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Europeanization, Enlargement and Social Policy in Central and Eastern Europe

Alfio Cerami
Centre d'études européennes, Sciences Po,
117 Boulevard Saint-Germain,
75006 Paris, France.
Email: alfio.cerami@sciences-po.fr

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the relationship between Europeanization, Enlargement and social policy developments in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, it examines the importance of ideas, interests and institutions in the making of contemporary public and social policies, as well as focusing on other mechanisms that may lead to institutional change. Here, the "goodness of fit" thesis developed by Börzel and Risse (2000) is analyzed, and other elements that may lead to EU convergence are also examined. These elements are identified in the strategic negotiations of actors, in policy learning processes, in social policy diffusion of ideas and in the emergence of new forms of transnational solidarity. Contrary to common assumptions that address the role of EU institutions as being minimal in the formation of post-communist social policy, it is argued that the European Union did play a crucial role in the process of systemic transformation by helping the introduction of new *social policy ideas, interests and institutions*.

Introduction¹

After the completion of Enlargement on 1st May 2004 for eight Central and Eastern European countries² (CEECs) and the successful conclusion for Bulgaria and Romania on 1st January 2007, new and important questions must be raised on the future role of the European Union (EU) in ensuring that a clear social policy vision of reforms is implemented by the new Member States. The impact of the EU in the development of Central and Eastern European social policies is often addressed as having been limited (Ferge 2001; Sissenich 2003, 2005; Bafoil 2006, forthcoming). World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are, in fact, the most quoted international actors able to ensure the implementation of their social policy priorities (Deacon et al. 1997; Orenstein 2005; Müller 2004; Manning 2004). The three pillar scheme of pension, market-based health insurance, residual protection against unemployment and a basic safety net for those people in urgent need of assistance are the most notable examples of World Bank and IMF policy prescriptions. Furthermore, it could also be added to the critiques that the EU had no clear interest in promoting a strong European Social Model in the region due to the necessity (or will) of privileging macro-economic stabilization measures instead of welfare state expansion as well as to the fact that the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) does not represent such a powerful policy tool able to ensure full compliance to the objectives set at the EU level (see Ferge 2001; Bafoil 2006). However, and despite the fact that these statements are, to some extent, true, some important questions are still in need of an adequate response. Which are the social policy preferences of the EU? Have they coincided with the policy priorities of other international organizations or some specific characteristic is recognizable at the EU level? And, more importantly, in which areas was the EU successful? This paper aims at addressing these issues by exploring the relationship between Europeanization, Enlargement and social policy developments in Central and Eastern Europe. Contrary to common assumptions, it is argued that the EU did play a crucial role in the process of systemic transformation by helping the introduction of new *social policy ideas, interests and institutions*.

The paper is divided into three main parts. Part one examines the importance of ideas, interests and institutions in the making of contemporary public and social policies, but also focuses on the mechanisms that may lead to institutional change. Here, the shortcomings of an analysis only based on the "goodness of fit" thesis (Börzel and Risse 2000) are analyzed. Part two attempts to identify those social policy areas in which the EU has contributed mostly to change. Changes in pensions, health care, employment,

¹ This paper has been presented at the CONNEX PhD Workshop held in Paris on the 30th May 2006 at the Centre d'études européennes of Sciences Po, Paris. I owe a huge debt to Andrzej Rychard and to François Bafoil for valuable comments on this topic.

² Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

social inclusion and gender equality policies are briefly investigated. Finally, Part three scrutinizes more in details other mechanisms that may lead to EU convergence, such as interest negotiations, policy learning processes, social policy diffusion of ideas and emergence of new forms of trans-national solidarity, but it also discusses whether the Europeanization process has been characterized by inertia, retrenchment, absorption or transformation. The aim here is that of offering a more comprehensive approach to the study of the impact of Europeanization on national social policies.

1.1 Ideas, Interests and Institutions in the Making of Contemporary Public and Social Policies

The “Three I”, as Bruno Palier and Yves Surel (2005) call *ideas, interests* and *institutions*, are not new comers in the field of public and social policy. Other authors such as Hugh Hecló (1994) and Peter Hall (1997) had already emphasized their explicative possibilities. Only in recent times, however, ideas, interests and institutions have been the object of a lively academic debate. The notion that *ideas* may influence social policy change is indisputably intriguing, even though it should be first asked where *ideas* exactly influence policies. Agenda-setting, legislative processes, and implementation mechanisms are not “Wertfrei” (free of values) procedures, but rather they imply: (a) the crystallization of personal beliefs and opinions on what is addressed as a desirable policy; (b) the consensus among individuals and epistemic communities on what is useful and necessary for the country, regions or local areas; and (c) the conformity to a determined social policy paradigm, as Kuhn (1970) would put it. Policy discourses built on individual ideological preferences, as Vivien Schmidt (2002, 2006) has emphasized, may, in fact, greatly influence the final outcome of policy-making (see also Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). In the area of employment, Taylor-Gooby (2005) has demonstrated that a paradigm shift from passive benefits towards *activation* is occurring in France, Germany and the UK (see also Clasen 2000), while, on long-term care, a strong emphasis on home- and market-based provisions has now been put in place in France, Germany and Sweden (Timonen 2005). On old-age, the myth of an adult worker society (Larsen 2005), and of multi-pillar pensions (Bönker 2005) are the key social policy ideas shared now by most of European countries, whereas a new political agreement on social activation (Aust and Ariba 2005) and on gender equality are the key elements in social assistance and family policies. Nevertheless, despite the introduction of these new social policy ideas, the most important paradigm shift is, probably, the notion that social policy can be considered as relevant only if it is beneficial to economic development (Carmel 2005). This is substantially different from the policy discourse that existed during the *trente*

glorieuses of the welfare state, where social policies were intended to serve social objectives regardless of economic priorities.

Not only the identification of ideas is important, but also the classification of interests is crucial in understanding how public policies are conceptualized and implemented at national and EU level. Here, the focus is between the interests and the actions of actors, as well as on their strategic negotiations and interactions. Walter Korpi's *power resource model* (Korpi 1983) highlights, for example, the role played by class mobilization in the making of post-industrial welfare states. According to Korpi, the development of the welfare state in Europe should, first and foremost, be explained by the presence of strong social democratic forces, particularly present in the Scandinavian countries, which pushed for a socially responsible (or socially aware) capitalism. Similarly, Peter Baldwin (1990) has focused on the strategic interest negotiations of farmers in the making of Scandinavian universal social policy, as well as the role played by Bismarck in Germany in establishing the first social insurance system. According to Baldwin, not only the existence of social democratic governments pursuing social democratic interests were responsible for welfare state creation and expansion in Europe, but also the existence of particularistic policies preferred by the Scandinavian farmers or by Bismarck in order to ensure, respectively, a high level of social protection or preserving the stability of its government. Other interest-based explications look at the expansion of welfare programmes in Europe as a functional necessity of the state to deal with the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism (Polanyi 1944 [1957], Gough 1979; Offe 1984). The list of possible examples on the importance of interest negotiations could also include the tensions existing between EU, national, regional and local levels. In these cases, EU, national, regional and local actors are constantly engaged in strategic negotiations to promote or to ensure their interests through various lobbying activities.

Finally, both ideas and interests could not be expressed if the necessary institutions would not be in place. Although a precise definition of institutions is difficult to find, North (1998, p. 248) describes them as "the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction", in this paper I want to focus not only on the formal institutions that are put in place by governments in order to deal with specific administrative tasks, but also on informal institutions, such as the set of formal and informal norms that govern human behaviour (North 1998; March and Olsen 1989). In fact, political institutions (such as the parliament, the senate, the electoral system) are crucial in defining the rules of the political game, clarifying the boundaries of democratic and civic representation. Economic institutions, such as all organizations, establishments and regulations that

govern the markets (including Ministries of Finance, trade unions, chambers of commerce, etc.), provide, by contrast, an identifiable form to an unidentified entity, which is the "market". Similarly, legal institutions (such as courts of justice, supreme courts, penal and civic codes) state what citizens are allowed to do and not to do, delineating the borders of legality or, to use a sociological terminology, a socially accepted behaviour. Welfare institutions (such as pensions, health care systems, unemployment, family and social assistance policies), introduced with the aim of clarifying who is entitled to what and under which conditions, also define the boundaries of citizenship (see Marshall 1963, 1970; Bartolini 2005; Ferrera 2005). Finally, social institutions (such as the family, and civic associations) help the formation of people's beliefs, which are then translated in specific political and economic orientations. For these reasons, an analysis of policy change could not be complete, if the role played by ideas, interests and institutions is not seriously considered. However, it is important to remind that the relationship between ideas, interests and institutions is far from linear. Policy ideas may, in fact, produce a set of new interests that then turn into new institutions, while the presence of determined interests can foster new policy ideas that in turn may have an impact on the creation of new institutions. Similarly, already existing institutions create a set of related interests and expectations which then influence the policy ideas that have to be promoted. To summarize, it can be argued that these three elements tend to be interconnected each one producing a significant impact in the final policy reform process (Cerami 2006a).

1.2 Mechanisms of Institutional Change

How do institutions change? At first glance, this question may seem accurate, but is, in reality, an extremely problematic one, since a couple of important issues remain persistently neglected by such formulation. Do institutions evolve or are they introduced by design? And, if not then how are they really introduced? The literature on this topic is broad and increasing in recent years (see, for instance, Goodin 1996; Stark 1995; Offe 1996; Thelen 2004; Streeck and Thelen 2005), but, despite all efforts, no academic consensus can be found on how countries change their institutional structures. The approach preferred in this paper is that institutions tend not to be created from scratch or introduced by design, but rather they are built with pre-existing "institutional material" (Bafoil 2006, forthcoming). The main argument here is that contemporary institutions are the result of a recombination of preexisting features, with the main aim of bringing past institutional structures in line with new adaptational requirements (Cerami 2006b).

With respect to the impact that the EU institutions can have on institutional change, the most quoted approach is, probably, the one based on the "goodness of fit" thesis developed by Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse (2000). In its simplest version, policy and institutional change at national level tends to occur only if discrepancies between EU requests and the local situation exist (see also Börzel and Risse 2003). Other factors could also be included in this analysis, not necessarily dismantling the foundations of the "goodness of fit" thesis. These would involve, for example, the role played by pre-existing social norms in favouring policy and institutional implementation (Toshkov 2006) or the presence of similar interests among the actors involved in the reform process. As expected, numerous shortcomings to Börzel and Risse's thesis have constantly been highlighted during the years (see, for instance, Falkner et al. 2005; Falkner and Treib 2007; Bafoil 2006; Pasquier and Radaelli 2006), but, for brevity, only some alternative factors that may speed the transposition and implementation of legislations and policies at national level will be mentioned. As Toshkov (2006, pp.7-9) summarizes, these might include: (1) the existence of governments positioned to the right of an ideological Left/Right continuum; (2) the orientation of governments towards traditional values related to national sovereignty; (3) the civic and political support for EU Integration; (4) the effectiveness of domestic governance; (5) the absence of numerous veto points; (6) the existence of strong political pressures for compliance to EU rules; and (7) the presence of unfavourable economic conditions, such as unemployment.

These seven main factors are not enough to completely abandon the "goodness of fit" thesis, but, at least, show that one must be seriously cautious about its explicative possibilities. The extent to which EU legislations and policies can be transposed and implemented, in fact, can also be greatly influenced by the ideological preferences of governments and actors, by the administrative capabilities of a country and the presence of veto points, as well as by the existence of economic and political vulnerabilities (see Featherstone 2003; Radaelli 2003).

2.1 Ideas

In the previous section, some theoretical considerations on the "goodness of fit" thesis have been conducted. This section proceeds with an investigation of the social policy areas where the European Union has been capable of influencing national policy-making through the introduction of new social policy ideas, interests and institutions. In the new Member States this has occurred through "binding recommendations" associated to the process of Enlargement, as emphasized by Heather Grabbe (2001), but also through cognitive processes, as now discussed by numerous authors (Palier and Guillén 2004;

Ferge and Juhasz 2004, Lendvai 2004, 2005; Keune 2006; Manning 2006; Cerami 2006b).

The new social policy ideas introduced by EU institutions, notably by the DG Employment and Social Affairs, in the field of employment and social policy have coincided with the so-called European Employment Strategy (EES), which was launched at the Luxembourg Jobs Summit of November 1997, which then became a key component of the Lisbon Strategy of 2000. The key elements of the EES concern an improvement in four pillars: (1) entrepreneurship; (2) employability; (3) adaptability; and (4) gender equality³. Despite criticism concerning the ambiguity of the European Union in promoting a clear social policy orientation (Manning 2006), it is undeniable that these four pillars became common topics of discussion among Central and Eastern European policy-makers, as well as also extremely recurrent themes in the *National Action Plans*⁴. Of course, official statements are not automatically translated into real policies, but the role that ideas developed at EU level have had on national policy outcomes should not be underestimated. Erhel et al. (2005) have shown, for example, that, politicians and policy-makers in France have denied, even in the face of evidence, the real impact of EU institutions on national policy-making. The reason for this denial can be explained by the French politicians' fear of their voter's opinion, who might see any form of EU influence as a lack of personal and national autonomy. On the opposite side, it should also be mentioned that other countries, such as Italy, have, sometimes, overemphasized the EU constraints on national policy-making, especially when painful austerity measures had to be introduced. In this case, EU influences have become, at the same time, an object to hide, but also to show to the public opinion.

In each case, as Mandin and Palier (2002) have demonstrated, European institutions have contributed to promote a cognitive and normative harmonization of social security reforms in Europe through the enforcement of a common language, of a common vision of reforms and of common objectives. These correspond in the field of employment to keywords such as *activation*, *making work pay*, and other *workfare* related issues. This also can involve other social policy areas. In the field of pension, for example, the EU has repeatedly called attention to the necessity of also including, in the establishment of a financially stable and generational viable pension system, a social variable (Mandin and Palier 2002). The EU ideas in pension reforms have been expressed by the formula "adequate and sustainable pensions", which has become a terminology very often used

³ See *European Employment Guidelines* available at URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/elm/summit/en/papers/guide.htm

⁴ A complete list of *National Action Plans* is available at DG Employment and Social Affairs web-site. URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/employment_strategy/national_en.htm

not only in the *National Strategy Reports*⁵, but also among policy-makers in the region. In the field of health, the new keywords introduced by the EU have been *accessible, high quality and sustainable health and long-term care*. A continuous reference to these keywords can be found not only in the documents *Review of Preliminary National Policy Statements on Health Care and Long-term Care 2005*⁶, but also in various web-sites of the Ministry of Health, which are more directly aimed at explaining the new social policy approach of governments. Finally, in the field of social inclusion, which according to the understanding of the EU should include wide-ranging and all-embracing policies, the reference texts are the *National Action Plans on Social Inclusion*⁷. Here, old and new Member States have been called to express their target in accordance to national and EU priorities, but, in the case of Eastern Europe, these priorities have tended to match more clearly the EU expectations.

2.2 Interests

The acceptance of new social policy ideas through a formal agreement on the new policy priorities that had to be promoted has inevitably coincided with the development of new interest-based relations. If the reforms of the pension systems are taken into account, the implementation of policies aiming at ensuring *adequate and sustainable* pensions has resulted not only in an improvement in communication and in strategic interactions between the Ministries of Finance and the Ministries of Social Affairs, but also in an improvement in communication and in strategic interactions between public and private pension schemes providers. In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, the Ministries of Finance have, very often, engaged in a violent debate with the Ministries of Social Affairs in order to ensure the financial stability of the system. The officials of the Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs, by contrast, were more prone to express their serious concerns with the possible social repercussions of proposed reforms (the side of the "adequacy" of pensions). The most notable cases here are represented by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, where reform proposals have continuously come and returned from one Ministry to the other, but no country can be addressed as an exception. On the other hand, the introduction of private tiers, now on a compulsory or voluntary basis fully introduced in all post-communist countries, has implied that the private pension funds have vigorously engaged in lobbying activities to ensure that their interests were, at

⁵ A complete list of "*National Strategy Reports (2005): Adequate and Sustainable Pension Systems*" is available at DG Employment and Social Affairs web-site. URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_protection/pensions_en.htm#2005

⁶ A complete list of "*The Review of Preliminary National Policy Statements on Health Care and Long-term Care*" is available at DG Employment and Social Affairs web-site. URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_protection/health_en.htm

⁷ A complete list of the "*National Action Plans on Social Inclusion*" is available at DG Employment and Social Affairs web-site. URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_inclusion/naps_en.htm

least, heard, if not clearly supported by governments. Not very differently, the reforms of health care in the region, characterized by the introduction of health insurance in almost all countries⁸ and by the establishment of additional private health funds have implied the same inter- and intra-ministerial communication and bargaining activities. This time, however, the ministries in charge were the Ministries of Health and the Ministries of Finance. Bargaining and lobbying activities, in order to ensure that the EU call for an *accessible, high quality and sustainable health and long-term care* would be met, have also included private health funds managers as well as associations of medical personnel. On employment policies, the four pillars of the EES (increasing entrepreneurship, employability, adaptability and gender equality) have resulted not only in an increase in communication and interest negotiations between national, regional and local actors in order to ensure, for example, that the new active labour market policies were successfully implemented at local level, but it has also coincided with the development of new interest-based relationships between associations of employers, employees and local authorities. Not dissimilar considerations can be made for those policies that aim at ensuring social inclusion. In this case, a more active support for vulnerable groups has required an increasing communication and negotiations between the different levels of the decision-making and implementation process, where the growing number of NGOs involved is only the most visible example of this process.

2.3 Institutions

The third element of this analysis concerns the development of institutions, which have been called to ensure that the ideas and interests could easily find a place where voices could be heard. The EU has been actively involved in institution-building in the region even before the opening of official negotiations for membership. The activities of the EU in this sector have primarily been financed through the PHARE programme in place since the early 1990s, with an exceptional effort, considering the small budget possibilities of the EU, of 16 677 million € in commitments for projects, 11 573 million € was effectively paid by the European Union during the period 1990-2004 (European Commission 2005, Annex). Despite the evaluation of PHARE-sponsored projects have not always been positive⁹ (see Cerami 2006b, pp. 66-69), and the money spent for the modernization of

⁸ The sole exception is represented by Latvia which has system strongly based on tax-financing.

⁹ **Interview 2 Hungary:** "Problems with the PHARE project are well-known. Now, the main focus is on "Twinning" and institution building. There is, however, a lack of reliable EU civil servants (experts). "For example, in this Ministry we [currently] have a guy from Denmark [I ask if he was a junior or senior expert. The response was: junior expert], who has no idea about his job. We have to give him an office and we also have to teach him what he has to do. At the end, we're providing him with technical assistance and not [the other way around]. I understand that this is useful for his career, but this is not supposed to be our job". [...] "PHARE project is better than NO PHARE project. PHARE has a symbolic meaning. It is very useful to show to national governments the areas where attention is needed. For example, the new projects on Social Dialogue or Improvement of Employment Offices". **Interview 9 Estonia:** All problems of bureaucracy in the EU are confirmed: "These are well-known problems. Nonetheless, writing PHARE proposals, which is true in that they

the social security system corresponded approximately to only 3.6 per cent of total budget during the period 1990 to 1998 (De la Porte and Deacon 2002; Lendvai 2004) and to 3.2 per cent in the following years (Cerami 2006b, p.67), it cannot be denied that the role of the EU in institution-building, as a whole, has been extremely important. In fact, a brief look at the *PHARE Annual Evaluation Reports* available from 1998 to 2004 shows an innumerable number of projects sponsored and co-financed in all countries in the most disparate areas of social protection, including: (a) the implementation and strengthening of administrative capabilities in sectors related to safety at work; (b) gender equality; (c) employment promotion; (d) the management of health, pension and employment funds; (e) the modernization of social assistance and labour offices; (f) the correct development of business and tripartite relations; and (g) the re-enforcement of administrative capacity for the future management of Structural Funds. In addition to these, bilateral and joint-projects financed directly with the Member States through the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) should also be mentioned.

Even, perhaps, more importantly, the EU has not only helped the creation of formal institutions as mentioned above, but also the crystallization of informal institutions (see also Sabel and Zeitlin 2006), that is, those related to the formal and informal norms that govern the behaviour of policy-makers (North 1998; March and Olsen 1989). Unfortunately, the measurement of formal and informal norms is not an easy task. Psychologists and researchers should, in fact, find a way to understand how and to what extent external EU-sponsored ideas have contributed to the personal orientations of policy-makers, excluding other possible socializing factors (such as discussions with colleagues). The role played by the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in this indirect process of institution-building can, perhaps, be an emblematic example. Starting from the assumption that the OMC is an indirect form of governance that works through non-hierarchical steering processes (Börzel et al. 2005), convergence towards EU level priorities takes place through "mutual learning", not an aseptic process, with different means (guidelines, indicators, peer-reviews, etc.), as well as also regrouping different actors in similar arenas of decision-making (the Commission, the Member States, the

are very complicated, is also very useful to us, because you need also experience of writing a project proposal. PHARE will help us to learn how to apply for Structural Funds. Structural Funds are now the main priority. In 2004, when we hope to become members, we will not have access to PHARE money anymore, but to Structural Funds! **Interview 10 Bulgaria:** "It would be undemocratic to say that the EU "experts" are too expensive. The problem is that they're not always serious. We don't need experts, who treat us as unskilled civil servants. When you talk with "experts" (from the EU or from Western countries), you have almost always the feeling that they know what is always best for you. They better know what should be done. It is particularly annoying the fact that they still think that you have to be trained from the basics. Every time a new expert comes, he/she always starts from the very beginning (ABC)". **Interview 11 Latvia:** "We already knew about the dispersion of PHARE money through Western consultancies. However, we hope that through the new decentralized strategy for accession of structural funds, things will change. [...] Even if the rule of origin of materials and equipments will certainly favour Western Europe, this is a price that we accept to pay. We are interested in buying technical equipment of good quality, rather than cheap, but bad equipment".

social partners, and the representatives of civic society) (see Mandin and Palier 2002). In this context, Europeanization results not only from a process of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, paradigms, styles or “ways of doing things” (Radaelli 2003, p.30), but also as a “meaning making” mechanism (Lendvai 2005), where an “instrumentally rational¹⁰” (Zweck-rational) behaviour, to use Weber’s terminology ([1922] 1968), is aimed at bringing about a change in policy-making. It is, in fact, questionable, how the successful adoption of the majority of an estimated volume of about 80.000 pages of rules, containing more than 1000 directives (Toshkov 2006) has been the result of simple necessity to meet the requirements for joining the EU (“goodness of fit” thesis), without a serious commitment in changing the way how these prescriptions were perceived by national authorities. Here, it is argued that EU legislation and policies have not only been adopted and implemented, but also metabolized by the decision- and policy-makers of the region.

3.1 Interest Negotiations, Policy Learning Processes, Social Policy Diffusion of Ideas and Emergence of New Forms of Trans-national Solidarity

The previous sections have discussed the “goodness of fit” thesis by highlighting its shortcomings, but also the role played by the European Union in influencing the social policy-making process in the region through the introduction of new social policy ideas, interests and institutions. This section aims at discussing more in detail other factors that may be responsible for convergence to EU requests¹¹. These are identified in strategic negotiations of actors, in policy learning processes, in policy diffusion of ideas, as well as in the emergence of new forms of trans-national solidarity. In all these cases, compliance to EU requests results as a complex process of institutional and actor-centred bargaining activities¹², rather than simply the result of the “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1989).

In Eastern Europe, political actors have not preferred the *status quo* to reform attempts, even though each reform option would have implied welfare cuts and, as a consequence, possible electoral losses. Rather, Central and Eastern European politicians actively engaged in reconsidering the nature of previously established welfare institutions through vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking strategies¹³. However, strategic

¹⁰ In *Economy and Society*, Weber ([1922] 1968) identifies a fourfold typology of action: a) instrumentally rational (zweckrational) according to which individuals rationally choose means and action; b) value rational (wertrational) according to which action is determined by individual’s moral values or cultural beliefs; c) affective (affektuell) in which action is chosen on the basis of an emotional decision; d) traditional (traditional) in which action is determined by the “habitus” of everyday life.

¹¹ For an interesting debate on convergence at EU level, see O’Connor (2005).

¹² For the concept of actor-centred institutionalism, see Scharpf (1997).

¹³ For the concept of vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking strategies, see Mulé (2001), Natali and Rhodes (2004), and Schludi (2005).

interactions of political leaders with the aim of, at least, reducing the loss of electoral votes (vote-seeking), the continuation of their mandate (office-seeking) or the implementation of their preferred reform options (policy-seeking) have not been the only bargaining processes in the region. Lobbying activities have also involved numerous economic and social actors, which, for the first time in forty years, gained a voice in the public scene. These included, as highlighted, the most disparate players, from trade unions and associations of pension and health funds to organizations of pensioners, of women, of medical personnel, etc. What is important here to note is the ways how these lobbying activities have taken place. As noticed by Cornelia Woll (2006), while lobbying in the United States can be addressed as a well institutionalized and regulated activity, in which different interest groups directly and, sometimes, aggressively pursue mostly their short-term objectives, lobbying in the European Union (and particularly in Brussels) is primarily still a procedure conducted in a soft manner looking more at establishing long-lasting relationships based on consensus, rather than short-term gains. The main lobbying activity in Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, has been characterized by *incomplete dialogue*, whose success was severely constrained by the difficulties associated to the restructuring of the economies in transition. Trade unions in the region, for example, have only had limited power in blocking the introduction of austerity measures proposed by governments, since these austerity measures were often addressed as unavoidable in order to save the country from an immanent catastrophe. The particularly disastrous socio-economic situation, in fact, inevitably required a proactive approach, while passivity would have certainly become a deadly solution. This should, however, not lead to the false conclusion that no influence from private interest groups has occurred. In the Czech Republic and Slovenia, for example, trade unions and associations of pensioners succeeded in blocking the introduction of the three pillar scheme of pension (Fultz 2002), while in Hungary and Poland the discontent among the population for the most recent reforms in pension, health care and protection against unemployment have led politicians to expand, instead of drastically cut, the access to benefits.

Not only strategic interactions have contributed to the social policy reform process, but also policy learning dynamics¹⁴. As mentioned, the most important political science tool developed by the European Union to ensure cross-national learning has been the OMC, whose main characteristics lie precisely in improving participation through a common dialogue between different Member States and the EU (De la Porte and Pochet 2003; Pochet and Zeitlin 2005) through peer reviews, through the development of common

¹⁴ On policy learning, see Hall (1993).

indicators and, where possible, through common responses. The OMC is, however, not the only instrument put in place by the EU to ensure that its priorities were efficiently met. The *Reports on Progress towards Accession*¹⁵ were, in fact, aimed not only to evaluate countries' success in reforms, but also to highlight the areas and the countries where "best practice" was found. These documents, available from 1998 onwards, included a special chapter on "Social Policy and Employment", where the performance of each candidate country was evaluated and, if necessary, clear policy recommendations were provided. The value attached to these reports was not insignificant among Central and Eastern European policy-makers, since a negative evaluation would have had negative repercussions on further negotiations for accession, but also on the bargaining capacity for accessing to EU funds. Last, but not least, the ways how money were invested in projects by the European Union were also subjected to external evaluations, sometimes coupled to the presence of external observers in the recipient country (Lendvai and Stubbs 2006). This form of direct and indirect monitoring was important for compliance to EU objectives, since policy-makers were constantly called to ensure transparency and coherence in the implementation of co-financed projects¹⁶.

A further element of the EU influence on social policy making has concerned the emergence of new forms of trans-national solidarity due to the pressures associated with a Europeanized and globalized labour market¹⁷. As highlighted by Bartolini (2005) and Ferrera (2005), the welfare state in Europe has been functional to the development of the modern nation state by defining the boundaries of citizenship (see also Marshall 1963, 1970). Welfare institutions have not only created the legal conditions for the inclusion of specific professional groups, but also created the conditions for the exclusion of others, usually the "non nationals". In brief, what the European Union has succeeded in introducing in Central and Eastern Europe are new principles of *social sharing*¹⁸. Central and Eastern European workers will very soon freely move from one country to another, while their welfare rights, temporarily limited, will be allowed to travel with them (the issue of *portability of welfare rights*) (Cerami 2006b). As Leibfried and Pierson (1995, 2000) have affirmed, welfare rights and provisions in the European Union cannot be restricted within the borders of the nation state anymore, since workers, capital and services are also no longer confined within the national territory (see also Bartolini 2005,

¹⁵ A complete list of the "Reports on Progress towards Accession" is available at DG Employment and Social Affairs web-site. URL: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/index.htm>

¹⁶ **Interview 2 Hungary:** "The EU is in effect an active player in providing binding directives. This happens, however, indirectly through the monitoring process. Every six months, we at the Ministry have to deal with EU officials who come to monitor the real implementation of EU guidelines. Thus, the control, although indirect, exists".

¹⁷ On transnational solidarity, see Beckert et al. (2004); on transnationalism, see also Orenstein and Schmitz (2006).

¹⁸ For the concept of *social sharing*, see Bartolini (2005) and Ferrera (2005).

Leibfried 2005, Ferrera 2005). This involves a redefinition of new institutional principles and structures called to ensure the full implementation of the new rules of *social sharing*.

3.2 Inertia, Retrenchment, Absorption or Transformation?

As highlighted by numerous authors (Börzel 1999; Cowles et al. 2001; Héri-tier 2001; Héri-tier and Knill 2001; Radaelli 2003), Europeanization can be characterized by four possible outcomes: *inertia*, *retrenchment*, *absorption* and *transformation*. While *inertia* corresponds to either a lack of change, or, when change occurs, this tends to be involuntary and primarily the consequence of a "spill-over" effect (a change in one area that leads to a change in another area), *retrenchment* includes a "spill-back" effect (Schmitter 1971; Wessels and Faber 2006), in which a country resists EU pressures becoming increasingly less "European". Similarly, while *absorption* requires countries to absorb certain non-fundamental changes while maintaining others, *transformation* tends to correspond to the so-called *third order* (or *paradigmatic*) *change* (Hall 1993), in which a drastic revolution in the fundamental logic occurs (Radaelli 2003, p. 37-38).

How do we define then the outcomes of Europeanization in Central and Eastern Europe in terms of these four possible outcomes? Certainly, *inertia* has not been the main characteristic of the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. EU accession has, in fact, required great efforts to comply to EU prescriptions and this was not simply driven by pure economic reasons, but also by the fundamental necessity to ensure a "Return to Europe" while securing, at the same time, distance and autonomy from the Soviet empire. *Retrenchment* is also not a likely event in the future, even though the EU expectations of the new Member States will not be met. In fact, rejection of the EU would inevitably necessitate alternatives, which are not easily identifiable at present date. In addition, while many Western European countries can face disintegrating pressures from the public opinion (such as France) to go back to the pre-EU situation with the aim of increasing their national autonomy, this would certainly not be the case of CEECs, where the small size of their economy would make them even more vulnerable nations. What remains, at this point, is the dichotomy of *absorption* versus *transformation*. The most common assumption on the transformation in the region looks at transition countries as having been fundamentally transformed and modified in their nature from outside. Very little attention is given to the institutional peculiarities, both in terms of formal and informal institutions, which persisted during the Soviet and post-Soviet period. In this context, not an aseptic "copy and paste" *policy transfer* from one country, or an international institution, to another country or another institution seems to have taken place in Eastern Europe (Bafoil 2006), but rather a less passive *recombinant policy*

implementation of ideas, where policies and thoughts developed at the international level have been metabolized at the national level on the basis of the pre-existent socio, economic and political structures. In the case of the social security system, for instance, Bismarck features introduced in the pre-Soviet period (such as a social insurance system based on work-performance) persisted the communist social policy re-organization, being reinforced also in the post-communist environment (Cerami 2006b). *Recombinant transformation* has, in brief, been the main characteristic of the reform process in the region.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this paper has aimed at highlighting the important role played by the European Union in the Central and Eastern European social policy reform process. Contrary to common assumptions that emphasize the inadequacy of EU-sponsored reforms, it has been argued that the influence of EU institutions has been far from insignificant helping the introduction of new social policy ideas, interests and institutions. In addition, other factors that may influence institutional change in the region have briefly been discussed. These have been identified in successful strategic negotiations of actors, in policy learning dynamics, in policy diffusion of ideas, as well as in the emergence of new forms of trans-national solidarity. The paper has also called attention to the necessity of looking at institution-building as a complex process of institutional and actor-centred bargaining activities. Social policy reforms in the region could, in fact, be characterized as a continuous process of structuring, de-structuring and re-structuring of existing welfare institutions (Cerami 2006b), in which the EU was undoubtedly a central force. A question that still has to be addressed, however, is how will the EU succeed in influencing the social policy-making process in Central and Eastern Europe, once that the Enlargement process is successfully concluded. It cannot, in fact, be denied that the prospects of Enlargement have been vital in pushing the candidates towards EU convergence (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, 2005). The simple access to *Structural Funds* or subventions through the *Common Agricultural Policy* (CAP) could, in this context, not be sufficient or so effective as the previous decisions taken by policy-makers driven by a will for joining the EU. Strengthening the OMC can probably be seen as the best solution, but more research is needed on the future impact of EU governance on Central and Eastern European social policy.

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