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Christina Minniberger

The Micro-Integration of Europe

The Functional Differentiation of Europe through Inter-Regional Learning

Nomos

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Herausgegeben von

PD Dr. Claudio Franzius,
Prof. Dr. Franz Mayer,
Prof. Dr. Jürgen Neyer

Band 6

Christina Minniberger

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Micro-Integration of Europe through Inter-Regional Projects

Heterogeneity, fragmentation or diversity – recent academic and political discussions on the current state of the European Union have been dominated by descriptions of its undeniable complexity. Going along the path of uniform European integration as envisioned by the European credo of 'Unity in Diversity' has been challenged by rising disparities of interests and capacities of the member states – a trend reinforced with each round of enlargement and each amendment of the founding treaties. Within this highly fragmented setting, the advancing of the macro-process of European integration is challenging, even leading to predictions of a "dead lock of integration" (Habermas 2008: 122). As one recent manifestation of this observation, the discussions on a European reaction to the financial and economic crisis have been impeded by an inability to agree upon a common European strategy. To enable progress despite the disagreements, the German chancellor Angela Merkel called for a multi-speed Europe of the willing member states (Financial Times Europe 2012).

While the consequences of heterogeneity on a deceleration of the 'grand integration' process receive consideration through concepts such as flexible or differentiated integration, the dynamics under the surface of the member states remain a "black box" to European integration studies. What is being referred to in this dissertation as the "micro-integration" of Europe is explicitly fostered by the European Commission who relies upon flexible, multi-level cooperation as instrument for achieving the 'grand' European strategies. This strengthening of instruments targeting at the sub-national level of policy-making also results from the fact that policy areas affected by the European political strategies such as the Lisbon Strategy, or more recently the Europe 2020 strategy, remain within the sovereignty of the member states – limiting the potential for deepening the macro-integration in those areas.

Currently thousands of regional policy-makers cooperate within inter-regional projects dedicated to the ambitious goal of transforming the European Union into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" (European Council 2000: 1). Within the Interreg

programme, European regions voluntarily exchange "best practice" programmes supporting the regional development and innovation systems within Europe.

Within this dissertation thesis those inter-regional networks are understood as "Micro-Europes" as they comprise similar diversities of interests and structures as observed on the level of the member states.

So far, the discussions on the European integration process and the role of inter-regional cooperation have been led separately. This dissertation aims at highlighting the inter-linkages between the separate debates and introduces the learning-perspective for capturing subnational cooperation in the frame of integration: first, inter-regional project networks are manifestations of a trend towards a thematic differentiation of integration; second, as a consequence of heterogeneity, the understanding of integration is currently reconsidered by the inclusion of learning as step on the ladder towards integration.

Therefore, this dissertation thesis aims at answering the following research questions: Which consequences does the heterogeneity of interests and structures have on the European integration process? And, which lessons can be drawn from the learning processes within the "Micro-Europes" of inter-regional cooperation?

1.1.1 Theoretical Framework: Differentiated Learning within the European Union

Developed for a European Union of five founding states, the grand theories of European integration lay their focus on the homogeneous deepening of formal integration between the formerly independent states. In line with the enlargement of member states and European competences, this understanding of integration has been challenged by the increase of the structural heterogeneity within the borders of the European Union. Two tendencies can be observed in recent academic debates: first, a softening of integration which leaves analytical room for capturing cooperation and learning processes under the umbrella of European integration, and second, a differentiation of the integration process which leads to deeper integration based on joint interests. Therefore, this dissertation sheds light on the micro-integration of Europe – the gradual deepening of integration within flexible spaces driven by the thematic interests of policy-makers throughout Europe.

Softening of the Integration. While early definitions of integration emphasised the shifting of loyalties and competences towards a new center (e.g. Haas 1961), more recent definitions of integration recognise the gradual evolution of integration - providing explanations for the grey area between the separation and the integration of units. Adding to this discussion, Wallace (1990) goes on to describe integration as the establishment and development of intense and diverse patterns of relations among initially separated units. For understanding those diverse patterns of interaction, Zito and Schout have introduced the concept of learning as analytical lense capable of highlighting the "micro-processes" behind the European integration (2009: 1103). Those 'softer' definitions of integration build on the metaphor of integration as "ladder" whose balks represent the gradual process towards integration through the establishment of cooperation and learning (Dyson and Sepos 2010: 4). Within the Babylon of analytical learning concepts, the concept of lesson-drawing introduced by Rose (1991; 2005), provides a categorisation of learning processes on the "ladder" towards European integration. The basic idea of lesson-drawing is the voluntary learning on past experiences: "Confronted with a common problem, policymakers in cities, regional governments and nations can learn from how their counterparts elsewhere respond" (Rose 1991: 3-4). The learning on policies and programmes covers the processes "in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas" is transferred from one political setting to another (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996: 344). In line with the metaphor of the "ladder", lesson-drawing builds upon a graduation of learning processes – from the sole inspiration taken from other programmes, to their photocopying.

Differentiation of the Integration. When widening the understanding of integration towards 'soft' cooperation within Europe, the landscape of integration – with its spatial borders and eligible actors – changes. While the macro-integration builds on formal decisions taken by the member states, the micro-integration through learning and cooperation inherits a broader flexibility towards the actors and mechanisms of integration. Within European studies, the theoretical concept of differentiated integration provides a framework for positioning flexible cooperation within the broader context of integration. The theoretical concept of differentiated integration "allows member states to cooperate at different levels of integration" (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012: 299) and is defined as "the process whereby European states, or sub-state units, opt to move at different speeds and/or towards different objectives with regard to common pol-

icies" (Dyson and Sepos 2010: 4). The reasons for differentiation can be summarised under the following question: "who is willing and able to integrate" (Wessels and Jantz 1997: 345)? Depending on how European policy-makers respond to this question, the thematic policy areas or the set of participating actors may vary – leading to a Europe of multiple speeds or variable geographies. In the most flexible specification, the European Union might resemble a market of opportunities where member states "pick-and-choose" their integration priorities. While the discussions on non-homogeneous integration in the 1990 s have been focused on the level of the member states and the 'grand steps' of integration (such as the European Monetary Union), recent works have taken on a broader definition of differentiation. Among others, Holzinger and Schimmelfennig (2012) and Dyson and Sepos (2010) propose extended categorisations of differentiated integration including informal integration dynamics as well as multi-level differentiation. The focus is therefore being shifted towards voluntary and flexible differentiation which is driven by a joint functional core around which flexible spaces of willing and capable actors evolve.

This dissertation aims at understanding the consequences of a rising structural and 'soft' heterogeneity within the European Union on the European integration process. Therefore the concept of lesson-drawing – for operationalising the integration dynamics in Europe – is combined with the theoretical framework of differentiated integration which allows for categorising the functional and spatial consequences of differentiation. By combining the findings on the 'softening' of the integration process through learning with the concept of differentiation, three lessons can be drawn for the theoretical analysis: First, the heterogeneity of the European framework increases the relevance of differentiated micro-integration processes, second, the relevance of a Europe à la Carte built upon voluntary, thematic interests of policy-makers increases, and third, in line with this trend towards a stronger functional differentiation, a new territoriality within the European Union is observable – besides the national borders, sub-state, supra-national, trans-national, cross-border or inter-regional spaces are carved out.

Summing up, the theoretical contribution of this dissertation thesis is two-fold: first, this thesis aims at applying the concept of differentiated integration, especially the works by Stubb (1996), Leuffen et al. (2013) and Dyson and Sepos (2010), to 'soft' integration on the subnational level; second, this thesis aims at using the concept of lesson-drawing for capturing and understanding the processes leading towards a differentiated, soft

integration of Europe. By combining the perspective of learning with differentiated integration, the thesis proposes a frame for adequately capturing the micro-processes of European integration and for classifying the findings within the wider frame of differentiation within Europe. The application of this frame on the micro-integration within Europe, provides insights to the question how heterogeneity is being overcome within inter-regional settings, while the European macro-integration is challenged by the heterogeneity of interests and capacities.

1.1.2 The Empirical Analysis: Cooperation and Lesson-Drawing within Interreg

Within the fragmented reality of European policy-making, the design and implementation of flexible governance modes increases in importance. The relevance of network-like approaches based on "non-hierarchical linkages between a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to a policy" is perceived as an approach for overcoming challenges of heterogeneous structures and interests (Börzel 1998: 254). One manifestation of a flexible, functionally focused governance instrument is the inter-regional project cooperation within the European Union's regional policy. Located under the umbrella of the European Regional Development Fund, the programmes support cooperation and learning between non-bordering European regions on topics of 'European importance'. Precisely, the programmes are understood as operational arm for implementing the European political strategies, such as the Lisbon Strategy, in the member states and regions. As policy instruments, inter-regional cooperation projects are described as "non-binding forms of EU policy making and integration which signal the emergence of a new mode of governance through 'facilitated coordination' alongside the traditional governance by hierarchy which characterized the 'Community Method' of regulation" (Colomb 2007: 350–351). Through these instruments the European Commission encourages bottom-up initiative, fostering the creation of inter-regional networks but also fostering intra-regional networks within the regions (Ansell 2002: 320).

The Interreg programmes are dedicated to "bringing together authorities and other actors at regional/local levels, to enable them to learn from each others' experiences in the fields of innovation, knowledge economy, environment and risk prevention" and based on the gathered experiences, to

transfer programmes and policies from one region to another (Interreg IVC Evaluation 2013: 8). Within each project network, actors representing European regions cooperate for a time frame of three years. The underlying political intention is the achievement of the European strategies such as the Lisbon Strategy by improving regional policies in the areas of innovation and environmental protection. From a European point of view, the objective of Interreg is to promote an European added-value through "voluntary, multilateral processes of cooperation, exchange and learning running over several years between various types of actors mainly at sub-central levels of government" (Colomb 2007: 350). Within the three strands of Interreg, the Interreg C programme is characterised by the highest degree of diversity manifested in three dimensions: first, spatial diversity is required for each Interreg C project including independent, non-border regions from all directions of the European territory; second, the institutional distances between the regional policy-makers representing the regions is wide-ranging as Interreg is open to public authorities, regional business agencies or research institutes; third, the learning within Interreg C is challenged by the thematic complexity of transferring regional policies and programmes between diverse regional settings.

Within regional studies Interreg projects have been subject to empirical analysis but the works have been restricted to projects within the Interreg A and B strands which are both focused on 'harder' forms of cooperation such as the establishment of cross-border institutions or common investments in infrastructure (see for example Dühr et al. 2010; Colomb 2007; Böhme et al. 2003). On the contrary, the effects of projects financed by the Interreg C programme as 'softest' strand of Interreg focused on inter-regional learning and experience exchange have not been under analysis so far. Therefore, the qualitative approach of this dissertation thesis provides a unique framework for capturing 'unmeasurable' exchange and learning processes as well as the outcomes of these processes.

The selected case study of this dissertation thesis is the Interreg C project "Know-Man: Knowledge Network Management in Technology Parks" established under the thematic priority of "Innovation and the Knowledge Economy". The objective of "Know-Man" was to improve regional development and spatial innovation policies by exchanging and transferring regional innovation programmes between six European regions (KM Application Form 2009). Those programmes serve as "best practices" of initiatives strengthening the cooperation between the aca-