

Why Sociology of Transformations?

After the unprecedented constitutional, economic, and political transformations of the former communist countries, large differences between East and West Europe still exists in the results of sociological surveys and statistical records. At the same time, other tensions known from the history of Europe come back to the forefront of debates on European integration. The relative economic success of northern countries and failure of Southern Europe in confronting the recent economic crisis lead to questions of more profound cultural differences in dealing with economic issues.

The experience of state bankruptcy, lack of economic competitiveness, environmental pollution and other phenomena symptomatic of the falling of “real socialism” are part of the collective memory of Central-Eastern Europeans, who still remember the time before the transformation. This suggests the relative importance of the political and economic order as compared to purely cultural factors, and gives more weight to the question of what would be the right political and economic strategy for Europe as a whole. On the other hand, it may be understood as a question of the deeper drawbacks of socialism’s cultural and anthropological presumptions.

The decreasing quality of European democracy raises a number of problems, such as the condition of political processes in individual member states, the prerequisites of moral universalism on the part of individual European “citizens” engaged in the political process, and the potential of openness and universalistic orientation of particular national and ethnic cultures making up the European home.

Since 1989, there have been several periods and strands of thought applied to Eastern and Central European societies. The period after 1989 was full of optimism and expectations, and mostly based on theories of transition towards market economy and democracy and catch-up approaches deriving from evolutionist and liberal theorizing of modernization and convergence theories.

In the late 2000s, illusions were gradually dissolving, and new realistic approaches to assessing reforms and transformations appeared, stimulating debates about the outcomes of social change. What did post-communist countries come up with? There were some critical views, ‘unexpected’ consequences discussed by sociologists using dependence theories (core and periphery of Europe), dependent market economies. Institutional sociologists suggested examining competitive

assets of institutions, as well as the variety of capitalisms which emerged in the region, to find out how differences and specific features of the transformations related to differences in context. The recent economic crisis has raised questions for the development of transforming societies in relation to their internal situations (the rise of social inequality and nationalism, the dropping level of institutional and personal trust, the maintenance of social cohesion and integrity), as well as their relations to Europe and the global world.

What are the *driving forces* of social transformations? What are the impacts of global forces? How do social transformations overlap with *cultural change*? Are they affected or constrained by such determinants as values, *habitus*? What are the consequences of certain social transformations with respect to social structures of society, emerging social inequalities, etc.? Do we overestimate or underestimate the inertia of precious institutional experience and culture? Is there a certain evolutionary logic to this process, etc.? Comparative studies are seen as the major source of data to address these issues and test the applicability and explanatory power of different approaches.

Micro-level analysis and interdisciplinary approaches take into account changes in individual lives, identities and solidarities, and focus on everyday life practices in the particular spheres of social life tied to certain local and historical contexts. This will definitely contribute to the understanding of actual social life in transforming societies.

Research Network (RN 36) 'Sociology of Transformation: East and West'

Understanding the need for better theories and research on the impact of social transformations, scholars from different countries formed a working group. The Research Stream 03 was first constituted in 2003, at the 6th ESA conference in Murcia as a platform for discussing the issues of social transformation in Eastern European countries and their integration into united Europe. At that time the RS03 was convened by Peeter Vihalemm (University of Tartu, Estonia) and Chris Rumford (Royal Holloway, University of London). During the 7th ESA conference in 2005 in Torun, the Research Stream titled its session "Enlargement of the EU – lessons from the past and prospects for the future".

At the 8th ESA conference in 2007 in Glasgow the RS was titled 'Enlargement of the EU' and convened by Peeter Vihalemm and Marju Lauristin (University of Tartu, Estonia).

At the 9th ESA conference in 2009 in Lisbon, the RS was titled 'East and West in Europe' and convened again by Peeter Vihalemm and Marju Lauristin.

In 2011, the Research Stream took further steps in Geneva under the title 'East and West in Europe: Two Decades of Transformations'. It was coordinated by Peeter Vihalemm and Elena Danilova (Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy

of Sciences, Moscow) and tasked with examining two decades of social change in Europe, beginning with the collapse of the wall between East and West. The collapse of the Communist system and enlargement of the EU and NATO during the last two decades have brought about fundamental changes in European social spaces as well as in social relations of old EU member states with new ones, applicant countries and their neighbors. Social transformations in Central and Eastern European countries drew great research interest, with multiple angles to consider. Fifty papers were submitted, on different sociological aspects of social transformation and European integration processes.

The initial objective of the stream was to unite efforts of sociologists throughout Europe, interested in the social transformation processes going on in Europe after the collapse of communist regimes, with a focus on the countries in Eastern and Central Europe including Post-Soviet countries.

The RN 36 has emerged from the integration of Research Stream (RS) activities and mutual efforts during a few last conferences of European Sociological Association. The RN title was accepted by a majority of members: "Sociology of transformations: East and West". The Research Network 36 positions itself as a space for scholars who are interested in the field of social transformations in European countries that have already joined EU or constitute its neighbors and partners in the broader sense. We want to bring together younger researchers and prominent scholars, so that they have a chance to share their thoughts and views and collaborate in the future. Comparative studies can be one of main foci of the collaboration.

The Research Network 36 brings together researchers from competing paradigms (Polanyi's 'great transformation' concept, modernization theory, path dependency theories (institutionalism, civilization theories, etc.), multiple modernities, etc.), and aims at linking sociological debate on the European transformations to the wider global processes.

The RN 36 attracts European scholars working with both macro-level and micro-level research. Its objective is to encourage interested parties to participate in the RN, develop research and enhance theoretical discussion on social transformations.

Among present activities of the RN 36 one can find:

1. Organising a number of sessions and a business meeting during ESA biennial conferences (the closest – in 2016 in Sibiu).
2. Managing an e-mail discussion list or establishing a web-based forum.
3. Organising a biennial mid-term conference or workshop in between ESA conferences.
4. Contributing to the ESA journal and special issues, and the ESA newsletter.
5. Developing and strengthening linkages with other RNs in the ESA and similar working groups in national sociological associations across Europe and elsewhere.

25 Years After the Communism: East and West of Europe in Search of Solidarity

All the questions mentioned above call for credible sociological explanations based on long-term empirical research in different countries. The heritage of the Solidarity Movement, which began in Poland 25 years ago, could be a good starting point for such a debate, so the last conference took place in Gdansk, the birth-place of ‘Solidarity’.

For intellectuals of the period, the movement held out a hope of building a new kind of society in Central and Eastern Europe. One of those worth remembering is Fr. Józef Tischner, the author of *Ethics of Solidarity*, a small book proposing a new idea of (independent) society and citizenship. Studied today, it stimulates a reflexive evaluation of the present, provoking the questions of what hopes have been fulfilled and what fears have come true. The 1980–1981 period brought also a number of pioneering social studies of “action-research”, with Touraine’s *Solidarity. The Analysis of a Social Movement: Poland 1980–1981* as probably the best-known example.

A core conclusion for many academics after 20–25 years of transformation is that society cannot be founded only on economic and formal ties, but must build on social ones as well. *Solidarity* seems to be the best word to describe this ‘forgotten’ factor, which used to refer to what we know today as *social capital*, *mutual trust*, *community values*, or *civil society*.

The papers included in the volume were presented at the Conference 25 Years After Communism: East and West of Europe in Search of Solidarity which took place in Gdansk, in 16–18 October 2014. It was 2nd mid-term conference of RN 36.

In his article, *From the ‘Solidarity’ to precarious work. Transformation of the labour market in Poland 1989–2014*, Tadeusz Sznajderski shows the transition of the Polish economy from late communism, through early capitalism, to the precarious labour market.

Arkadiusz Góralczyk depicts Poland’s role in the creation of self-government in Ukraine. He presents the conception and nature of and barriers to the decentralisation of power and citizen empowerment. He attempts to assess the situation and indicate the differences in the conditions of the development of this empowerment at the local level between Poland and Ukraine.

Adam Konopka’s paper, *Political backlash in postcommunist Poland – the alliances between nationalist far right and working class 25 years after the decline of communism*, presents cases of alliances between nationalist organisations and local branches of the Solidarity Independent Trade Union in recent years. The explanation of those cases is based mainly on the historical-political perspective of David Ost’s “Defeat of Solidarity” and the philosophical background of George Sorel’s concept of revolutionary syndicalism.

Dominika V. Polańska and Grzegorz Piotrowski examine urban activism in their article, *Radical Urban Movements in Poland – the case of squatting*. Their

ambitious study looks at how urban social movements use transactional activism, networking between organized non-state actors and other groups in the politico-institutional sphere. The authors argue that the use of different repertoires of action, mediated and developed through negotiations among partners, facilitates new social movement activities. Their analysis, built on 50 semi-structured interviews, points to the importance of alliance formation and cooperation between different kinds of groups. The analysis focuses on the alliance built between the more radical form of urban movements – squatters – and the more moderate one – the tenants.

Arkadiusz Peisert raises a bit of a philosophical question about the character and the future of communal ties in his paper *The individualization process – constructive or destructive for communal ties? Deliberations on Norbert Elias's ideas*. His deliberation goes along the main ideas of Norbert Elias, presented in *The society of individuals*. Elias argued that the development of human communities is heading towards integration on human-wide level community. The question is, 'how do changes in the nature of communal ties in Central Europe during this process?'

The last part of the volume turns to social theory. Jacek Tittenbrun's paper, *Concepts of capital in Pierre Bourdieu's theory*, shows that the Bourdieusian framework brought more harm than good. Paradoxically, whilst Bourdieu is commonly regarded as a culturalist, his approach is grounded in economism or economic imperialism. This squeezing of extra-economic phenomena into the economic straightjacket leads necessarily to the latter, i.e. the concept of capital, being overstretched. In turn, the notion of cultural capital suffers from crude physicalism and under-specification.

Arkadiusz Peisert

The Board of Research Network No 36 of European Sociological Association