
ECONOMICS

Sociology

Jiroudková, A., Rovná, L. A., Strielkowski, W., Šlosarčík, I. (2015), EU Accession, Transition and Further Integration for the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, *Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 8, No 2, pp. 11-25. DOI: 10.14254/2071-789X.2015/8-2/1

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Received: April, 2015
1st Revision: May, 2015
Accepted: June, 2015

DOI: 10.14254/2071-789X.2015/8-2/1

JEL Classification: F15, F33, N13

Keywords: economic governance, transition, Central and Eastern Europe, Euro, market economy, European Union, BRIDGE project.

EU ACCESSION, TRANSITION AND FURTHER INTEGRATION FOR THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

ABSTRACT. This contribution summarizes the outcomes of the research produced within the framework of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme Jean Monnet's BRIDGE project and focuses on the research dissemination in the field of economic governance that must be considered by the Central and Eastern European countries in the EU context. The topics mentioned above became the core of this special issue of *Economics and Sociology* journal.

Prior to the EU enlargement, the EU accession and the subsequent Euro adoption were viewed as a solution to economic problems such a lack of fiscal discipline, high inflation expectations, volatile exchange rates, and a lack of efficient investments into R&D and technology. The scope of these problems was defined by both the transition from the socialist to market economy as well as the economic policies preceding the EU entry. Moreover, the changing global environment and demographic trends also had their significant role. After the EU accession and a relatively short interim period, the financial crisis changed the EU economic governance and consequently the implications of the EU entry for the CEE.

Introduction

Accession, transition and further integration of Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) into the European Union (EU) call for the urgency to comprehend and assess the state of art of the transition and accession processes in these countries and their attitudes towards the further integration of the EU (see Rovná, 2002; or Šlosarčík, 2011).

With regard to the above, Professor Dunkwart Rustow (who is often called "the father of transitology") states that after the transformation of society towards democracy there has to be the final habituation phase where "gradually the rules of democracy become a habit" (Rustow, 1970). This process is usually supposed to take the life span of one generation. Oliver Williamson, a 2009 Nobel Prize laureate and a specialist on economic governance,

also estimates that this process might take some time, perhaps more than one generation (Williamson, 1985).

The present graduates were already born after the fall of Iron Curtain however the question arises whether the societies of Central and Eastern Europe have already finalized this phase and are fully established democracies with functioning market economies (Baldwin *et al.*, 1997). Some researchers think that this phase has not yet been reached. Thence, more in-depth research focused on the external and internal factors (such as political culture and path dependence, lack of political debate, weak civil society, corruption, clientelism in political parties, EU crisis, influence of Russia, etc.) that prevent the fully completed transformation (Koudelková *et al.*, 2015) is still in need to be done thoroughly.

1. Pitfalls of transition and EU accession

The main slogan of the year 1989 was “back to Europe”. With the collapse of the Soviet block and the emerging of the new democratic countries in the Central and Eastern Europe, the accession to the EU became the ultimate task and the widely-supported idea across all strata of the societies. The EU accession processes that included the harmonization of laws and regulations, as well as the implementation of Acquis Communautaire accompanied the transition and transformation processes. These two were not always identical and the specifics of the countries of CEECs played a certain role in both processes sometimes leading to distortions and unfavorable results.

The question now arises whether the economic transition and EU accession were successful and whether they influenced present development in the CEE countries and their attitudes towards further integration of the EU. The EU is finding itself at a turning point, on one hand economic governance is deepening whilst on the other hand the support of citizens and support of some member states is fading. The attitudes of CEE countries differ and are influenced also by the specifics of their transition and accession processes.

The BRIDGE project closes these gaps and provides a comprehensive overview and policy implications for the CEECs and their further role in the EU. Therefore, its contribution to the research and public debate appears to be of a great importance and relevance.

2. Main objective of BRIDGE project

The BRIDGE project examines the specifics of the development of CEE countries and the way how it is influencing their attitudes towards the EU. In addition, it attempts to grasp if and how the experiences of the countries in CEE could be used in the countries of the former USSR (e.g. Belarus, Georgia, or Ukraine) regarding the research, teaching and debating on the EU-related issues.

BRIDGE uses innovative approaches towards the research of Central and Eastern European countries' development and their role in the EU comparing the transitional theory of Rustow and its fourth condition referring to the democracy becoming “*the habit*” or “*the way of life*”.

The timing for such a research is just “*a life span of one generation*” The Copenhagen criteria serve as a point of reference and the research is divided into three working groups. The research aims to explain the specifics of the transition process and accession of CE countries towards the EU and will focus on the attitude of these countries towards further integration of the EU.

Furthermore, the project brings together experienced researchers and young postgraduate students (MA, PhD) and young researchers (Post Docs) from the countries of

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Central and Eastern Europe and their counterparts from other European countries who are focusing on the problems of Central Europe and their role in the EU.

The project uses the results from research to teaching. The innovation of the study programs will be done together and with active participation of students themselves.

Moreover, the project will transfer the results of the research to civil society, the public debates will be organized, materials will be accessible to broader public (politicians, journalists, civil servants, etc.), the “*table society*” debating the role of Central and Eastern Europe will be established and the links with some civil society groups will be formed (e.g. anti-corruption initiatives).

BRIDGE project heavily draws from the experiences with the pilot project GO EAST (Researching, teaching and debating the EU in Eastern Europe) for the countries of Eastern Partnership (Ukraine and Armenia) to transfer the knowledge and skills to Eastern European partners, which are in the process of transition themselves.

The project will employ social networks and modern ICT solutions to serve as a hub for researchers, students, journalists, politicians, civil servants and broader public regarding the transition process in Central and Eastern Europe and the attitude towards the further development of the EU. The lectures, power point presentations, contributions at the conferences and workshops, videos, picture and graphs will be displayed at the webpage.

Last but not least, the project involves the postgraduate students and establishes an interactive web platform for discussion and debates.

Conclusions

In order to fulfill the main goals of BRIDGE project discussed above, a comprehensive research on economic governance of the CEECs and their relation to the EU should be done. The special issue of the *Economics and Sociology* journal is based on the outcomes of this research conducted by the academics in several EU countries.

The economic governance research activities presented hereinafter in this special issue are examining various aspects of the nexus between the CEE-specific economic goals such as real convergence, changes in the EU economic governance such as emphasis on fiscal consolidation and deeper financial integration, and the post-transformation problems such as unfinished economic reforms. The aim of this is to put their work together and facilitate debate about policy lessons.

The dissemination on the economic governance conducted within the framework of the BRIDGE project examines the major challenges faced by the CEE in the area of economic governance together with their major determinants such as the implications of the transition from centrally planned towards market economy and the currently proposed deepening of European economic governance and regulation.

The results of the dissemination and its main policy implications might be of special relevance both for academics in the EU and in the former USSR countries, as well as for the policy-makers in Brussels, Washington and Moscow, who are in charge of shaping up the economic policies and the global strategies of tomorrow.

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