COHESION AND DISPARITIES: REGIONAL AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE BETWEEN POTENTIALS, POLICIES AND PRACTICES – EDITORIAL

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Abstract. One of the biggest challenges for the European space is the existence of an unbalanced development between European states, regions and rural / urban communities, embodied by the complex phenomenon of disparities. The regional and local development are major interest fields especially for the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe that have rediscovered the role of responsible territorial players for their regions and local communities during the process of EU-integration. Local and regional development policies and practice need to include the epistemological progress of Geography. The paper tries to outline how Geography can contribute to achieving the common objectives of territorial and social cohesion, what are the ‘optimal’ points of view for spatial analysis and what should be the commitment of geographers as responsible spatial actors and finally, where are the premises for finding new directions of process-oriented approach and the knowledge-based creation of spatial value-added.


Key words: cohesion, disparities, regional development, local development, Central and South-Eastern Europe, geographers’ approach.

Cuvinte cheie: coeziune, disparități, dezvoltare regională, dezvoltare locală, Europa Centrală și de Sud-Est, demersul geografilor.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Cohesion and Disparities

Undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges for the European space is the existence of an unbalanced development between European states, regions and rural / urban communities, embodied by the complex phenomenon of disparities. Disparities may include among others historical differences and inherited cultural structures, contrasting political systems and statehoods, diverse socio-economic development patterns as well an array of interrelations between the mentioned factors. In times of progressive globalisation and the clash with widespread (negative) effects of translational handling, the European Union (EU) focuses continuously on another challenge next to dealing with the effects and outcomes of disparities – assuring cohesion on a European scale.

Thus, “Territorial cohesion is about ensuring the harmonious development of all these places and about making sure that their citizens are able to make the most of inherent features of these territories. As such, it is a means of transforming diversity into an asset that contributes to sustainable development of the entire EU.” (EU-Commission, Directorate General for Regional Policy, 2008).

The Lisbon Agenda objectives, postulated in 2000, concentrate on strengthening the European competitiveness (mainly innovation-driven economical competitiveness), building social cohesion and environmental sustainability and developing a knowledge-based society – a dynamic space of flows (Castells, 1989). In the nine years after the Lisbon Agenda, the EU has experienced a historical enlargement towards the East with the accession of 12 post-socials transition countries. This has induced the adjustment of quite a few of the midterm objectives.

En vérité, the economic dimension of European integration is strongly developed and highlighted by the performance of the EU-joint economic area and market. Admittedly, this has to be reflected excepting the still unforeseeable effects of the global financial crisis. Various issues like the social cohesion or the reform of EU-institutions and its functioning principles still need to be tackled and have until now failed to provide viable and widely accepted solutions. The problems created by growing disparities have also been superior in number than the concrete solutions to counteract them. Thus, the ‘rule of thumb’ indicating that in the EU the disparities between member states diminish as in the meantime disparities within the member states increase seems to find its endorsement.

Therefore, how can Geography contribute to achieving the common objectives of territorial and social cohesion? What are the ‘optimal’ points of view for spatial analysis and what should be the commitment of geographers as responsible spatial actors? And finally, where are the premises for finding new directions of process-oriented approach and the knowledge-based creation of spatial value-added?

1.2 From an European to a practical perspective

Local and regional development policies need to include the epistemological progress of Geography in regard to the processes of territorial conversion and controlled evolution of disparities (Ianoș, 2006). Furthermore, spatial analysis, including its complex methodology, expertise and outcomes need to be integrated in the policy making process and subsequently in the practice of regional management. This process assures a scientific foundation for regional and local development strategies, an insertion of expertise into
governance practices as well as a validation respectively critical evaluation of policy outcomes. It takes places ex ante, concomitantly and ex post, assuring the participation of all actors of spatial development. The comparative analysis of the different experiences from selected case studies is intended to have a demonstrative role for politicians and practitioners.

The regional and local development are major interest fields especially for the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe that have rediscovered the role of responsible territorial players for their regions and local communities during the process of transition and EU-integration. The failure of the policy of forced territorial homogenisation, which was practiced during the communist period (a policy that proved to be fatally useless), did not bring a disinterest towards the spatial effects of socio-economic processes but on the contrary, the search for a new logic for territorial management.

The balancing act between political / practical coherence and territorial cohesion seems difficult to put in place, since the regions (as territorial / spatial systems) are a result of the interference of different systems of discontinuities and therefore heterogeneous by definition. Consequently regions comprise both dynamic as well as problem areas. When dealing with regional development issues, there is no hold before administrative borders, be it intra- or international one. That is why there is a need for a ‘cross-border’ perspective and an integrative approach based on participation of spatial drivers and actors. The subsidiarity principle is also a key component of any regional policy approach, since there is always a local ‘advantage’ in dealing with specific community-related problems. Cooperation is one of the catalyst for an embedded and sustainable regional / local positive spatial dynamic. The EU-commission adds in this sense two more directions for the (re)orientation of the EU-regional policy:

- Territorial cohesion is provided by sustainable development and access to services and infrastructures, underlining the importance of cooperation beyond administrative and international borders (especially with the neighbouring countries and regions outside the EU)
- An effective regional management requires an integrated and spatial-specific approach, having into consideration an improved coordination between different sectoral policies and a continuous partnership of the involved territorial actors (cp. EU-Commission, Directorate General for Regional Policy, 2008)

2. REGIONAL AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: THEORY AND PRACTICE

2.1 Regional development

Regional development is a concept with the highest degree of generality that comprises the actions which aim the optimization of territorial system in terms of equity – at the level of subsystem and structural aggregates, thus at micro and meso scale – and efficiency, at the macro scale level, in a wider territorial context and in regard with the outside environment (cp. Coffey, 1982).

Working towards finding solutions for regional development and elaborating regional policies that are sustainable and with positive performance, the regional sciences have developed different methods and theories, based on an integrated approach towards
spatial phenomena and the interrelating processes and drivers that shapes territories. In this context, the research on unbalanced development and the focus on regions with special characteristics, thus with special development needs (e.g. border areas or old industrial regions) is being highlighted by the actuality and the socio-political relevance of the investigated issues. The most utilised theories and models include: the independence of spatial evolutions, the convergence of the regional development level, the divergence and hierarchisation of spaces, the localization theories (von Thünen 1800; Weber, 1909; Christaller, 1933; Losch, 1954; Isard, 1956), the theory of circular and cumulative causality (Myrdal, 1957; Balogh, Prebisch, Hilgert), the growth poles theory (Perroux, 1961; Boudeville, 1966; Aydalot, 1984; Ianos, 2001), the diffusion theory (Schumpeter, cf. Saint-Julien, Therese, 1992), the core-periphery mode (Friedmann, Holland, Myrdal, 1982). The integrated spatial analysis, spatial modelling based on assessment of impact and added value of policies, the identification and investigation of cause-and-effect chains as well as the development of theoretical background for development strategies and policies are spotlighted in current tendencies of geography-based regional sciences.

Among the main preoccupations is finding the key factors and premises that foster or inhibit development as well as identifying and analysing the possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) in connection with development strategies – the so called drivers-oriented analysis. Furthermore, the spatial observation and diagnosis practice has established complex models for spatial modelling, including territorial development scenarios using multi-scale analysis and GIS-based interpolation, that provide decision support for regional and local policy makers – the impact oriented analysis. Next to spatial development scenarios, one of the key issues in spatial analysis and territorial planning is the identification of problem fields, different types of lock-ins (institutional, financial, political etc.) as well as the processes and drivers behind the dynamics of development (progressive, regressive, degressive and stagnating) – the problem and process oriented analysis.

Development models highlight among others several processes that determine: an internal adjustment of the growth potential and for a knowledge and export-based economy (subsequently creating growth and increasing competitiveness), the research and dissemination of scientific findings by means of an integrated approach towards spatial development and a subsidiarity-centred policy making, the dependence theory and development dissemination as well as the concept of growth poles (Navalpotro, 2000) and metropolitan areas (e.g. Metropolitan European Growth Areas, cp. ESPON).

2.2 Local development.

The perpetuation and even increase of disparities in the last decades have confirmed the necessity that many theories, methods, ideologies have to be adapted to the specific cases represented by each territorial entity. In the course of time, an important number of theories appeared, like the “development from the ground” – the innovative milieus (Aydalot, 1984), endogenous development, local development (Guademar, 1992, Navalpotro, 2000, Botazzi, 1996), which have highlighted the importance of the ‘local’ in the sense that “local environments play a determinant role as innovation incubators, they act like a prism through which innovations are catalysed and which give the area its particular complexion” (cf. Aydalot, 1986). Representing more of an approach way than a
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model, local development has an important contribution in regaining the territorial dimension of development.

“Think globally – act locally!” This widely used phrase expresses a paradox of recent socio-economic development: Whilst the process of globalisation spreads continuously, diminishing the role of national states and regulating institutions on the one side and integrating economies into global competitiveness and markets into global trade on the other side, the importance of locality and of the local-based handling is constantly increasing. This phenomenon takes place both as an ‘adverse’ reaction to the undamped extension of globalisation (in form of localisation, glocalisation, regionalism), but also as a reaction to a flowing economic and financial environment and an increased pressure induced by world-wide competition. Furthermore, the local level becomes a nutrient medium for innovation and knowledge development, capacity building, development of best practices and the positioning on a specific niche (in form of endogenous potential, local embeddedness and local ownership), using in the best way possible the regional and local competitive advantages and valorising them into added value for living standard, the access to a wide spectrum of services and the fostering of creative culture, quality and commitment to participative development (cp. Scott & Garofoli, 2007).

The transition period in post-socialist brings to light a specific ‘local’ problem (among other spatial processes), which represents to a certain extend the continuation of a masked problematic of the socialist central planning based mainly on a policy of forced industrialisation and accelerated shift from an economy based on the primary sector to an industrialised economy – the development discrepancies between urban and rural areas, that evolve together with an increased polarisation of socioeconomic development.

In this case, the importance of locality is underlined by the role of cities and urban agglomerations as motors for the transition and the EU-accession and magnets for foreign (direct) investment. Furthermore, the development of the tertiary and quarterly sector has led to increased “clustering” of socioeconomic welfare. Critically seen, the current policies of regional development as well as EU and national planning, focus mainly on developing metropolitan growth areas, and less on the sometimes ‘abrupt’ transition from urban to rural. In many cases, processes with positive centripetal effects (urban-focused) imply negative centrifugal effects in the surrounding rural areas (positive dynamics in an urban agglomeration lead to shrinking of the rural space in its gravitational area). The expected positive trickle-down effects turn into negative factors of agglomeration and hyper-concentration, sprawl and splinter development, spatial shrinkage, constant dependency, migration etc. Thus, the physical limits of the locality and the ‘local’ are often being ‘over-stretched’.

2.3 Regional policies and politics

The Europe 2000+ Document is significant for illustrating the algorithm for creating regional development politics at the European level, which can be applied at inferior spatial levels. Also, the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (Commission of the European Communities, 2008) sets up an inventory of instruments and explains the major European perspectives on approaching and shaping regional policies, based on the objectives drawn in the Lisbon Agenda.

The analysis of many regional policies in the EU (Alden, Boland, 1996), reveals some aspects that come into hand in the case of regional development and it’s applied
Carrying out represented by the regional politics: the European context is very dynamic and needs a sensible and efficient planning system (which can only be based on knowing the reality on the territory); the planning goes beyond the physical aspect and calls for preoccupation aiming social, economical, ecological and political goals, thus becoming a strategic enterprise; market forces have to be taken into account, as well as public/private partnerships in the development process; decentralisation progress in the process of planning and the empowerment of the regional and local level on the basis of the subsidiarity principle; the transnational and cross-border components, as well as major transport corridors and the environment are more and more important in regional politics; European politics with spatial effects have to be in harmony and to interact in order to create synergy effects (e.g. structural, cohesion, and common agricultural politics funds).

In Romania the law no. 151/1998 defined regional development as a “set of planned and promoted measures by the local and central public administration authorities, in partnership with several actors, with the aim of assuring a dynamic and durable economic growth, by valorisation of the local and regional potential for improving life conditions.”

The 2007-2013 Regional Operational Programme (ROP) implements the major objectives and components of the National Strategy for Regional Development and of the National Development Plan (NDP) and together with the other Operational Programmes aims to contribute to the diminishing of the economic and social development disparities between Romania and the EU-average. The main features of ROP are: a clear territorial dimension, targeting mainly lagging behind regions and less developed areas; in general, public areas are the main areas of intervention that fall under the responsibility of local authorities and are complementary to other OPs key areas of intervention; the emphasis on the local component, justified by differentiations in development patterns around the country.

The practice of regional development at European level points out: possible tensions between cohesion and competitiveness (competition between harmonization/homogenization and polarization); the existence of “winners and losers” (centres and peripheries); the risk of concentrating improvement only on the centre in the detriment of the periphery. It is notable, that once again the importance of local development is being highlighted. The local space becomes an employing space, from this point of view (Cox, idem), defined a network of territory actors and drivers.

Therefore, local development can be expressed through more rights an freedoms for communities, the responsibility of authorities, the importance of private initiative (Botazzi, 1996), the articulation of local interests, the conciliation of tradition with modernity and industrial development with durability, the emphasise of going beyond the defensive and past-oriented manner (Gaudemar, 1992) of perpetuating subsistence, conciliating the short term profit with the long term one, as small and medium companies are being the icons of the new industrial paradigm (Piore, Sabel, cf. Botazzi, 1996), because of their capacity to be flexible and function in a systemic connection.

The practice of regional and local development in Romania shows however the perpetuation and even the increase of disparities. ROP offers objectives and instruments for creating local and regional synergies of all territorial actors and drivers, but these still need to be implemented and to become effective, thus unfolding its positive influence.
3. THE GEOGRAPHERS’ APPROACH ON REGIONAL AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

It must be said that the geographers’ undertakings is very useful in this context, assuring the individualisation of the two types of instruments for regional development: spatial instruments (target areas) and sectorial instruments (targeted domains).

For the target areas, the studies that are concentrated regional territorial systems set up several spatial typologies. Thus, in terms of integration (of the role and place in the main territorial system), Bailly (1995) differentiates: central, intermediate and peripheral areas, homogenous spaces respectively, asymmetric polarized spaces, spaces polarized by various micro-regions. In relation with the dynamics type, there can be identified: areas of potential growth, potential stagnation, or decline (Bailly, idem) or rural regions in regress, regions in conversion, regions in full recovery (Baudelle). Criteria that register the level of economical activity, structural and positional characteristics in the subsystem and in the relations inside it, have made the following differentiation possible: low developed areas, areas in industrial decline, agricultural areas, urban areas with specific problems, peripheral areas, border areas (Navalpotro, 2000). Adding the nature quality, we have the following differentiation: effervescent, critical, de-favoured, protected areas (Cocean, 2000).

Sectorial instruments (targeted domains) are individualized through the study of functional components of the regional systems and their reference to the system average.

The geographic approach on local development underlines the necessary reference to the territory, that “has appeared essentially as a (...) anti-economical and contesting response, to an excessive (...) theorising of the industrial and productivist state intervention, regaining powerful arguments of regionalism” (Lacour, C., Puissant, Sylvette, 1992, p. 1007). Today there are talks about an ethics of territorialism that emphasise the necessity of a development manner in which economic growth becomes a way, rather than a purpose, in which the preoccupation for human development is substitute to that for the development of things, in which territorial integration takes the place of vertical functional integration.

The territory becomes a factor of development, being the premise that imposes the quasi obligatory role played by the geographers’ implication in the approach of local development. Theoretical approaches of geographers on the territorial system (Dauphine, 1979, Cunha, 1988, Brunet, 1990, Nîr, 1999, Ianoș, 2000, Haggett, 2001, Beguin, 1998) offer exhaustive images of this line of lecture. The complex territorial system includes physical geographical and social economical components. Identifying the characteristics that condition the quality and intensity of their interactions are necessary. The essential ones are those that form the “synergy of the system”: workforce, natural resources, information, capital, means of production, command centres; the relations between these, inside the “regulatory block” etc. The fluxes – of matter, energy, information – substantiate the functioning of the system, as well as the quality and intensity of its interactions and interdependencies.

The “structural elements” (the way in which physical components arrange themselves, including the inherited ones, which come from the ‘territory inertia’) are represented by: network layouts, roads, equipment, settlements, distances, localizations, relative positions.
Recent studies on the territory, in relation with the development, are concentrated more on the supra structure – a sum of historical, social, cultural factors that generate different development processes.

The geographical approach emphasises the open characteristic of the territorial system, defining the internal and external inputs, as well as the reactions to internal and external causalities. The changes from outside generate feedback, which, in the negative case, can determine changes of the function and structures of the system.

The goal of the territorial system, that of auto-reproduction, necessitates economical and social convergence, as well as maintaining the natural, landscape, patrimonial and cultural diversity, which are also compatible to the goals of regional development.

Starting from this fact and taking into consideration the practical necessities of Romania and of other Central, Eastern and South-Eastern European Countries, we considered the organisation of this workshop to be very opportune and of actuality for current European regional policy issues and working fields.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The regional and local development are major interest fields especially for the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe that have rediscovered the role of responsible territorial players for their regions and local communities during the process of EU-integration. The renouncement of the policy of forced territorial homogenisation, which was practiced during communist period (a policy that proved to be fatally useless), did not bring a disinterest towards the spatial effects of socio-economic processes but on the contrary, the search for a new logic for territorial management.

The balancing act between political/practical coherence and territorial cohesion seems difficult to put in place, since the regions (as territorial/spatial systems) are a result of the interference of different systems of discontinuities and therefore heterogeneous by definition. Consequently regions comprise both flagship-as well as problem-areas.

The practice of territorial analysis, specific to the modern geographical sciences, must accompany all strategies and policies of local and regional development. Thus these practices are being funded and validated.

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Within this frame, the international Conference held in Timișoara between 23rd and 25th may 2008 was conceived to be an interface to the perspectives and challenges of the EU-accession and enlargement on the one side and the deficits and problems of regional and local governance practice on the other side.

In concordance with the introductory statements and the current themes in the scientific discourse, the conference held in may 2008 in Timișoara focused among others on the following topics: Spatial discontinuities, regional disparities and spatial typologies in Central and South-Eastern Europe, cohesion and EU-regional policy instruments, regional competitiveness and competition, multiscale evaluation of the social, economic and ecologic impact of EU and national policies on the functioning of territorial systems, core-periphery relations, peripheral areas, specific problems of rural and mountainous areas, local and regional governance capacity, best practices, structural and institutional problems,
cross-border-cooperation, management of problem-areas, environmental policies and the use of geo-resources, regional development and territorial planning, identities and integration and especially during the field trip the problematic of the EU-external border and the cooperation with the Western Balkans (esp. Serbia).

On the invitation of the Department of Geography of the West University of Timișoara and of the Institute of Geography of the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, more then 60 geographers and professionals from Romania (București, Iași, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Craiova) and abroad (Germany, France, Serbia, Slovenia, Hungary, Austria, Poland) presented various analysis of experiences and case-studies from Central and South-Eastern Europe. Some of their contributions are published in this special issue of “Geographica Timisiensis” journal.

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