

## **Pathways to sustainability in Central and Eastern Europe: practices, policies, and discourses**

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Sustainability - a global buzzword in policy making - has drawn as much interest as criticism (Nebbia, 2012; Turcu, 2012). First and foremost it drew criticism for its vague and elusive meaning and lack of clear definition. Even the emerging sustainability science admits to weaknesses in building sound theoretical and methodological paradigms (Anderson, Teisl, & Noblet, 2016). The commonly acknowledged definition of general sustainability (including its three pillars – ecologic, economic and social) invokes a vision of human welfare that takes into consideration inter- as well as intra-generational equity, and which does not surpass the limits of Earth’s natural resources. In other words, it is a vision of a society which does not live at the expense of future generations (Passerini, 1998). In 1987 the seminal report “Our Common Future”, or else Brundtland Report, defined sustainable development<sup>1</sup> as development, which "... meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED]1987:43). Since then, it has been adopted by most international organizations and nation states in programming their policies towards sustainable development and the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 only confirms this direction.

Despite its global resonance, the topic of sustainability and sustainable development remains under-researched in post-socialistic societies. This calls for research aiming to fill the void around the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability in Central and Eastern European Countries. In 2014 under the auspices of UNESCO, Eastern European leaders met at the Bratislava Summit on “Sustainability Science in Central and Eastern Europe” and issued a memorandum where they acknowledged that: “While strategies, institutions and instruments exist, which have the potential to make our region more sustainable, they are either not well used or not effective enough”.<sup>2</sup> Among the reasons for what they acknowledged to be a failing set of strategies, they mentioned: fragmented approaches, over-bureaucratization, inappropriate indicators and lack of personnel and financial resources for participatory implementation and monitoring. Secondly, they recognized that most post-communist countries struggle to meet the requirements of market economy with sustainable development, in particular because of the low influence of civil society organizations addressing sustainability. On the other hand, however, the long isolation from international markets, coupled with growing criticism of the quality of products supplied by international chains, has resulted in establishing a wide range of low resources lifestyles, or what could be called a “quiet sustainability”(Smith and Jehlička 2013, Visser et al. 2015). The scene of transition towards sustainability also has its newer actors, such as a variety of social movements (food sovereignty, slow cities, de-growth,...) which have just started to expand into Eastern Europe yet nevertheless might pave the road to more sustainability and resilience building.

The situation around sustainability needs a more nuanced approach; we think it is productive to question narratives that yet again cast Eastern Europe as “lacking the prerequisites” for reaching the development levels of Western (European) countries. The problem with such narratives is that they cast Eastern Europe as outside global processes and spur research that looks for causes in the specificities of Eastern European situations, rather than also inquire whether and how the institutional blueprints created by Western and international organizations are so marred in complexities, that their application and

implementation might be extremely uneven. The Summary Statement of the Bratislava workshop assumes that the road to sustainability is a relatively straightforward one, and that what is keeping Eastern Europe behind is again, as in so many other fields in which the post-communist area has to “catch up” with the West, a lack of the proper capacities. However, since the mid-2000s research has pointed out that the effort to promote sustainability is often given a cold shoulder or even met with resistance by those civil society groups considered to be lacking from the region. This resistance or opposition is not so much due to a lack of acceptance of sustainable development, but rather due to the top-down and Western-inspired character of state efforts – backed by European institutions and international NGOs – to pursue sustainable development; local practices or approaches barely receive attention and do not find their way in official policy papers (Smith, Kostelecký, and Jehlička 2015, Mincyte 2011, Aistara 2009). Furthermore, the “polysemic” nature of the official sustainable development discourse spurs conflict between competing notions of sustainable development; for instance, while some understand the concept as referring to restoring the balance between agricultural practices, landscape, and ecodiversity, others see in it the restoration of “pre-agricultural natural processes” and participation in a global market for biodiversity (Schwartz 2005, 314).

The emecon Special Issue on Sustainability in Central and Eastern sheds light on the challenges and opportunities for the pathways to sustainability - in broader – social, economic and environmental sense. The articles deal with one or more of those three dimensions of sustainability and look at different practices, policies or discourses of sustainability and sustainable development in Central and Eastern Europe. They analyse the role of formal institutions and organisations (national and international), as well as activities of different social movements and community actors mobilising around the issues of sustainability and resilience building. We especially welcomed papers addressing the questions of social and economic sustainability, as the challenges within these two dimensions have received even less attention than the ecological/ environmental one.

The perspective that emerges from the articles in this issue complicates the picture of the EU as an actor that fails to consider local complexities and the “polysemic” nature of sustainable development agenda. On the one hand, the article by Brendan Duprey shows how in Bulgaria, the EU and a coalition of NGOs fighting for the preservation of natural habitats fail to consider the opposition of local businesses to the preservation agenda. On the other hand, Benedetta Cotta shows in a Polish-Hungarian comparison of waste management and recycling legislation and projects backed by the EU that the EU holds the key to more effective implementation of sustainable development goals: participation, the wide-ranging inclusion of Polish state and non-state actors in project management ensures the success of projects. In her paper, Marta Klekotko also stresses the importance of wider societal involvement in sustainability initiatives. The key question however is not just one about expanding the list of groups and stakeholders, but about how to facilitate the communication between the various groups with differentiated interests, in particular because various groups possess and deploy different forms of knowledge, with different degrees of legitimacy attached to them. In the remainder of this Introduction we provide a summary of the articles and the contributions they make.

Klekotko’s paper provides a broad theoretically-driven overview of the many facets of the concept of sustainable development, which co-exist in the contemporary global development studies by which the paper contributes greatly to the socio-political and theoretical debate about the complexities of relations between the economic and social development, on the one hand, and the ecological constraints on the other hand. The discussion points to several crucial parameters of sustainable development, which next to its classical three dimensional character (economic, ecological, social), include such characteristics as durability, self-support and integration. Klekotko’s paper addresses critically also the political dimension of the sustainable development and its role in the debate on the limits of paradigm of endless economic

growth, which despite the apparent evidence for its unsustainability, still remains the key mantra of contemporary visions of progress among the political elites. Furthermore, the paper discusses the changing meaning of sustainable development and the role of civil society and governance structures as mechanisms of the integration of different actors and their arguments into decision-making over the course of development. It elucidates the vital role of civil society, which is considered both a dimension of sustainable development and a facilitator for sustainable development strategies. The empirical analysis of the civil society's role in development of sustainability in rural Poland delivers a range of convincing arguments on the validity of governance mechanisms for success in developing sustainability projects.

Similarly to the conclusions drawn by Klekotko, Benedetta Cotta recognizes that participation is one of the most essential and most pressing elements in construction of sustainable solutions in the area of environmental protection. In her paper, Cotta examines the relationship between European and domestic actors involved in EU-funded projects in municipal waste management in Hungary and Poland in the years 1998–2013, where she establishes that the primary factor determining the successful and sustainable implementation of EU programs is the horizontal and co-operative decision making process. In Cotta's paper we can find an elaborate and insightful analysis of theoretical framework for analysing the external assistance to less developed countries, where models of vertical and horizontal assistance are discussed. On their basis Cotta formulates two hypotheses: **H1:** *The likelihood of sustainability of EU-funded projects increases with the number of financial, knowledge and capacity transfers from EU to CEE countries*, **H2:** *The likelihood of sustainability of EU-funded projects increases with the establishment of a wide cooperation and multiple alliances between EU and domestic state and non-state actors*. The following detailed investigation of development of waste management programs in Poland and Hungary delivers an in-depth knowledge of processes and mechanisms of cooperation between the domestic and international actors, which sheds light on the potential for creating sustainable solutions as the result of these processes and stresses the quality, rather than quantity of external assistance and they key success factor.

Brendan Duprey provides a timely and in-depth analysis of the implementation of “Natura 2000” – the largest network of protected areas in the world. His focus is on Bulgaria and on the implementation in this country of the EU's directives on the protection of birds and habitats. The article studies how despite the EU criticizing the government of Bulgaria and launching infringement procedures, the government did not stop the construction of wind turbines in the protected areas, at least in part claiming to be following directives regarding the encouragement of renewable energy production. Duprey interprets the results of his analysis as evidence for the EU's very limited enforcement capacities in particular in post-accession situations; and as evidence for the need not only to castigate member country governments for the failure to implement EU decisions, but also to assist them in their implementation efforts. For instance, he uncovers that authorities approved many of the wind turbines construction projects without requiring investors to provide evaluations of their projects' impacts. Assisting national and local authorities in learning to work with project evaluations, and in “distinguishing costs and benefits of environmental versus economic-oriented legislation” might be successful ways of furthering the implementation of Natura 2000 directives. The wider problem however that the article alludes to is the European Commission's apparent assumption that there are “no trade-offs between the various objectives embedded into EU laws”; this assumption however is problematic, and the Bulgarian case documents the conflictual situation that arises from trying to simultaneously implement habitat and renewable energy directives.

Simon Schöning and Vasyl Zubaka focus on the problems of the transition to renewable energy in Ukraine; here the argument is not so much that authorities fail to consider trade-offs

between different policy objectives, but that they fail to take into account local complexities. Schöning and Zubaka draw attention to the extent to which energy remains one of the most corruptible, inefficient and socially vulnerable sectors of the country. They warn against a reform of the sector that focuses only on price liberalisation, as price liberalisation hardly addresses the problem of only a few economic actors controlling most of the country's energy production. Furthermore, much of the population distrusts governmental interventions, and measures to extend financial support for citizens opting for renewable energies (solar panels, for instance), are hardly popular. Schöning and Zubaka argue instead for "democratising" the access to renewable energies and providing safety nets to the population, in particular once energy prices have been liberalised. Here too, as in Duprey's analysis of Natura 2000, the initial set of policy proposals fails to take into account the complications surrounding implementation, in particular if the project is resisted by powerful business actor; in the words of the authors', "the conflict of interest between existing market players and the uptake of alternative sources of energy is evident".

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sustainable development is not synonymous to sustainability. For criticism on sustainable development see: Gómez-Baggethun, E., & Naredo, J. M. (2015). In search of lost time: the rise and fall of limits to growth in international sustainability policy. *Sustainability Science*, 10(3), 385–395.

<sup>2</sup> Summary Statement of the Bratislava workshop "Sustainability Science in Central and Eastern Europe", June 2014.

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