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ESF Forward Look

Central and Eastern Europe Beyond Transition: Convergence and Divergence in Europe

Executive Summary

The last 25 years have witnessed some of the most profound political, social and economic changes in Europe's history. The fall of communism at the end of the 1980s not only reshaped relationships within the continent against a background of rapidly increasing globalisation, but also provided fascinating insights into the potential for, and limitations of, the large-scale reshaping of society.

The Forward Look 'Central and Eastern Europe Beyond Transition: Convergence and Divergence in Europe' aims both to identify the developments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which would, could or should become hot research topics in the study of CEE as a part of European society and as such be promoted and endorsed by national and European grant institutions; and to outline ways in which foresight on CEE can contribute to the development of the social sciences in general and input important topics into transnational research.

To this end, the Forward Look report 'Central and Eastern Europe Beyond Transition: Convergence and Divergence in Europe' provides a range of specific conclusions and recommendations contributing to the formation of targeted projects which meet the needs of policy makers struggling with the future challenges that are now facing Europe and the wider world.

The full report can be downloaded from www.esf.org/publications/forward-looks

1. Forward Look Findings

Convergence and divergence

For Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) research funding organisations on the one hand and Western European ones on the other, the themes of 'Economic competition' and 'Economic policies' were in the top three in both groups of funding agencies. An emphasis on 'Regions, urban-rural issues' was more important in the East while 'Methodology' carried more weight in the West. Thus, the general result of the Survey was that the research priorities of foundations in Western Europe and CEE do have some significant differences. Overall, however, similarities are more characteristic of the general picture and it seems reasonable to expect that this trend will continue.

Scenarios for the future

The dual dynamics of EU integration and economic development will matter most for CEE looking forward to 2020. The scenarios and their underlying assumptions do not suggest a major new research paradigm replacing the Europeanisation research of the 2000s. Rather than assuming unidirectional adaptation

effects in CEE in the face of EU influences, this perspective highlights how domestic political actors might use and/or abuse the constraints and options offered by a Europeanised institutional, economic and social environment. If anything, the scenarios point to a need to see Central and Eastern Europe in a multi-level and multi-dimensional development setting.

2. Conclusions: Thematic Clusters

A number of forward-looking research topics have been suggested for each of the disciplines considered in the report. However, some interdisciplinary thematic clusters could be identified.

Populations in change

Out-migration, in-migration, regional population change, ethnic minorities and integration all affect the basic structure of our populations and alter social relations, governance challenges and economic opportunities. Many Western European countries have long faced similar challenges, particularly with regard to in-migration, which is a relatively new and as yet limited phenomenon in CEE, and more could be done to examine the possible divergences in priorities in different parts of Europe. In CEE, population shifts sometimes take place against the backdrop of still unresolved questions of indigenous ethnic minority integration, and while the danger of direct ethnic conflict has generally subsided, policy debate and political rhetoric about migration issues are particularly complex where they co-exist with older ethnic minority problems.

New Geographies of Europe

The 'return to Europe' – overcoming the West-East divide – has been a prevailing perspective on transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, and issues such as the economic division of labour between Western and Eastern Europe and how local governance and regional development are affected by EU cohesion funds will continue to need research. At the same time, geographic imaginaries are changing in Europe – a complex process in which the notion of Central and Eastern Europe will become more diffuse; and the recent financial and economic crisis has shown that the fates of many Western and Eastern European countries were much more inter-woven than amongst the CEE countries themselves. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe also play a role in expanding Europe's border further to the East, despite unease toward deepening cooperation with Russia, and the broader process of democratisation, including prospects for further EU enlargement, are crucial for Europe's future.

Recommendation 3**Invest in dedicated research infrastructures**

For transnational research projects really to achieve comparative results, it is essential that scholars have access to cross-national data and that such data are comparable with the rest of Europe and globally. According to the Forward Look survey, ‘infrastructure, data-bases’ is the research topic where expenditure by West European foundations exceeds that of CEE foundations most conspicuously.

Access to high quality national data resources from CEE requires targeted financial support for CEE data archives along with specific actions directed at such issues as standardisation, tools and services provision as well as training opportunities for data providers and users.

Recommendation 4**Encourage academic independence and research excellence**

Research ethics and developing a new kind of standard research culture are of crucial importance for the quality of the general societal and political environment in which research takes place. It is therefore also of relevance, when assessing research conducted in CEE, to compare the influence and ‘political embeddedness’ of social scientists compared to Western Europe. How are academic freedom and independence guaranteed in CEE? What are the standards of research excellence, and how and where are they produced?

Recommendation 5**Support CEE scholars in project leader positions**

The survey conducted as part of the Forward Look showed particularly low participation of CEE scholars as coordinators in EC-funded framework projects. While this situation continues, governments and policy makers in CEE have only reduced possibilities of influencing transnational research agendas. Many social scientists in CEE have considerable experience and competence in research project management, and require skilled administrative back-up rather than leadership training in order to coordinate major international initiatives.

Recommendation 6**Strengthen the interaction of social scientists and society**

A stronger dialogue should be established with policy makers in order to present to them the potential contribution of social sciences to social developments. Many academic researchers in CEE have good contacts with politicians and policy makers, and high level meetings with, for example, MPs and MEPs at national

and regional levels can assist in developing such a dialogue. Policy makers (the research recipients) should be involved in particular with regard to the potential impact of applied research.

Recommendation 7**Develop good governance of science and resources**

There should be regular meetings of researchers with research funders in CEE and the European Commission (ministries, research funding agencies, EC Directorates General). These should include briefings about potential research directions both in basic and applied research; mobilisation of national support for scholarly data facilities and the launching of specific programmes focusing on research infrastructures and data collection based on national data sharing policies; and action to ensure that peer reviewers from CEE are adequately represented in transnational actions.

Recommendation 8**Strengthen human capital and capacities**

Training opportunities should continue to be created for early career researchers. Care should be taken to ensure that young CEE scholars remain a priority and that tendencies for such career development opportunities increasingly to target Eastern European scholars from non-EU Member States should not jeopardise training provision for young scholars in other CEE states.

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The ‘Central and Eastern Europe Beyond Transition: Convergence and Divergence in Europe’ Final Report has been prepared under the responsibility of the Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS):
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