



**Review of the PhD thesis by Daniel Šitera:
“Europeanization and the State in Central and Eastern Europe: Political
Economy of European Structural Funds”
Submitted to the Institute of Political Science, Charles University**

I. Brief outline

The thesis analyses the evolution of the EU’s cohesion policy since its inception. Focussing on its impact in the four Visegrád countries and especially Czechia, it aims to detect the institutional forms, socio-economic purpose, and developmental impact of the policy. The thesis argues that it serves as a “development fix” to regulate the tensions stemming from uneven socio-economic development. Institutionally it integrates Europe’s periphery in the form of a rescaled state, where developmental visions and instruments are designed by EU actors, whereas the responsibility for achieving development is delegated to national and local governments. The socio-economic purpose is conceptualized as neoliberal developmentalism. Specifically, the cohesion policy complements and reinforces the building of competitiveness on national and local levels, with the aim of deepening FDI dependency. Theoretically, the thesis builds on critical political economy approaches. Its data sources are policy reports.

II. Summary evaluation

The thesis addresses an important question. The developmental ideology and impact of the EU’s cohesion policy in East Central Europe has rarely been analysed in an encompassing way. The thesis is also structured in a logical way, and it is based on studying an impressive amount and range of policy documents. However, the thesis has several shortcomings. The theoretical framework is overburdened with jargon and very hard to digest. The author also does not provide a good sense of the state of the art, and his specific contribution to existing literature. Moreover, the theory is insufficiently connected to the empirical analysis. The author makes a number of strong claims which are insufficiently substantiated. In terms of research design, main concepts are not operationalized, it remains unclear how the empirical analysis is conducted, and how claims are verified.

III. Detailed evaluation

The thesis has a number of merits. First, it asks very relevant research questions, that have not yet been addressed by the literature. As such, it makes an important contribution. Specifically, it contributes to the Europeanization literature by looking at the developmental ideology, and the interconnections between foreign direct investment (FDI) dependency and cohesion dependency. To the comparative political

economy literature, it adds the focus on an additional source of dependency, namely cohesion funds. It also contributes to critical political economy by extending a neo-Marxist framework to the analysis of cohesion policy.

Second, the thesis makes an interesting argument. Specifically, it claims that EU cohesion policy constitutes a case of transnational regulation of peripheral development (TRPD), which complements the policies of FDI inflows. It further argues that this TRPD has led to a dependent developmental state, and rescaled dependency across local, national and supranational institutions. These two claims are reasonably well substantiated.

Third, the thesis is well structured. The first chapter introduces the topic and research questions, the second chapter provides the theoretical framework. The two subsequent empirical parts focus on the development and transformation of the EU cohesion policy since its inception, and the impact on state structures and development on the national and local level in the Visegrád countries & Czechia respectively. The final chapter concludes.

Fourth, the thesis is also very impressive in terms of the sheer amount of empirical material that the author has processed. The thesis stands out for the very thorough reading of a wide range of EU, country and local units reports related to the cohesion policy.

At the same time, however the thesis has several shortcomings. This refers first to the theory. The thesis relies heavily on Marxist theories, without however sufficiently conceptualizing and theorizing central terms. For instance, what is the value added of conceptualizing Europeanization as a developmental fix, which is then “formed through the mutual constitution of (literal) infrastructural fixing, (intermediating) socio-institutional fixing, and (metaphorical) semantic fixing?” (p. 28). How is this different from claiming that cohesion policy seeks to overcome tensions stemming from unequal development in the enlarged EU, and it does so by building institutions, investing in infrastructure, and providing discursive legitimacy? Harvey’s concept of geographical fix is theoretically rooted in his crisis theory, and it argues that geographical fixes provide a temporary solution to existing contradictions within the reproduction of capitalist relations. In contrast, the thesis does not theorize the contradictions and tensions of capitalist reproduction in the EU, which would result in the “necessity” of fixing them. I therefore question the value added of using these terms.

The same holds true for the state theory that the author refers to. Poulantzas’ state theory is embedded in class analysis, and his concern is the relation between different class fractions and the state. The dissertation however does not offer a class analysis, and therefore the state theory hangs in the air. Again, I question the value added of bringing Poulantzas in. It is unclear to me in how far the de- and rescaling of state authority that the author finds in his thesis goes beyond what existing scholarship calls multilevel governance.

The thesis also combines several theoretical frameworks (Regulation School, neo-Poulantzian state theory, neo-Gramscian theory, and Harvey’s Marxist theory), and it is an open question whether these frameworks can all be combined without losing theoretical coherence.

Overall, therefore, I find the theoretical framework heavily overblown, as it is imbued with a diversity of neo-Marxist approaches. At the same time, it does not succeed in adequately taking on board the implications of Marxist analysis. In the end, the findings of the dissertation therefore seem to be quite compatible with non-Marxist frameworks.

The second problem I see is the empirical substantiation of the more detailed steps in the argument. It remains unclear how the authors' concepts of TRPD, the different fixes, and concepts such as hegemonic projects and social coalitions inform the empirical analysis. How do we recognize a TRPD? How does this concept differ from other concepts, for instance multilevel governance? What is the definition of a social coalition, and how do we know a social coalition exists? How do we know a certain project is hegemonic? What is it that we need to observe to be able to confirm that a project is hegemonic? In the end, my impression is that the author has a preconception of what he wants to find, and then claims that he found it, without however going through the necessary steps of concept formation, operationalization, measurement, and empirical manifestation.

The lack of empirical substantiation of major claims is also due to important methodological shortcomings. Thus, the thesis seems to be mostly based on document analysis, but nowhere are we told how the analysis is conducted. This is problematic, as there are a number of methods how documents can be analyzed: quantitative or qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, policy network analysis, topic modelling, just to name a few. Given the sheer amount of policy documents, novel text as data methods could have been used. At the same time, the theoretical framework seems to call more for critical discourse analysis. In any case, the author needs to tell the reader which methods of data analysis he has used, and show how he has come to his conclusions.

I also wonder why documents are the only source of data. Would it not have been adequate to complement it with interviews or other forms of data generation in order to test the validity of the findings with information of different sources? This is particularly important in EU studies. As is well known, the EU is master in producing policy documents, but there is also a big gap between the rhetoric and the action. The same holds even more true for those on the "receiving end": national governments and local governments have to "talk the talk" in order to get money. But this does not mean that they also walk the walk. It would therefore have been crucial to use multiple methods of data collection.

Further, in terms of its literature review, the thesis is not fully satisfactory. It does not give the reader an adequate understanding of what the literature has already found out about cohesion policy, and where the thesis adds to existing literature. Thus instead of rejecting existing literature on the grounds that it is not critical enough, I would have wished to read the findings of existing literature first, to understand what exactly is missing.

Finally, in terms of its formal aspects, the thesis is generally doing an adequate job. However, it has some shortcomings: the tables and graphs are not sufficiently explained in the text, and there are a number of language mistakes. Some parts of the text also become unreadable because of the heavy use of abbreviations.

IV. Questions for discussion

1. What is the value added of conceptualizing Europeanization as a developmental fix, which is then "formed through the mutual constitution of (literal) infrastructural fixing, (intermediating) socio-institutional fixing, and (metaphorical) semantic fixing?" (p. 28). How is this different from claiming that cohesion policies seek to overcome tensions stemming from unequal development in the enlarged EU, and it does so by building institutions, investing in infrastructure, and providing discursive legitimacy?
2. Can you, based on one example, walk us through your method of document analysis?

3. You often claim that a specific strategy is hegemonic, or it is legitimized by integrating specific actors. For instance, on p. 182 you claim that “the coalition [that underpins the Moravian developmental strategy] became legitimized only when integrating the foreign capital interests and the endogenous innovation-led upgrade”. How do you know that the coalition became legitimized? Which empirical indicators would support your claim?
4. You argue that the cohesion strategy has a polarizing effect on development. Yet, your empirical analysis looks only at one growth pole. Can you establish a polarizing effect by only looking at one growth pole?
5. Can you elaborate more on double impact of the cohesion policy that you detect, namely that it both serves to make localities more attractive for FDI, and as a source of enrichment for local oligarchs? You seem (at least implicitly) to be arguing that both are desired and compatible outcomes, but are they?
6. Your thesis is overall very critical with the EU cohesion policy. Can you give us an idea of what the EU should have done to overcome unequal development? Do you have any evidence – from earlier historical phases or different geographical areas - that an alternative strategy has led to a more equalizing outcome?

V. Overall assessment

I recommend the thesis for defence, with the recommended grade of pass.



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