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EU Cohesion Policy and the Europeanization of Central and East European Regions

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ABSTRACT This article probes the extent to which politics in Central and Eastern European (CEE) regions are becoming Europeanized. Existing analyses suggest that Europeanization and regionalization in CEE have been loosely related phenomena. These claims, along with broader forecasts about the waning post-accession influence of the European Union (EU), generate predictions that the politics of the regions will be ‘lightly Europeanized’. The article presents evidence to refute these predictions. It shows that EU norms, incentives and discourses are being transmitted through EU cohesion policy and becoming deeply embedded in the identities and strategies of Polish, Czech and Slovak regional officials. It further suggests that subnational actors are drawing on EU resources to reinforce their traditionally weak positions vis-à-vis their respective central states.

KEY WORDS: Cohesion policy, Europeanization, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia

Introduction

Soon after the regime transitions of 1989, elites across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) identified European Union (EU) membership as their ultimate foreign policy goal. Their eagerness to accede placed them in relationships of “asymmetrical interdependence” (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Moravscik and Vachudova, 2003) versus EU member states. CEE states would gain more by becoming EU members, in other words, than EU incumbents would gain by admitting them to the club. Theoretically, this would allow EU actors to demand reforms that policy makers in CEE might have rejected in the absence of EU pressure. Asymmetrical interdependence offered EU actors opportunities to influence the polities, politics and policies of CEE countries in the years leading up to 2004 (when eight CEE countries joined the Union) and 2007 (when Bulgaria and Romania acceded).

Yet, recent studies of ‘Europeanization’ in CEE caution that EU influence on institutions in CEE should not be overstated (Jacoby, 2004; Schimmelfennig and
Sedelmeier, 2005; Grabbe, 2006). They stress that asymmetrical interdependence opens opportunities for influence but that opportunities are not the same as impacts. They emphasize that CEE countries are not blank slates and that EU conditionality is projected into complex political, social and economic arenas. They remind us that the EU is a multi-headed actor, whose institutions frequently proffer contradictory advice and whose abilities to monitor compliance vary from one policy area to the next. They analyse the agency of CEE policy makers, who take advantage of the enlargement process’ uncertainties to steer EU-supported reforms in directions that reinforce their interests. And they advise us that the pre-accession era’s asymmetries are transitory. Applicant states remain responsible for implementing the *acquis communautaire* after achieving full membership but are spared the pre-accession process’ minute scrutiny. Relaxed scrutiny allows CEE actors to reconfigure institutions that were constructed in response to the EU’s pre-accession pressures. In short, these studies imply that national institutions and strategic domestic contrivances limit the extent of EU influence on CEE politics. They stress that the EU’s pre-accession role was weaker than theorists of asymmetrical interdependence would predict but generally agree with the proposition that EU influence is likely to decrease after accession.

Analyses of CEE regionalization have featured prominently in the recent wave of Europeanization studies. In the last ten years, many CEE states have established ‘intermediate’ units between central and municipal levels. Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are the clearest examples of these processes, but Hungary and Lithuania have also gestured toward regionalization (Marcou, 2002). There were strong reasons to believe that these reforms would be driven by the EU. The promise of access to the EU’s Structural Funds attracted many people in CEE to the EU, and EU actors stressed that effective absorption of the Structural Funds required regional reform. But the literature on CEE regionalization (Hughes et al., 2004; Brusis, 2006; O’Dwyer, 2006) has suggested that the EU’s role in regionalization was secondary and that domestic dynamics were primary. Europeanization, this emerging consensus suggests, is a subplot in the drama of CEE regionalization.

This article seeks to complicate the emerging consensus. It does not cover arguments about decisions to create self-governing regions in CEE. Rather, it focuses on developments within those regions. Unlike the emerging consensus, which downplays the effects of the EU on regional politics in CEE, this article argues (1) that regional politics in CEE is becoming increasingly Europeanized, and (2) that Europeanization has actually intensified since CEE countries have acceded to membership. The article focuses on interactions between EU cohesion policy and domestic political actors and institutions in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It stresses that regional dynamics in all three countries would look much different was it not for the EU’s influence. Specifically, it suggests that actors’ strategies, the size and shape of regional structures, the workloads and orientations of regional bureaucrats, and the patterns of interaction linking public institutions to societal actors would be significantly different in CEE was it not for the availability of EU Structural Funds. By arguing that EU practices, discourses and procedures are becoming deeply embedded in domestic politics (Bulmer and Burch, 1998), the article argues that Europeanization and CEE regionalism are more closely linked than most recent contributions imply.
The argument draws from analysis of three sources of data: (a) interviews conducted in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Brussels in 2006 and 2007; (b) planning and programming documents for the 2004–06 and 2007–13 Structural Fund cycles; and (c) internal and public documents of CEE regions and ministries. The interviews (over 40 in all) were conducted in two rounds. The first round, in May–June 2006, was centred in national and selected regional capitals in the three CEE states. In national capitals, the author interviewed senior managerial personnel in the ministries that co-ordinated Structural Fund programming, bureaucrats in the ministries that managed operational programmes during the 2004–06 programming period, NGO leaders that had monitored and/or participated in Structural Fund programming and implementation, and local academics. In regional capitals, leading regional politicians, social partners and bureaucrats in charge of Structural Fund programming and implementation were interviewed. The second round of interviews, in May–June 2007, was based in Brussels. Here, I targeted representatives of CEE regional offices, personnel at the relevant country desks in the European Commission’s DG Regio, sector experts in the relevant permanent representations, CEE members of the Committee of the Regions, and members of the European Parliament’s committee on regional development. In short, I made an effort to interview as many major Polish, Czech and Slovak regional politicians and bureaucrats as possible and to speak with local, national and supranational, stakeholders in CEE regional policy making. I used a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions on the (un)importance of EU regional policy to CEE development efforts, the weights of various actors (local, regional, national, supranational, public vs. private) in the politics of Structural Fund programming and implementation, the development of the relationships linking supranational, national and subnational actors over time, and the learning curves faced by national and subnational actors between the 2004–06 and 2007–13 Structural Fund programming cycles. In accordance with Institutional Review Board stipulations, I have concealed the names and other identifiers of interviewees in the course of this article’s empirical analysis. Still, I have attempted to represent accurately the opinions and ways of seeing the world that emerged from the interviews.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, it discusses conceptions of Europeanization and reviews the literature on Europeanization and regionalization in CEE. Secondly, it presents evidence from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This section aims to expand the focus of the literature on CEE regionalization and to argue, against the literature’s claims, that politics in CEE regions are becoming increasingly Europeanized. Thirdly, it cautions against the tendency of restricting CEE Europeanization research to questions about the impact of conditionality and outlines avenues of research on Europeanization and the dynamics of CEE political authority.

Europeanization and Regionalization: the Emerging Consensus

Europeanization is arguably the major conceptual buzzword of contemporary work on European politics. The meaning of the concept has been debated at length (Olsen, 2002; Bache, 2003). Some see Europeanization as a phenomenon occurring at the supranational level, as “the emergence and development at the European level of distinct
structures of governance, that is, of political, legal, and social institutions associated with political problem-solving that formalize interactions among the actors, and of policy networks specializing in the creation of authoritative rules” (Risse et al., 2001: 3). Others see Europeanization as a domestic-level development—a process of domestic change that can be attributed to European integration (Hix and Goetz, 2000). Still others try to couple supranational and domestic developments under a single umbrella. Radaelli (2000: 4), for example, sees Europeanization as processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’, and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies.

Debates about Europeanization are often confusing; scholars who purport to study a similar phenomenon (Europeanization) may, in fact, be studying different ‘sides’ (domestic and supranational) of the integration process. Fortunately, studies of Europeanization in CEE have been rather consistently conceptualized. Here, most scholars see Europeanization as a domestic-level development. They seek to understand whether reforms undertaken before enlargement have been driven by domestic actors, supranational principals or some combination of the two. Students of regionalization— Baun (2002), Brusis (2002, 2006), Hughes et al. (2004), Jacoby (2004) and O’Dwyer (2006)—address these questions repeatedly. They try to ascertain which actors determine reform timetables, draw regional boundaries, outline the competencies of various tiers of authority and set up financial systems linking central-state and regional organs. They look at the cognitive and rhetorical dimensions of regional reforms, attending to the ways that domestic actors understand their preferences. If the Commission, member-states or other EU actors convince reluctant domestic reformers to support reform despite their ‘real’ preferences, reshape institutions in ways that domestic dynamics alone cannot explain, and/or affect domestic actors’ understandings of what they are doing, then scholars can be confident that Europeanization is happening. If EU incentives, contributions and discourses are non-existent, irrelevant or unimportant, then Europeanization is not happening. In short, studies of CEE regionalization assume that we can determine whether Europeanization is afoot by studying domestic-level developments and, in particular, developments at the centre of CEE states.

In terms of theoretical findings, students of CEE regionalization have reached varied, but generally compatible, conclusions. Baun (2002: 275) suggests some Europeanization of the regionalization process: “the prospect of EU accession has played a vital role in promoting territorial reorganization and political decentralization in both Poland and the Czech Republic”. Jacoby (2004) and Scherpereel (2009) give slightly less weight to the European dimension but stress that pre-accession pressures played at least some role in driving outcomes. For Jacoby (2004: 92), “it would be wrong to assert that devolution was exclusively the product of EU pressures, [but] it seems unlikely to have occurred in this time and manner absent those pressures”, while for Scherpereel (2009: 210), pro-enlargement parties eventually established
institutions, which, “in the absence of EU conditionality, they were unlikely to have endorsed”. Likewise, for Brusis (2006: 295), the EU “changed the opportunity structure domestic actors faced, but its role was more complementary than decisive”. And, for O’Dwyer (2006: 222), “the EU figured as a useful pretext for reforms that allowed domestic political forces . . . to shape regional institutions in their own interests”. Of all the studies of Europeanization and CEE regionalization, Hughes et al. (2004: 174) identify the smallest European role—“institutional outcomes in the regionalization of the CEE [countries] have been overwhelmingly driven by domestic political factors arising out of their transitions from communism rather than by EU conditionality pressures”. These analysts differ more in tone than in underlying argument. They generally agree that EU pressures have not been strongly determinative of reform outcomes. They suggest, collectively, that domestic phenomena, like historical institutional legacies and party-political considerations, have been the dominant principals in CEE regionalization. The EU, while not irrelevant, has been secondary.

This emerging consensus has important theoretical implications. Despite the asymmetrical interdependence that characterized the pre-accession era, it proposes that the extent of Europeanization was none the less limited. The EU may have altered reform timing or affected discourses and rhetorical strategies. But it was no international dictator and domestic actors maintained significant room for manoeuvre.

Most students of CEE regionalization would be unlikely to foresee the intensification of Europeanization after enlargement. The power that EU actors possessed before enlargement derived from their status as gatekeepers and their ability to threaten exclusion if regional reforms did not progress. Once pre-accession asymmetries had evaporated, we could expect an even more tenuous link between Europeanization and regionalization. In the EU-15, domestic administrative and political traditions have stood up well to the exigencies of working within the EU’s political system. The literature is particularly rife with examples of ‘weak Europeanization’ in unitary states—a category to which all CEE states belong. If Europeanization and regionalization were weakly linked before accession, we might expect an even more tenuous association after accession.

This article’s following sections show that these expectations have not been confirmed. The EU may have been a weak force in the process of establishing self-governing regions, but it has played a strong role in driving regional developments after 2004. The necessity of adapting to life in the EU has compelled important institutional and cognitive changes in new regions, particularly since enlargement. In the absence of the EU, emerging regional dynamics in CEE (at least in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) would look very different than they do today: administrative offices of regional self-governments would be smaller and regional political heads and administrative personnel would have more circumscribed “cognitive-geographical universes”. While they might look to counterparts abroad for information on best practices in government (subnational actors in CEE routinely did this during the early and mid-1990s, when the process of EU enlargement accelerated), they would have been more oriented toward national politicians and ministries than they have been in recent years. In short, evidence suggests that the EU Structural Funds have had important effects on the structures and cognitions that frame subnational politics in CEE. Regional politics in CEE is becoming increasingly Europeanized.
Most students of regionalization and Europeanization in CEE have analysed dynamics at the central level of government. This focus is understandable. Before 1998 in Poland, 2000 in the Czech Republic and 2002 in Slovakia, these states lacked a regional level of self-governance. Legal responsibility for establishing self-governing regions lay with national legislatures. Subnational actors lobbied for and against regionalization packages, but ultimate discretion rested on national politicians’ shoulders.

Once legislatures decided to establish new political regions, though, the regions took on a life of their own. The birth of the regions has opened new analytical opportunities. We can now go beyond the question of establishment, probing to what extent the regions themselves are becoming Europeanized—to what extent EU policies, incentives and discourses are shaping the operating logics of regional bodies. This section highlights various ways that the EU has shaped the development of the regions. It looks first at the pre-accession era and the ways that the 2004–06 EU Structural Fund programming process affected nascent Polish, Czech and Slovak regions. Although regional politicians in CEE failed to achieve their goals during this process, the process itself helped to effect the Europeanization of the regions. It then examines post-accession developments, showing how both tasks flowing from 2004–06 operational programme implementation and preparations for the 2007–13 programming cycle have deepened regional Europeanization. Together, these transformations suggest that CEE regions are becoming quite Europeanized and that the Europeanization process has accelerated since accession.

Before discussing these developments, it is necessary to review the context of regionalization processes in these states. All three states experienced significant centralization during the early years of Communist hegemony. The Soviet Union exported a system of territorial administration that had been pioneered by Lenin and perfected by Stalin. Under this system, territorial units were ‘dually subordinate’ to counterpart party bodies and to state bodies at the next-highest territorial level. Of course, the Stalinist template was imposed on states with different subnational histories, and certain CEE states had significantly altered the Soviet template by 1989. Still, there is a general scholarly consensus that both pre-communist and communist-era traditions of regional governance were weak (Brusis, 2002; Horváth, 2002; Caramani, 2003; Keating, 2003; Yoder, 2003; Palné-Kovács et al., 2004). Historically, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have lacked strong, legitimate regional political structures; the regional politicians and bureaucrats interviewed for this project frequently mentioned historical handicaps that had to be overcome for central-level policy makers to take them seriously.

All three countries also experienced flux in territorial relations in the early post-communist years. After 1989, democratic reformers sought to overhaul territorial politics. National politicians moved quickly to establish self-governing municipalities and to abolish those territorial tiers (especially regional tiers) that had been most associated with Communist rule. Beyond these common first steps, national patterns began to diverge. CEE leaders faced fundamental questions about territorial politics and administration. Some—how many levels of subnational government should
there be? How should deconcentrated state administration relate to territorial self-government? How should subnational politicians be elected? Which administrative competencies and financial resources should be decentralized?—were debated from early on in the transition. Others—how might local administrative boundaries fit within the EU’s NUTS population specifications? How should national development objectives relate to EU regional development objectives?—arose once the EU enlargement process gained steam in the late 1990s.

Suffice it so say that national leaders answered these questions differently. All three states established self-governing regions, but the status of the regions differed from country to country. Poland established two intermediate levels of self-government (powiat and województwo/voivodship), while the Czech Republic and Slovakia established one (kraj). Poland and Slovakia established separated systems of territorial state administration and self-government (interviewees in both states referred frequently to the challenges of building a modus vivendi among representatives of self-governing and deconcentrated state authorities); the Czech Republic opted for a conjoined system. Polish legislators established sixteen voivodships whose borders corresponded with the EU’s NUTS II categorization. Czech and Slovak legislators established political regions, which, in most cases, had populations too small to fit within the NUTS II population band. The Czech Republic established thirteen regions and one capital city with regional status, and Slovakia established twelve self-governing regions whose boundaries overlapped with the boundaries of state administrative regions that had been established in 1996.

The Regions Come Alive: Europeanization in the Pre-accession Era

All three states held elections to regional bodies soon after the acts establishing the regional architecture entered into effect. Despite low voter turnout and minimal public knowledge about subnational bodies, new regional politicians sought to capitalize on their positions. Central–regional dynamics varied considerably from state to state, but numerous regional politicians mentioned common disappointments. They struggled, for example, to find funds that would allow them to carry out pet projects, dole out political favours and leave a mark on their territories. Central governments, regardless of their political orientations, were reluctant to transfer budgetary resources to regions, even when such resources would cover policies (e.g. education, health, transport, culture) for which the regions were responsible.

A related disappointment for regional politicians involved the extent of regional participation in and control over EU Structural Funds. Politicians were eager to use EU funds to promote development. As the millennium turned, more regional politicians became aware of the potential uses of EU funds. The EU committed over €255 billion—37% of its total budget—to cohesion policy for the 2000–06 financial period. This figure included €22 billion for pre-accession assistance to CEE and another €22 billion for assistance between 2004 and 2006. Most of the post-accession assistance would be provided through the Structural Funds, whose primary objective (‘Objective 1’) was the promotion of development in poor regions (regions where per capita GDP fell below 75% of the EU average). All Polish voivodships and all Czech and Slovak NUTS II regions except Prague and Bratislava would be eligible
for Objective 1 support between 2004 and 2006 (Table 1). For regional politicians who were struggling to cover routine costs—much less to implement prestige projects—influence over the Structural Funds became a very attractive prospect.

Even for the abbreviated 2004–06 cycle, the Structural Fund programming process was formidable. This process, which began in 1999 and concluded in late 2003, took place within a framework established by EU legislation (Council of Ministers, 1999). The first, and most important, step in the process was the preparation, in each country,

### Table 1. Polish, Czech and Slovak Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>NUTS II region</th>
<th>GDP per capita, EU-25=100</th>
<th>Constituent political (NUTS III) region/s</th>
<th>Staff positions, 2004–06 CSF implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Mazowieckie</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Śląskie</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wielkopolskie</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dolnośląskie</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pomorskie</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zachodniopomorskie</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kujawsko-Pomorskie</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Łódźkie</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lubuskie</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Małopolskie</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opolskie</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Świętokrzyskie</td>
<td>34.3</td>
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<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Podlaskie</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Warminsko-Mazurskie</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Podkarpackie</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lubelskie</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>Praha</td>
<td>148.7</td>
<td>Hlavní město Praha</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic</td>
<td>Jihozápad</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>Jihočesky kraj</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jihovýchod</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>Plzeňský kraj</td>
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<td>Severovýchod</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>Vysočina</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Moravskoslezsko</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>Jihomoravský kraj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moravskoslezský</td>
<td></td>
<td>Liberecký kraj</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Střední Čechy</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>Královéhradecký kraj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Střední Morava</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>Pardubický kraj</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severozápad</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>Zlínský kraj</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ústecký kraj</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Bratislavský</td>
<td>111.7</td>
<td>Bratislavský kraj</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Západné Slovensko</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>Trnavský kraj</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trenčianský kraj</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nitrianský kraj</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Žilinský kraj</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Banskobystrický kraj</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prešovský kraj</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Košický kraj</td>
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</table>
of a National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP was a large strategic document whose structure varied slightly from country to country. All NDPs contained at least four sections. The first section included analysis of countrywide macro-economic and sectoral situations and socio-economic comparisons of a country’s NUTS II regions. The second section laid out developmental priorities and enumerated the ways that EU cohesion policy could be used to address developmental shortcomings. The third section included a list of operational programmes (OPs) through which countries would address specific development problems. This section also included a plan for how each OP would be managed and monitored (legally, ministries or regional organs could be charged with managing an OP) and a proposal for how much of the country’s total allocation would go to each OP.

Regional politicians were particularly interested in their countries’ NDPs. They sought to use Structural Fund regulations—which stipulated that NDPs be developed in partnership between state, regional, local and non-state actors—to amplify their voices throughout the drafting process. Most regional politicians also sought “an OP of their own”. They wished, in technical terms, to be recognized as the managing authority of a regional OP. Designation as a managing authority would grant regional politicians significant discretion over the details of OP design and would give them ultimate power over project selection. These powers, regional politicians hoped, would boost the size and visibility of regional administrative offices and generate funds that would allow them to leave a mark on their territories. Regional politicians also sought to ensure that the highest possible percentage of their country’s total Structural Fund allocation would go toward development in their particular regions.

Central governments, for their part, were reluctant to delegate responsibility for Structural Fund programming and management to the regions. From a technical perspective, central-state interviewees conveyed worries that the regions were too inexperienced to handle Structural Fund programming and management; these reservations were generally echoed by interviewees in DG Regio and academia. Concerns were particularly acute in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where political regions at the NUTS III level had only begun operating in 2000 and 2002 and where the small size of most political regions’ populations required the establishment of ’composite’ institutions at the NUTS II level (Table 1). Qualification for Structural Fund management thus compelled policy makers to agglomerate two or three NUTS III regions into a single NUTS II region. It was unclear, from the point of view of the Czech and Slovak central states, whether the NUTS III regions could effectively co-operate in their NUTS II agglomerations. From a political perspective, central politicians were concerned that regional influence over programme design, funding allocation and project selection would detract from their ability to claim credit for bringing European funds to domestic voters. Central-level ministers jostled for control over their own OPs; like the regional politicians, they saw management authority as a pathway to growth, bigger budgets and political weight.

The Czech Republic had established a Ministry for Local Development in 1996, and Slovakia had established a similar ministry in 2002. Multiple interviewees from outside of these bodies painted these ministries, not as the regions’ allies, but as their competitors: instead of defending self-governing regions, they sought to boost their own (weak) ministerial positions by co-ordinating their countries’ Structural Fund efforts and becoming managing authorities for particular OPs.
Still, some regional politicians hoped to overcome central-level resistance. They sought to employ EU norms to convince central governments to grant them more discretion over Structural Fund programming and implementation. Regionalism had experienced a renaissance within the EU over the preceding two decades. The EU had established the Committee of the Regions (CoR)—whose raison d’être was the representation of regional and local concerns—in 1994, and CEE members of the CoR spoke of their eagerness to use this body to develop networks and increase their visibility in Brussels and beyond. The principles of subsidiarity (where political decisions should be made as close to citizens as possible) and partnership (where subnational actors should co-operate with central and supranational actors in policy making) had emerged as Union-wide norms. The Commission’s DG Regio had, in line with the expansion of cohesion policy budgets over successive financial frameworks, become an important actor within the EU game. And although regional actors frequently complained about being excluded from accession negotiations, they could, at least initially, claim certain allies in DGs Regio and Enlargement who favoured robust programming and implementation roles for regions. They could point to successive Regular Reports (the Commission’s evaluations of candidate states’ progress toward membership) and informal contacts with the Commission, both of which emphasized the importance of regional administrative capacity and partnership.

In the end, though, the regions were disappointed with the outcomes of the 2004–06 programming cycle. As Hughes et al. (2004: 80–82), Jacoby (2004: 93) and Bruszt (2005: 5) have documented—and as interviews at DG Regio confirmed—the Commission changed its tune as the date of accession approached. The relevant DGs came to share central politicians’ concerns about young, understaffed, institutionally uncertain regions. This technical uncertainty coalesced with the Commission’s political interest in demonstrating its prudence in disbursing the EU budget. Regional leaders faced increasing resistance from both national and supranational actors.

Regional politicians’ Structural Fund ‘wish lists’ were not fulfilled. Slovakia’s regions fared poorly. The country’s NDP and OPs paid heed to the partnership principle, and regional bureaucrats and politicians were quite familiar, by 2004, with these documents. Because the regions were only established in 2002, though, they lacked the ability to ‘get in on the ground floor’ and to shape the final documents to their liking. Thus, to regional officials, ‘partnership’ was more of a cheap slogan than a mechanism for converting their priorities into outcomes. Slovakia’s Community Support Framework (‘CSF’, which determined the structure of Objective 1 support) included only four OPs. The largest and, from the regions’ perspective, most relevant OP was Basic Infrastructure (OPBI), to which the EU devoted 40.6% of its €1.041 billion Slovak CSF allocation. OPBI included a number of measures aimed at developing regional infrastructures. Regions were permitted under OPBI, for example, to submit applications to the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development for support of administrative offices, school refurbishment, regional transportation infrastructure and regional hospital construction and expansion. Although Slovak regions qualified as beneficiaries of Structural Fund support, they received no real power over fund allocation, standard setting, project evaluation or project selection. For these reasons, Slovak regions were frustrated by the 2004–06 cycle: they lacked power over programming and were largely irrelevant to implementation.
Polish and Czech regions fared better but were still unsatisfied with 2004–06 outcomes. Because both countries’ political regions were established earlier than Slovakia’s, they were stronger programming partners. But their respective central states and the increasingly cautious Commission opposed the regional OPs upon which their biggest hopes lay. Both countries eventually adopted a hybrid approach to regional OPs. Poland and the Commission negotiated an Integrated Regional Operational Program (IROP); the Czech Republic and the Commission negotiated a Joint Regional Operational Program (JROP). Both states also reached agreements on the percentage of the total IROP and JROP allocation that could be distributed to the country’s eligible NUTS II regions. The IROP was the largest of Poland’s seven CSF programmes, accounting for 35.9% of the EU’s €8.275 billion CSF commitment. The Czech JROP was the largest of the Czech Republic’s five CSF programmes, consuming 31.2% of the EU’s total €1.454 billion CSF allocation. IROP and JROP were hybrids in the sense that they delegated decisions about project selection to the regions while granting control over other, arguably more important tasks—including demarcation of selection criteria and control over intra-OP reallocation—to central-state ministries and monitoring committees.

Polish and Czech regional interviewees voiced mild satisfaction that they had acquired some role in OP implementation, but they were concerned that the political compromises embodied in the IROP and JROP had given rise to confusing institutional practices that threatened fund absorption and, ultimately, obstructed regional development. In Poland, for example, the marshal’s office (the administrative arm of the regional self-government) and the voivod’s office (the administrative arm of the central state in the region) shared authority over project evaluation, and both the marshal and the voivod sat on project selection committees. Regional politicians and bureaucrats were concerned that this system promoted administrative duplication, intensified already severe marshal–voivod disagreements, and confused final beneficiaries (municipal governments, businesses, NGOs) that wanted to submit projects. In the Czech case, the regions that were (directly) empowered by the JROP were located at the ‘artificial’ NUTS II level. In five of the seven Czech NUTS II regions that qualified for CSF support, these regions were constituted by delegates from political (NUTS III) regions. Administrative responsibilities for preparing the regional councils’ work had to be divvied up by NUTS III leaders, all of whom were anxious to augment their region’s staffing. Again, the institutional complexity of the system threatened to foment political in-fighting (between representatives of different NUTS III regions) and led the regional policy makers interviewed to worry about the transparency of the process to final beneficiaries. To Polish and Czech regional actors, the 2004–06 Structural Fund cycle opened opportunities but was considerably worse than the system of ‘proprietary’ regional OPs that most regional politicians supported.

The story of the regions in the years preceding enlargement is, therefore, a story of aggravation and disappointment. Regional leaders saw the Structural Funds as a means of consolidating political power and promoting regional development. Their preferences conflicted with the priorities of national and supranational officials, though, and the outcomes reflected the stronger positions of central–state actors.

But the story of the regions before 2004 is also a story of Europeanization. With purely domestic channels of funding blocked, regional policy makers came
increasingly to see the Structural Funds as a fount of power and growth. They managed, despite their disappointments in games for control over implementation, to gain a voice in project selection (in the Polish and Czech cases) and to augment, via the introduction of Structural Fund management positions, the size of regional administrative structures. In all three states, regional actors gained representation on the monitoring committees that oversaw implementation of all 2004–06 CSF operational programmes (not just OPBI, IROP and JROP). Perhaps, most importantly, they learned lessons about which strategies did and did not work in the politics of programming. By the time the CSFs had been negotiated and the OPs were being implemented, regional actors in CEE were assembling strategies for the longer, larger 2007–13 cycle. The rhythms, timelines, discourses and resources of the EU were becoming part of CEE regions’ operational matrices.

Europeanization Intensifies: Regional Developments since 2004

Europeanization has intensified since 2004, even as the asymmetries of the pre-accession era have evaporated. In Poland and the Czech Republic, the exigencies of Structural Fund implementation have transformed the organizational structures of regional bodies and, in all three states, preparations for the 2007–13 cycle have helped to transform regional administrations and pave the way for further EU-triggered growth.

The most direct indication of EU influence in the regions concerns the organization of regional administrative offices in Poland and the Czech Republic. Having gained a role in project selection under IROP and JROP, Polish and Czech regions have created positions devoted to CSF implementation. New regional bureaucrats have been responsible for administering calls for proposals, vetting proposals submitted by local applicants and seeking partners for grant schemes funded by IROP and JROP. Table 1 lists the number of administrative personnel currently working on IROP/JROP implementation in Polish and Czech regions as of 2007. The average Polish marshal’s office has more than 23 staff members working on IROP implementation. The average Czech NUTS II region has 12 staff working on JROP implementation. Without EU Structural Funds, these positions would not exist.

Three points bear emphasis with regard to these figures. First, because they focus on positions related exclusively to IROP and JROP, they underestimate the impact of the 2004–06 Structural Funds on CEE regional offices. In Poland, for example, the numbers include only personnel implementing two of the IROP’s four priorities (regional infrastructure and local development). Most marshals’ offices have also created positions to handle projects submitted under another IROP priority (strengthening regional human resource development); these positions have usually been ‘tacked on’ to regional offices’ departments of education. In the Czech case, the figures also exclude approximately thirty positions created in Prague to support the implementation of Objective 2 (revitalization of transitional regions) and 3 (modernization of training systems) assistance. They also omit positions in bodies that are legally independent of regional authorities. The Czech Ministry for Local Development, for example, has generally sent one or more employees to each region to deal with Structural Fund implementation, and the Center for Regional
Development—an independent subsidiary of the ministry with limited authority under various OPs—has boosted its staffing in the regions. Structural Fund implementation, in short, is a complex task that has facilitated the growth and transformation of regional bureaucracies in Poland and the Czech Republic. Even though regional bureaucrats have struggled to achieve effectiveness and efficiency, the Structural Funds have become the axis around which their daily activities revolve.

The second point about Table 1’s figures is that the personnel situation has been more dynamic than the figures imply. CEE regions have struggled to recruit and retain high-quality personnel in Structural Fund-related positions. There are numerous reasons for this difficulty. The work can be tedious, regional physical infrastructure (e.g. office space, computers) is often poor and pay for work in regional offices lags behind private-sector and central-state pay. Interviewed regional politicians and academics suggested that the regions have had fewer problems recruiting staff straight from university than they have had convincing these officials to stay on. Regional bureaucrats suggest that they learn a lot on the job; their everyday duties and attentions are focused almost exclusively on learning how to prepare and administer works funded by the Structural Funds. Due to the nature of this “EU apprenticeship” and the limitations of regional budgets, they have noticed (and may, in fact, hope to participate in) a certain trend: once their colleagues master the learning curves of Structural Fund programming and implementation, they often seek out positions with local and national private-sector employers who are keen to draft project proposals and able to pay more than regional politicians. As a result, many regional offices have experienced high turnover. These dynamics have undercut the accumulation of institutional knowledge and may have prevented the regions from making the most of their EU fund commitments. They also demonstrate the transformative power of the EU: without the Structural Funds, the bureaucratic positions are unlikely to have existed, the EU-centred cognitions are unlikely to have developed, and the human-resources dilemmas faced by regional offices are unlikely to have materialized as such.

The third point about the final column of Table 1 is that it lacks data on Slovak regional offices. As noted above, Slovakia’s regions were vested with less managerial authority for 2004–06 than their Polish and Czech counterparts. Slovak regions’ responsibility for CSF OPs was restricted to a single, small measure under OPBI. Slovak regions have not been totally untouched by Structural Fund implementation, though. During the 2004–06 period, Slovakia has participated in programmes with regions from neighbouring countries that have been funded by the INTERREG IIIA Initiative. INTERREG IIIA comprises a very small percentage of the Union’s total Structural Fund budget, and Slovak national authorities have played a dominant role in INTERREG IIIA management. None the less, the central authorities have delegated some management tasks (usually including public relations and project assessment) to the regions. Thus, a few regional bureaucrats (generally between two and five) in each Slovak region work on INTERREG IIIA implementation.

Transformations related to preparations for the 2007–13 programming cycle have also taken place in all three states. Before the final paperwork was processed for 2004–06, regional actors in all three states began preparing for 2007–13. Drawing lessons from their 2004–06 disappointments, they set out with a similar set of preferences—strong partnership, individual regional OPs and big budgets—but more co-ordinated strategies.
These strategies have had domestic and supranational components. Domestically, many politicians have reorganized offices to facilitate preparation of quality strategic documents. Many regions have increased the staffing of regional development departments and transferred personnel with experience in implementing Structural Funds into units charged with drafting strategic documents for 2007–13. Many have sponsored conferences to ‘sell’ local publics on the opportunities inherent in the new programming cycle and to defend the prospect of decentralized management against its critics.

Supranational strategies have also been intense. Enterprising CEE regions, following the lead of EU-15 regions, began establishing regional offices in Brussels in the early 2000s. The trend has intensified in recent years, to the point where almost every Polish voivod, Czech kraj and Slovak kraj has set up shop in Brussels. The staffs of the regional offices remain small (in many cases employing only one or two individuals), and these individuals are realistic about the limited scope of their influence. Still, the offices have performed important tasks—keeping abreast of cohesion policy-related developments in Brussels, maintaining links with DG Regio and permanent representations, and keeping politicians and bureaucrats at home (including, in many cases, bureaucrats in newly created departments of European integration) informed about how Brussels-level developments affect regional actors. Representatives of Brussels offices have begun to co-ordinate their strategies. In 2005, for example, the Slovak regions established a common House of Slovak Regions that abuts Slovakia’s permanent representation, and many Czech regions have relocated to the centralized Czech House that was established in preparation for the Czech Republic’s tenure of the EU’s rotating presidency in the first half of 2009. Co-operation among CEE regions from different states is also gaining steam, with a Visegrad regional group meeting regularly from 2006 onward. CEE regional politicians have continued to use their positions as CoR members or alternates to gain more information on Structural Fund programming and present their interests to DG Regio.

Negotiations on the 2007–13 programming documents have recently concluded, and CEE regions have fared better than in 2004–06. Poland will have sixteen separate, voivodship-managed regional OPs, which, together, will consume 37.3% of Poland’s total Objective 1 allocation. The Czech Republic will also have a regional OP for each of its seven Objective 1 regions. The regional OPs constitute 27.3% of the country’s total Objective 1 allocation, and Prague City Hall will also manage two Objective 2 OPs. Designation as a managing authority will mean more responsibility versus the 2004–06 cycle; among other things, this will produce a greater complement of Structural Fund-related positions in all Polish and Czech regions. As in 2004–06, Slovakia’s regions will play a weaker role than their Polish and Czech neighbours. The management system of Slovakia’s single, centrally managed regional OP (constituting 20.6% of Slovakia’s total Objective 1 support) resembles the Czech system from 2004–06; ultimate authority will rest with the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, but bodies at the regional (NUTS III) level will play a role in project selection and administration; bureaucratic positions will be created in the regions to implement particular measures of the regional OP. In short, regional actors have concentrated their energies on preparations for the 2007–13 programming cycle and are poised to take on stronger managerial roles during the current cycle’s implementation phase. These developments suggest a continued deepening of regional Europeanization processes in coming years.
Conclusions

EU cohesion policy is driving institutional change in Polish, Czech and Slovak regions. There is important variation among the states—particularly between Poland and the Czech Republic, on one hand, and Slovakia, on the other. Overall, though, regions in these countries would look very different was it not for their states’ EU membership. The administrative positions created to handle Structural Fund programming and implementation would not exist. The everyday cognitive orientations of regional politicians and bureaucrats—who have come, increasingly, to orientate their behaviours toward the Structural Funds—would be more restricted to national arenas. Without the Structural Funds, regional politicians would be unlikely to see the funds as they increasingly do—as a means of overcoming the stinginess of central-level politicians and fuelling the growth of regional offices and economies. In short, EU membership is generating opportunities that are transforming regional politics, as EU procedures steadily work their way into regional political life.

While this article’s primary focus has been on officials, a comprehensive account of EU-driven regional transformation must also recognize that the location of managerial authority matters for the emergence of regionally based civil societies and regional checks on central-state authority. When management authority is vested in the centre of a state, applicants submit materials to the centre and interact, throughout the implementation phase, with central-level inspectors. This process reinforces long-prevaling notions—that all politics is national, that influence trickles from the top-down, and that the national arena is all that really matters. When administrative, political and financial competencies are delegated to regions, very different state–society dynamics materialize. Applicants interact with lower-level units, regional bodies gain visibility and the appreciation of ‘ordinary citizens’ of power’s locus changes. Central states remain CEE’s most powerful political units, and it is not difficult to find evidence of the central state’s status as the number one focus of civil societal actors and voters. In all three states, for example, press outlets devote much more energy to national than to regional events, and turnout for national elections remains significantly higher than turnout for regional elections. CEE regions, in a word, are young and relatively fragile.

All the same, CEE regions are picking up steam and becoming more comfortable in their engagement (and occasional confrontation) with central-state actors. Regional arenas are more important now than they were before EU accession; they are targeted more frequently by municipalities, local businesses and other actors who have something to gain by participating in EU-supported projects. The dynamics discussed in this article suggest that regional arenas will continue to strengthen in the coming years, at least until the 2007–13 cycle has run its course. In the past, subnational actors in Central and Eastern Europe have overcome rather marginal constitutional and political positions to assert their interests and win concessions from central states (Ramet, 1996; Bunce, 1999; Leff, 1999; Scherpereel, 2009). Major concessions—akin to those seen in the immediate wake of state-socialism’s collapse—are not likely in the near future. Still, it would be unwise to write off CEE regions as irredeemably supine or superfluous, as European integration is steeling their hands vis-à-vis their respective central states.

The ‘emerging consensus’ discussed in the article’s first section suggests that Europeanization and regionalization were loosely linked phenomena; EU conditionality
affected domestic actors’ opportunity structures and sped up the timetables of regional reform. Overall, though, the EU played a secondary role in the politics of regionalization, and reforms’ major contours were determined by ‘domestic politics as usual’. This article defends a seemingly opposite thesis: that regional politics in CEE are quite Europeanized. But these theses are not actually opposites. The ‘emerging consensus’ and the article’s propositions are compatible, but both propositions are counterintuitive. The asymmetrical interdependence argument leads one to expect strong pre-accession effects and attenuated post-accession effects. But both expectations are inaccurate. The emerging consensus suggests that EU effects were relatively weak before accession, and this article suggests that EU effects have been relatively strong since accession. Regionalization (the process of establishing self-governing regions) was a rather weakly Europeanized process, while the politics of the regions are becoming increasingly Europeanized.

The Europeanization that this article identifies is of a different kind than the Europeanization discussed by many analysts of CEE. To begin with, the unit of analysis has differed. Instead of focusing on the central state, the article has identified Europeanization dynamics in the regions. Also, the mechanisms through which regional Europeanization has occurred have differed from the conditionality-based mechanism proposed by many other scholars. In the current case, a heavily institutionalized EU policy regime has promoted Europeanization by providing incentives to subnational politicians, assisting the organizational development of regional administrative bodies, reorientating the job descriptions and cognitive structures of regional bureaucrats, and beginning to alter the outlooks and dispositions of societal actors in CEE regions. This mechanism more closely resembles Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier’s (2005) “lesson-drawing” model than the “external-incentives” model that they found to be especially strong in the years preceding accession.

It is puzzling, from the point of view of most existing theory, that Europeanization dynamics have intensified since EU conditionality has disappeared. This intensification is also puzzling from the point of view of what might be called the conventional narrative of CEE post-accession behaviour. This narrative focuses on the Eurosceptical ideologies and high-summit machinations of Polish and Czech governments and concludes that these countries are anxious to parry Europeanization after a decade of quiescence.

The article identifies solutions to both of these puzzles. With regard to the puzzle of post-conditionality Europeanization, it suggests that densely institutionalized EU policy regimes embody incentives and discourses that domestic actors respond to, internalize and strategically employ. Future research might spotlight other EU policy areas, gauging the extent to which national, regional, local, state and non-state actors differentially utilize discourses and policies and respond to the incentives contained within those policies. This suggestion echoes Jacoby’s desire (2004: 232) for studies of Europeanization to be policy area-specific and attentive to the interaction between supranational policy regimes and domestic actors.

Concerning the puzzle of post-accession behaviour, the article stresses that Europeanization dynamics can continue apace, regardless of the attitudes and behaviours of heads of state and government. What ultimately matters for Europeanization are the opportunities and discourses embedded in particular policy regimes and the strategic
activities of public and non-state actors. Pronouncements by Kaczyński, Klaus, and other sceptical national politicians will not derail Europeanization dynamics in maturing European democracies.

Notes

1The only exception to the ‘regional management lockout’ involved a small measure within OPBI.
2In the Czech case, staff who implement OPs are distributed across the NUTS III regions that comprise the composite NUTS II regions. For example, the Ústecký and Karlovarský NUTS III regions comprise the Severozápad NUTS II region. Ústecký kraj officially hosts the office of Severozápad Regional Council; one bureaucrat staffs this office and prepares the work programme for Severozápad’s Regional Council. Under JROP’s management scheme, though, final beneficiaries in the Severozápad region co-operate with and submit applications to the NUTS III regional office in which they (the final beneficiaries) are based. Thus, both the Ústecký regional office and the Karlovarský regional office have sections responsible for interfacing with applicants. Six bureaucrats staff Ústecký’s grant scheme section; nine staff Karlovarský’s analogous section.
3Prague and Bratislava do not qualify for Objective 1 support but do qualify for Objective 2 and Objective 3 support. Prague City Hall fared better than the Bratislava region during 2004–06. Prague was designated an Intermediate Body for the implementation of Objective 2 and 3 support, while ministries maintained most management authority for Bratislava’s Objective 2 and 3 support schemes. As a result, the Bratislava region’s administrative office has not grown as rapidly as Prague City Hall’s.

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