

Received: August 2022

Accepted: March 2023

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2023.hss.01

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## **EU CORE AND PERIPHERY: APPLICATION OF STRATIFICATORY DIFFERENTIATION THEORY TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION**

This paper brings sociology to European integration. The author claims that even though the European Union is a unique entity, it can still be analyzed in the framework of international relations. Therefore, the sociological theory of stratificatory differentiation can be applied to European integration. From the formal point of view, all EU member states are equal and remain sovereign actors in international relations; the EU is conceptualized as a network organization. However, this paper concludes that there is an unofficial stratification in the organization based on cultural and economic differences. Western core EU states (France and Germany in particular) constitute the higher stratum; the new (post-communist) member states occupy the subaltern status. The tentative claim of the author is that this unofficial stratification results in a differentiated impact of EU policies on the interests of EU member states.

**Keywords:** EU integration, stratificatory differentiation, international relations, EU eastern enlargement, neoliberal capitalism, EU foreign policy.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

From formal point of view the principle of sovereign equality governs the relations between EU member states. It is frequently stressed that the EU is composed of states treated as equal partners who take decisions on the basis of negotiations and as a result, the interests of all states are taken into account to the same degree. This approach is difficult to reconcile with the realist approach in international relations. Sociologists can provide interesting insights into the problem applying differentiation theory in its stratificatory form. International society is differentiated functionally into politics, economy or law. Segmentary stratification relates to tribes, nations and states. Stratificatory differentiation refers particularly to relations between empires or great powers and the rest of international community (Albert et al., 2013).

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“Stratification relates to a structure of social relations differentiated into categories of super- and subordination”. Stratification may result in creating hierarchies. Hierarchy, in turn, refers to a form of rule. It is a governance relation in which authority allows the top states to restrict the autonomy of states occupying lower tiers. Substantial inequalities between states with reference to economic, military and symbolic power result in differentiated impact on the course of events (Viola, 2020b). Hidden hierarchies can be created within international organizations as a result of which states are able to influence other states or even in extreme cases control them unofficially. As a result, worldwide and regional centers and peripheries are created. Central states are regarded as more advanced than ‘backward’ peripheral ones. Structural and symbolic violence is frequently applied to influence weaker partners.

This paper claims that the sociological notion of stratification can be applied to international community and international organizations, including the EU. The aim of the paper is to analyze the process of EU enlargement and internal stratification within the EU with due regard to Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). The tenets of stratificatory differentiation theory will be tested by analyzing the eastern EU enlargement process and EU foreign policy.

## **2. MAIN TENETS OF STRATIFICATORY DIFFERENTIATION THEORY**

Sovereign equality is a strictly legal and formalistic concept. The term sovereignty means a potential ability to act independently in international relations. However, in reality, open or hidden hierarchies are created with the strongest states on top. European integration studies have a lot to gain from thinking in terms of stratificatory differentiation theory. Sociological theories referred to such inequalities between states in the past. For instance, the distinction between core and periphery is central to dependency theory, historical sociology, international political economy, or World-systems theory which claim that there are centers and peripheries of global capitalism (Albert et al., 2013).

Historically, the modern international system was created as a result of the Westphalian peace which stipulated that the Roman Emperor had no authority over German states. This rudimentary international community was widened and included new members on condition of adopting the rules of ‘civilized nations’. The system was based on insiders (European powers) and outsiders (mostly Asian states). Belonging to the system potentially gave advantages in the form of recognition and protection against an invasion on the part of European great powers (Farr, 2005).

In the course of time it turned out that the insider status did not necessarily protect or gave equal rights. Internal stratification was created within the system. Even in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century countries were divided between great and small powers and the former ones governed the system. States were differentiated on the basis of ‘civilization’, degree of development, or national power. Great powers assumed responsibility to manage the system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Viola, 2013).

The same rules exist nowadays. For instance, in the UN system special rights were granted to great powers forming the UN Security Council. In contemporary international organizations inequalities between member states of an organization are quite common. They are often based on voting rights which are derived from the population or GDP of states. Therefore, the admission to the system does not guarantee equal access to governance or resources (Viola, 2020a). In case of the EU, informally, the trusteeship of the

organization was assumed by the Franco-German axis which is often labelled as the driving force of European integration (Hendriks, Morgan, 2001).

R. Taras points out that stronger states may label weaker states in international relations, imposing on weaker states their own opinions. Currently instead of labeling them as less civilized, referring to democracy or human rights is preferred. In this manner, a hierarchy of prestige is created in international relations (Taras, 2013, pp. 1-2). The strongest members of institutions can reprimand the states which are transgressors even though all members are formally equal. Smaller states who oppose great powers can be discursively delegitimized in an effort to force them to abide by the rules (symbolic power). In this manner internal inequalities within the system are upheld and reproduced. With this respect (Viola, 2020b) writes:

Another way in which core states exclude or marginalize other recognized insiders is to discursively delegitimize them. By arguing that certain actors are no longer 'like us' because they abide by alternative norms or goals, insiders can be effectively excluded or marginalized. This happens when non-compliant insiders are recategorized as distinctly 'other' through labels such as 'pariah', 'outlaw', 'recalcitrant', or 'rogue' state [...] These labels signal that a member has gone wayward, that it is no longer fulfilling the collective norms and is threatening the stability of the system.

To sum up, both the international system and international organizations often do not provide for equality even nowadays. They are often not neutral but rather the arenas of power struggle. As a result, the distribution of resources and privileges connected with membership is not equal. The inclusion of new states creates incentive for core players to create new forms of hierarchy and in order to retain their status of rule setters who govern the system. The new and weaker actors are mostly rule takers who are dominated and occupy the peripheral status. International organizations enable cooperation and problem solving but on the other hand they contribute to the creation of a stratified system of political equals and unequals. The coexistence of equality and hierarchy is a constitutive feature of the international system and institutions (Viola, 2020b).

### **3. CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF WESTERN EUROCENTRISM**

From theoretical point of view several theories were advanced to explain the lingering Eurocentric attitude of the West. These theories include orientalism and post-colonial theory which are complemented by theories providing geographical boundaries of cultures advanced by Huntington and Balibar.

After the collapse of communism Western powers were able to construct the world in their image. It applied to democracy, human rights and economic liberalism. In civilizational terms, post-communist EU candidate states were constructed as not entirely European. They were 'othered' or Orientalized in the framework of the remnants of Western eurocentrism. It is pointed out that the formation of Western European identity since the 16<sup>th</sup> century was done by distancing itself from the cultures of the East. The West was supposed to be, progressive, civilized and even biologically superior and the East was labelled as backward, irrational and racially inferior. For the first time, the above mentioned issues were analyzed more extensively by E.W. Said. The author states that the legacy of

Orientalism remains alive in Western Europe to this day also on scientific grounds. Orientalism still remains not only an academic tradition, but it also influences the perception of the East by state governments or international business (Said, 1979, pp.201-204). This is summarized by Skórczewski (2009) in the following way:

In order to consolidate its optimistic image as the embodiment of the Enlightenment ideals of progress, the West “needed” a less developed, uncivilized, backward and immature Other, whom it had to properly represent and name, and thus endow with the identity assigned to it. The “invention” of this “Other” was a consequence of the discovery of the perfect matter for its creation, provided by the “peripheral” areas, stretched between Germany and Russia and covering territories from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans (with minor exceptions, such as Austria). The West accomplished this “invention” with the pens of its enlightened thinkers: Fichte, Herder, Voltaire, Rousseau, followed by others – diplomats, thinkers, scientists, travelers and writers.

From geographical point of view the works of S. Huntington and E. Balibar are important. E. Balibar points to the existence of concentric circles in the practice of European integration, according to this concept, Western Europe is considered the cultural center of the continent. The farther to the east the more the cultural distance from the center increases, that is, the distance from the center indicates the degree of civilizational development of the region (Balibar, 2004).

S. Huntington (1993), in turn, drew a dividing line between Western and Eastern cultures based on religious affiliation (Russia remains outside the circle of Western civilization). The countries of Central and Eastern Europe were considered sufficiently developed to qualify for EU membership after undergoing a process of socialization, while the post-Soviet space was considered foreign to Europe i.e. ineligible for participation in the structures of the West (Ukraine, Russia). The latter two countries already belong to a separate civilization, according to Huntington. There are also differences between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary and the Balkans (Romania, Bulgaria). The Balkan states had difficult access to EU structures because they remained for a long time under the domination of Turkey and were therefore associated with the East and all its negative characteristics. Although the Baltic states belonged to the post-Soviet space, S. Huntington counted them as part of European civilization (Boatca, 2013). Thus, it turns out that the access to EU membership was quite closely correlated with the Eurocentric concept of the backward East and the boundary between Eastern and Western cultures drawn by S. Huntington. The conceptions of Europeanness and the practical dimension of European integration were created by state governments and EU institutions on the basis of the proximity of a region to European cultural centers.

Some conceptualizations of the EU classify it as an empire. According to its own narrative the EU uses its power and leverage to shape their sphere of influence contributing to the spread of such universal values as democracy, free markets and human rights. On the one hand, unfavorable views of the EU hold that the EU controls its peripheries in the same way as ancient empires. The relations between the EU core and its peripheries are not equal

as the organization enforces also unofficial rules on the basis of its alleged cultural superiority with the aim of promoting its economic interests<sup>2</sup>.

#### 4. STRATIFICATORY DIFFERENTIATION THEORY AND THE EU EASTERN ENLARGEMENT

Stratificatory differentiation theory states that organization insiders are better positioned than applicants for institutions are not neutral arenas but sites of power and even dominance. The unequal status of insiders and outsiders resulted in forced integration of the CEECs into the EU by way of external governance. On the basis of the indicated cultural divisions and their subconscious application in the practice of the European integration process, the West believed that it had embarked on a great civilization mission, the overriding principle of which remains "the West knows best". The source of this approach was the tradition of Western eurocentrism, which in the past set itself the goal of a civilizing mission in the countries it colonized. As a result, the West approached the candidate countries in a paternalistic way Orientalizing them (Hooper and Kramsch, 2007) and treating as a repository of Eastness (Covacs, Kabachnik, 2001; Kuus, 2006).

As a consequence, the EU adopted the concept of returning to Europe the candidate countries from Central and Eastern Europe. These countries were to undergo a process of socialization into Western superior values (Europeanization). In legal and institutional terms, this process had to take place before accession. The candidate countries were faced with higher requirements in this regard than Spain, Portugal and Greece. In the early stages of integration, the candidate countries often experienced the phenomenon of idealizing the West, which resulted in unopposed compliance with Western integration plans and resulted in a teacher-student relationship.

J. Böröcz claims that in consequence of this approach to European integration the EU concluded asymmetric association agreements with the candidate countries which awarded greater benefits to EU member states (Böröcz, Sarkar, 2005).

The conditions for economic integration were imposed on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and were not negotiable (exceptionally, transition periods could be obtained). Thus, the rules of the EU's economic field were imposed from above (impositional Europeanization) (Jakubek, 2008). For example, financial deregulation mainly promoted the interests of the largest financial institutions in the world, which were concentrated in the United States and the richest countries of Western Europe. Liberalization took place in areas beneficial to the EU (e.g. financial markets) and not in areas important to the candidate countries (e.g. labor market liberalization). As a result, the workforce from the candidate countries had to wait for labor market liberalization around 20 years from the signing of the association agreements, and labor markets for workers from EU member states were opened immediately. As a result of the shock therapy, candidate

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<sup>2</sup> See edited volumes: *Empire's New Clothes: Unveiling EU Enlargement* (2012). J. Böröcz, M. Covacs (Eds.), Telford: „Central Europe Review” [Access: 15.08.2022]. Access on the internet: <http://aei.pitt.edu/144/1/Empire.pdf>. *The European's Burden: Global Imperialism in EU Expansion* (2006). Engel-Di Mauro, S., ed., New York: Peter Lang Publishing. The problem of economic core and periphery is raised by several theories. For example: Wallerstein, I. (2005). *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham: Duke University Press. See also edited volume, *Theories of International Relations* (2005). S. Burchill, A. Linklater, R. Devetak, J. Donnelly, M. Paterson, C. Reus-Smit, J. True (Eds.), Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

countries experienced a severe economic downturn losing around 20 per cent of their GDP. One should therefore talk about structural violence rather than integration on an equal footing which resulted in sealing the CEECs middle income and peripheral status within the EU (Böröcz, Sarkar, 2005).

There exists extensive literature on the performance of transition economies from the 1990's onwards. The general conclusion is that those economies which joined the UE have been closing the development gap. On the other hand, there was no convergence at least until the eastern enlargement. Between 1989 and 2003 the CEECs' economies grew by 21 per cent whereas the EU-15 economies grew by 32 per cent (Kornai, 2006). Between 1989 and 1998 the majority of the CEECs' economies contracted (with the exception of Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia) (Cai et al. 2003). Another problem pertains to the structure of their economies. B. Farkas (2011) argues that the result of the economic transformation is the creation of another model of capitalism in the new member states which is characterized by asymmetric interdependency as a result of a pernicious division of labor. The transition economies are complementary to EU core economies and perform mostly low value-added and labor intensive activities, such as assembly. As a result, in the CEECs a dependent capitalism evolved (Nölke, Vliegthart, 2009). Referring to the transformation Neunhöffer et al. (2006) write about 'questionable results'.

The candidate states were treated as outsiders which determined the economic results of the eastern EU enlargement. The rules of integration were hardly negotiable and the applicant states were rule takers. The candidate states were subjected to EU rules but they did not reap the benefits of membership for over ten years. This transitional period resulted in exacerbated economic and social problems for the candidate states. Therefore, one can conclude that the period of preparation for EU membership brought more benefits for EU member states than the candidate states which corroborates the main assumptions of stratificatory differentiation theory.

In spite of the fact that the results of the economic transformation of the new member states are mixed, Western scientists, politicians and 'eurocrats' are still convinced that the civilizing mission was successful and that it at least significantly accelerated the modernization of the CEECs'. The external governance of the candidate countries during this process is considered to be right, which suggests that these states would not be capable of modernizing on their own.

## **5. APPLICATION OF STRATIFICATORY DIFFERENTIATION THEORY TO EU FOREIGN POLICY**

Stratificatory approach to international relations indicates that after the inclusion of outsiders into the system, they retain their underprivileged status. After an expansion the most important powers aim at recreating stratification and exclusion to lower the costs of expansion. This time insiders are divided on the basis of common interests which means that states not aligning with great powers are excluded from sharing the benefits of membership. "Empirically, the three types of goods provided by inclusion in the international system – existential, governance and substantive – are not equally distributed among members" (Viola, 2013).

Stratificatory approach to European integration indicates that after the inclusion into the EU, the status of CEECs improved as they were entitled to the same treatment under EU law. However, core member states created new and often unofficial rules of exclusion which

resulted in the creation of internal stratification within the EU. This phenomenon will be exemplified by analyzing EU foreign policy in connection with two different geopolitical 'mental maps' of its member states.

EU foreign policy is carried out mainly within the legal framework created by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) which was introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht. EU foreign policy also includes European Security and Defense Policy. However, foreign policy should be treated more broadly. According to S. Keukeleire and J. MacNaughtan (2008) the term EU foreign policy should encompass such issues as trade, human rights, democracy or development policy.

Classical geopolitics has been criticized for the lack clear connection between geography and the power of nations. It has been stressed that even if such correlation existed in the past, nowadays it nearly disappeared as a result of modern technology. However, Geopolitics has been evolving and now it encompasses numerous fields of research. One of them is 'mental maps' of national elites which determine national foreign-policy goals. The most important of them is the conception of land powers opposing maritime powers. In other words, the Anglo-Saxon world represents maritime powers and it is opposed by Asian states as land powers (Sykulski, 2014). The EU has been divided over the affiliations of its member states. CEECs countries are afraid of Russia and as a result these countries pursue the transatlantic agenda. The Franco-German axis formally adhere to the transatlantic alliance. On the other hand, they are attracted to Asian land powers due to their economic importance. What is more, some elites of France and Germany claim that these countries should shed the American dominance as they would be better off creating Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis which would be extended to China or Shanghai (Grossouvre, 2002; Heins, 2006; Czubocha, 2013).

These diverging geopolitical conceptions constitute one of the major obstacles to creating a common EU foreign policy. Namely, most new EU member states viewed the Russian Federation as a security threat and as a result they pursued their Atlanticist agenda. On the other hand, the Franco-German axis aimed at creating an alliance with Russia which would be a counterweight to American unilateralism (Dinan, 2005; Czubocha, 2013; Piccardo, 2010).

First important clash took place in connection with the Irak war in 2003. Several months before the accession of CEECs into the EU. The Franco-German axis opposed the American invasion and the new member states supported it. French president, Jacques Chirac remarked undiplomatically that "these countries have been badly brought up" and they "missed a good opportunity to shut up" (McNicoll, 2008).

After the eastern enlargement such conflicts lingered around the relations with Russia and always in connection with the role of the United States in Europe. Poland promoted the project of the Eastern Partnership with a view to bring Ukraine and Georgia to the EU and weaken Russia. From obvious reasons Germany was not interested in giving this project more importance due to its anti-Russian underpinnings. As a result, even though the Eastern Partnership materialized in 2009, it was never a priority for the organization as it would put in jeopardy the relations with Russia.

Problems related to energy supplies created additional conflicts within the EU. EU energy dependence on Russian supplies was perceived as a security threat by East-Central Europe whereas Germany intended to base its industry on Russian energy supplies. As a result, a conflict erupted over pipelines from Russia to EU countries. The aim of Poland was to force Russia to include Ukraine into the pipeline projects. It resulted in an agreement

between Russia and Germany to build the North Stream pipeline bypassing Poland. Poland was not able to block the project which made it potentially possible to cut off gas supplies to the whole region. The disagreements over the broader energy policy lingered for years and they were costly especially for Poland as the opposition towards German and Russian projects resulted in higher gas prices for Poland and attempts at presenting Poland as a non-cooperative state which blocks EU initiatives (Czubocho, 2009).

The strongest EU member states often treat EU foreign policy as an extension of their own national foreign policies (Pietras, 2006). Within the European Union it frequently happens that smaller states change their position for fear of future retaliation on the part of the biggest EU member states (Gegout, 2010). On several occasions the new member states were reprimanded for not accepting the policy of the Franco-German alliance. The new member states are regarded as junior partners who should follow the advice of the biggest member states (it refers to the Franco-German axis in particular). Whenever the junior partners intend to express their own opinion and follow their own path against the will of the biggest EU member states, they are labeled as countries hampering EU integration for they presumably do not understand EU values. Thus, obtaining the status of EU insiders was not enough for East-Central Europe to achieve equal status with the core EU states.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that from the point of view of international law the Russian aggression of Ukraine of 2022 vindicated the geopolitical conceptions of the new member states who viewed Russia as a security threat. Broader cooperation between the Franco-German alliance and Russia is no longer possible in the current circumstances and the reliance on Russian hydrocarbons turned out to be a problem. The claims made by the Western EU member states that the new member states undermined European unity acting as the American Trojan horse in the EU has turned out to be unfounded.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As a result, in view of the provided evidence, it can be stated tentatively that the EU is not exactly what it claims to be as the member states are equal only from formal point of view and as a result the interests of member states are served differentially. Formally equal EU member states are internally stratified occupying different places in the unofficial EU hierarchy. The organization includes core states (mostly France and Germany) and the lower tier is occupied by the new, post-communist member states. Relations between them are not entirely based on the rules stressed by the official EU narrative according to which: sovereign and equal partners jointly run EU affairs by way of negotiations, bargaining, serving the interests of every member state to the same degree.

The enlargement was carried out on the basis of the forced introduction of EU law and the neoliberal economic model which resulted in 15–25 per cent recession in the candidate states and their deindustrialization. Their economies recovered as dependent ones servicing the most advanced economies. The fact that the CEECs countries have been closing the development gap after the accession to the EU does not mean that they may join the core EU economies.

After the inclusion of the post-communist countries into the EU, the core states created new forms of exclusion and in consequence, internal EU stratification was exacerbated. The new member states supposedly failed to internalize EU rules or in other words they were not Europeanized to a sufficient degree. Non-cooperation on the part of the new member states triggers attempts at marginalization by discursive delegitimization. It involves



questioning their Europeanness or full internalization of EU values. Such problematic states are called undemocratic, not upholding the rule of law, or nationalistic. Non-cooperative EU insiders are recategorized as 'others'. Recalcitrant member states are given signals in this way that they put the system in jeopardy. Warning signs can be presented by EU institutions or member states' politicians. The European Commission may threaten the new member states with noncompliance proceedings or a suspension of structural funds. Currently Hungary and Poland are criticized for the lack of democracy and the rule of law.

These processes resulted in paternalistic attitudes towards the new member states and coercing them into following EU integration projects prepared in advance by the biggest partners, e.g. strategic partnership with Russia which involved energy projects. The practice of EU decision making indicates that the interests and benefits of the biggest EU players take precedence over the concerns of the new member states. It refers both to economic and foreign policy issues in the framework of broader geopolitical and geostrategic considerations. Geopolitics created one of the most important rifts within the EU. The Franco-German axis aimed at creating a special partnership with Russia. The new member states, in turn, pursued their Atlanticist agenda for which they were reprimanded on several occasions. Therefore, the portrayal of the EU as a network without clear governing centers is only partially true as mutually beneficial cooperation does not explain in its entirety the functioning of the organization.

On the other hand, it is debatable whether the post-communist states would be better off today without participating in the European project. Uneven distribution of membership benefits does not preclude gains for peripheral states. It would be difficult to calculate the real benefits of EU membership as the results depend to a degree on the choice of indicators, methodology and the length of the sample period. One can argue that even the subordinate status within the UE brings more benefits than staying outside the organization. It is not clear whether the CEECs states would have been able to achieve a higher rate of economic growth and development without EU membership. In case of choosing their own development path, they might have descended into oligarchic political and economic systems which would have dampened their development prospects. Another problem is connected with trading partners. These countries lacked the clout of China and therefore, it is not obvious whether the EU would have granted them access to its market on privileged terms. Difficulties connected with trade could have hampered the CEECs' economic development.

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