-1031.

Grabbe, H. (2006) *The EU's transformative power: Europeanization through conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hughes, J., Sasse, G. and Gordon, C. (2004) 'Conditionality and Compliance in the EU's Eastward Enlargement: Regional Policy and the Reform of the Sub-national Government', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42, 3: 523-551.

Knill, C. and Lehmkuhl, D. (2002) 'The National Impact of European Union Regulatory Policy : Three Europeanization Mechanisms', *European Journal of Political Research* 41, 2: 255-280.

Kozak, M. (2007) 'Managing European Regional Policy in Poland in the initial period after accession', *Studia Regionalne i Lokalne*, Special Issue 2007: 67-89.

MRD (2008) *Doświadczenia i szanse regionów*; Przegląd regionalny nr 2. Warsaw, Ministry of Regional Development.

Paraskevopoulos, C. and Leonardi, R. (2004) 'Introduction: adaptational pressures and social learning in European regional policy - cohesion (Greece, Ireland and Portugal) vs. CEE (Hungary, Poland) countries', *Regional and Federal Studies* 14, 3: 315 – 354.

Pridham, G. (2008) 'The EU's Political Conditionality and Post-Accession Tendencies: Comparisons from Slovakia and Latvia', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 46, 2: 365-387.

Schimmelfennig, F. and Sedelmeier, U. (2004) 'Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy* 11, 4: 661-679.

Sedelmeier, U. (2006) 'Pre-accession Conditionality and Post-accession Compliance in the New Member States: A Research Note.', in: W. Sadurski, Ziller, J., Żurek, K. (ed.) *Après Enlargement. Legal and Political Responses in Central and Eastern Europe*, Florence: European University Institute.