Partnership Principle for Structural Funds in the New Member States. Understanding Contestation over the EU Requirements

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no materials accepted for any other degrees, in any other institutions. The thesis contains no materials previously written and/or published by any other person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Abstract

The thesis engages in analysis of the logic and patterns behind the contestation process over the partnership principle for Structural Funds in four new member states – Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia. It departs from a puzzling observation of actors, involved in the implementation of the partnership principle, strongly disagreeing with its current practice across all four countries and calling into question its existing format and advancing a variety of claims regarding possible reform of the practice. The thesis also departs from the academic puzzle of inability of existing scholarly accounts to explain the logic of contestation. It challenges the assumptions advanced by the literature on Europeanization, transposition and compliance, European civil society and partnerships in public policy as being able to capture only a small segment of complex reality of contestation and reduce it to either expression of actors' diverse cultural origins or other 'narrower' properties such as interests, identities etc.

To capture the logic of contestation over the partnership principle, the thesis draws on work of Antje Wiener and adapts the theoretical perspective of the theory of social construction of norms which views norms as intersubjectively constructed in the process of interactions, and which defines contestation as enactment of the structure of meaning-in-use. Meanings are seen as embedded in social practices. A new integrationist analytical framework is elaborated which views two social practices as potential reservoirs of meanings of partnership, namely, *cultural*, and *professional* backgrounds. Thus, the framework integrates diverse assumptions of existing strands of research literature. In empirical terms, in order to identify the logic of contestation as enactment of meanings shaped by either cultural or professional backgrounds an interpretive methodology was used. It prescribes reconstruction of meanings through immersion with the world of agents' interpretations rather than pre-conceiving the sources of agents' conceptualizations in advance.

The major findings demonstrate that contrary to expectations of the existing literature, the logic of contestation over the partnership principle cannot be strictly reduced to either clash between cultural backgrounds of actors coming from different countries (cross-country divergence) or clash between diverse interests, identities or other properties of actors. It has been found that actors' understandings of partnership are largely shaped by their common professional backgrounds and, thus, converge across countries but diverge across three groups of actors – state officials, civil society organizations and economic and social partners. The role of cultural backgrounds has been found as playing no, as in case of state officials and economic and social partners, or only some, as in case of civil society organizations, role in structuring actors' interpretations of partnership. In other words, actors coming from the same group interpret partnership highly similarly.

The findings contribute to and challenge existing scholarly discussions about Europeanization, implementation of the EU requirements and policies, and development of civil society actors in the CEE member states. They also highlight a new perspective on normative claims about European civil society and their empirical rootedness through a better understanding of contestation around the EU partnership.

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CSO   Civil society organization

MC   Monitoring Committee

NGO   Non-governmental organization

NDA   National Development Agency

OP   Operational Programme

Chapter 1. Understanding EU partnership in Central and Eastern Europe

Partnership(s) between state and non-state (civil society) actors acquired the status of an axiom in contemporary public policy-making (Geddes & Sullivan, 2011; Skelcher, Mathur, & Smith, 2005; Sullivan, Barnes, & Matka, 2006). The concept structures communication between governmental and non-governmental actors who seek to combine their resources in search for common solutions to pressing policy problems. Such forms of cooperation and collaboration between various public and private actors have recently proliferated across the globe. One can say that partnership became a new orthodoxy of policy-making (Geddes, 2000). Policy-making in such areas as local community development, social exclusion, education or urban development is no longer seen as the realm of exclusively state effort but is increasingly being practiced as a joint collaboration (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003a).

This enormous popularity of partnership hinges on several strong arguments about benefits brought about by intensive interactions between actors. Partnership is seen as a form of governance and policy-making capable of resolving, first, efficiency and, second, legitimacy problems that the state faces as a policy-maker. Interactions between public and private actors are believed to lead to discovery of new more efficient solutions to complex policy problems through bringing together actors' expertise and knowledge. Additionally, involvement of non-governmental actors (civil society actors) into policy-making is widely believed to add more legitimacy to decision-making as well as to include the marginalized groups into designing policies for themselves and provide citizens with channels for meaningful participation (Saurrugger, 2007). Whether partnership delivers on these grand promises of efficiency and democratic legitimacy has been the question that provoked massive wave of scholarly interest and contributed to burgeoning literature on this matter (Haque, 2004; Munro, Roberts, & Skelcher, 2008).

In the context of the EU policy-making partnership acquired especial importance for a variety of reasons. On the one side, the EU itself faced a challenge of democratic deficit and embarked on a search for various solutions to that (Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Majone, 1998; Moravcsik, 2002). Political stalemate related to the constitutional process and growing alienation from the citizens, especially increasing in times of economic crisis,

pushed the EU institutions to establish better ways of connecting to political aspirations of the EU citizenry. Faced with rejection of the constitutional treaties in several member states and numerous accusations of turning into a technocratic polity that lacks democratic accountability and connection with citizens, the EU turned to civil society as one of the remedies for democratic deficit (Huller, 2010; Kohler-Koch, 2009, 2010, 2012; Liebert & Trenz, 2009; Smismans, 2006). The idea of partnership as a practice that brings together state and civil society actors in the action of joint policy-making became especially valuable solution to waning legitimacy and scarce citizens' involvement.

On the other hand, the issue of overall efficiency of the EU policies, especially cohesion policy, has always been actively discussed. EU financial interventions and investment have been criticized numerous times for low added valued. Cohesion policy, the second largest EU policy in terms of budget share, and its main financial instrument – Structural Funds – have become somewhat a symbolic representation of continuous inefficient allocations, abuse of the EU taxpayers' money and even corruption. Against this background, partnership became an anchor of hope for greater efficiency of EU policy implementation and especially cohesion policy. Partnership is considered to be particularly helpful for tackling the above-mentioned caveats of inefficiency through increased control over allocations by civil society actors, sharing risks and enhanced trust between the state and societal actors.

To address these important problems, namely efficiency and legitimacy, the European Commission pushed for strengthening of the legal power of the so-called partnership principle for Structural Funds in its cohesion policy. It actively invested in promoting partnership through strengthening the Regulations for Structural Funds and enhanced monitoring and sanctioning for failures to implement partnership. In the last years, the European Commission also intensified its effort aimed at initiating a wider discussion on importance of the partnership principle for cohesion policy and establishing consensus among the member states around commitment to its application (European Commission, 2012). Partnership became a buzzword for cohesion policy and one of the "big five" – five major cohesion policy principles, namely additionality, programming, subsidiarity and co-financing (Official Journal L 158:3 28 June 2003).

1.1. *The puzzling contestation over the partnership principle*

Ever since partnership arrived as a requirement to the member states, it has produced a lot of confusion, disagreements, criticisms and other reactions, voiced by all groups of actors

involved in cohesion policy-making. A small but growing body of literature on application of the partnership principle registers that this requirement was met with some skepticism in all member states and triggered intensive contestation. Existing research demonstrates that application of partnership has had a variety of implications not quite directly associated with the goals of efficiency and legitimacy: intensified rivalry and competition among actors (Bauer, 2002; Milio, 2014), formalism and rubber-stamping (Piattoni, 2006) or open dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the practice on the part of actors (Batory & Cartwright, 2011). Scholars argue that existing practice of partnership actually diminishes democratic oversight (Bache & Olsson, 2001; Olsson, 2003), leading to compromises on efficiency (Scott, 1998) or even increasing the role of the state actors and further "technocratisation" of cohesion policy as opposed to initial expectation of opening cohesion policy up to influence of societal actors (Sutcliffe, 2000). What existing literature emphasizes is that regardless of wide understanding of importance of the partnership principle, actors strongly contest partnership, its goals and application. This state of affairs does not indicate that any wide consensus around this EU requirement exists, despite all the effort made by the European Commission and, paradoxically, openly expressed commitment of actors to the spirit of partnership. Quite the contrary, the partnership principle remains a very problematic EU requirement far from being fully applied. However, the existing literature remains inconclusive and insufficient to what causes this contestation and how it unfolds.

Problematic character of application of partnership and intensity of contestation over it are especially noticeable in the case of the new member states. That partnership has dramatically failed as a policy practice is the statement that most frequently pops up in interviews with actors involved in its implementation. References to continuous failures can also be found in the literature on implementation of partnership in this part of Europe (Batory & Cartwright, 2011). Actors critically approach existing practice of partnership and insist on a variety of reasons for that. These range from inherent "wrongness" of the soil on which this Brussels-born requirement has fallen to weakness of every sort of partner involved and their inability to contribute to this, in fact, useful and positive practice. The contexts in the new member states are described as hopelessly damaged by post-communist legacy operationalized as absolute hostility of actors to any forms of state/civil society interactions. Alternatively, the European Commission is frequently blamed for its notorious incapability of coming up with any comprehensible policy requirements and producing unnecessary obstructions.

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However, when discussing solutions to this fatal misfortune of partnership in their countries, actors draw quite an interesting picture of expectations. Some responses given by actors in the interviews, clearly illustrate the diversity of opinions. Respondents, representing Hungarian civil society organizations (CSOs), the first of three groups of actors brought together by the partnership principle, for instance, very often depict partnership as the opposite to what is laid out in the following quotation:

> … there is no communication – you write a letter and *there is no answer*, you invite them and *they are not coming or answering*, they simply say "no, we are not talking to you because you are critical! *That is not a partnership attitude*.[1]

In contrast, their colleagues from Slovenia point to different aspects: partnership '*is how the government deals with NGOs and how NGOs tell what their issues are*'[2] or '*partnership should give NGOs opportunities to implement some of their projects*'[3]. Slovak representatives of CSOs frequently mention that the authorities fail to identify the right partners among CSOs, meaning that it is not clear how representative the chosen organisations are or whether they, in fact, are associations of civil society who work independently of the government. Failure to ensure equal representation of all partners in institutional manifestations of partnership, like, for instance, the Monitoring Committees (MCs) is presented as another feature of implementation that causes permanent frustration for CSOs.

State officials, the second group of actors involved, normally reject these claims. Respondent from one Polish ministry, for instance, directly states:

> I think partnership is this cooperation with different organizations and *letting them influence the Funds*. Partnership principle means that we treat ourselves like partners. But at the end of the day, *the ministry is the one who is going to be responsible for spending of the EU money … we can give them the vote, we already did it, but you cannot expect from us that we will let them to block something or to choose projects that we know will not be done clearly*.[4]

Her Hungarian colleague points to a very different concern:

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[1] Interviewee CSO Hu, 4 Apr 2013 (CSO refers to "civil society organization" – A.D.).
The excerpts are taken from the transcribed conversational interviews with representatives of the major actors involved in implementation of partnership principle. Some parts of the excerpts have been italicized in order to bring attention to discursive interventions of the interlocutors that are believed to hint at and uncover deeper meanings attached to partnership. All the responses are given in the language used by the interviewed. References to the excerpts indicate which group of actors a respondent belongs to, country and the date of interview.
[2] Interviewee CSO Sl, 6 Sep 2012.
[3] Interviewee CSO Sl, 10 Aug 2012.
[4] Interviewee SO Hu, 26 Mar 2013 (SO refers to "state official" – A.D.).

We organized lots of workshops and lectures in all of Hungary, in the largest cities *just to generate the expectations and provide the information* and *create an impression that they can participate*. We were not sure we could make an impression that they should participate but, anyway, we tried to be as close to people as possible.[5]

Additionally, state officials repeatedly tell that achieving greater efficiency, for instance, is the major goal of partnership exercise since it is the taxpayers' money, allocated in huge sums for solving a wide range of pressing policy problems, which is at stake. State officials also link implementation of partnership to country's image as a reliable member state in Brussels and, not least of all, speculate about partnership as advancing democracy in their countries.

Finally, representatives of the third group of involved actors – economic and social partners – emphasize completely different things, as suggested by this quote: 'Partnership is badly implemented: *meeting agendas are far too extensive, the thematic variety of discussed issues is too wide, and the domination of the 'administrative side' among members is obvious*'.[6] Alternatively, sharing their aspirations with regards to what a true partnership should be like, they mention: 'There should be *something like a zone where we move*, let's say, *a playground which is legally and formally structured* and provides opportunities for exchange of opinions'.[7] On top of that, concerns of economic and social partners include, for instance, fear that partnership discussion circumvents the issue of capacity building of their organizations. They strongly oppose this issue being discussed together with the issue of financing CSOs. It turns out they truly believe this is a strategy of dissolving the status of economic and social partners as primary actors of policy-making problems.

Interviews during which respondents are asked to reflect on their expectations from partnership reveal two major trends. First, actors in the new member states unanimously construct partnership as a continuous failure and express strong disagreement with how it is being practiced. Second, when discussing what exactly is not working and how partnership should be "fixed" actors express the whole world of extremely diverse opinions and attach very different meanings to it. Issues of democracy and political participation come up alongside references to proper procedural formats of partnership. Actors stress that true partnership is equally about proper communication between partners, organization of massive public consultations on the major cohesion policy issues, access to partnership

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[5] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[6] Interviewee ESP Pl, 19 Nov 2013 (ESP refers to "economic and social partner" – A.D.).
[7] Interviewee ESP Sk, 12 Nov 2013.

settings and timely provision of policy documents. At first sight, it seems that actors pick up on everything and blame existing practice of partnership for not living up to any possible criteria. Most interestingly, such strong opinions are expressed by *all* actors. That makes one think that everyone is dissatisfied with everything possible.

Such a picture is a very familiar sight in public policy-making when one can find little agreement around policy means or ends even when the process of initial discussions and debates is over and a policy is in high gear. The question, thus, arises whether any logic or pattern of such contestation can be identified? In application to the case of partnership, the question is whether there is any pattern of how the meanings in this observed cacophony come about?

1.2. *Existing accounts and research question*

As was mentioned above, existing literature on partnership does not provide a reliable account of the observed contestation. Additionally, application of the partnership principle in the new member states is noticeably underresearched. So far, the involved actors themselves, mainly CSOs and the European Commission, have done continuous research on practice of partnership for the purposes of promotion of the requirement. Academic research has been scarce. For instance, no large cross-country analysis of how partnership is being implemented in the new member states exists. Existing accounts mainly tend to be single case studies or go for comparison of maximum two cases (Batory & Cartwright, 2011; Dabrowski, 2012).

Scarcity of research on partnership in the new member states looks utterly surprising given that inquiring into what makes actors in the new member states work together or, conversely, obstructs collaboration has a huge potential to address several truly important problems. Research on implementation of partnership and contestation over it pertains to a number of important debates on political developments in the region such as the role of civil society actors in the process of democratization and their roles in reconstitution of democracy in the EU. Partnership arrived in the context which traditionally has been seen as a space of "weak" civil societies unwilling or incapable to contribute to policy-making, let alone to foster democratization (Sissenich, 2010). Uncovering how partnership works on the ground can shed more light on whether these assumptions reflect the empirical reality. It can help to avoid biased presuppositions on how actors actually relate to their involvement in domestic or EU policy-making and contribute to that.

Additionally, research on partnership might reveal a lot more on how the EU requirements are being implemented in the new member states. Although there is no paucity of research on this matter, another problem comes to the front. The prevailing characterization in the literature defines the new member states as "empty shells" or "world of dead letters" hinting that compliance with the EU requirements is more of a failure rather than a success (Dimitrova, 2010; Falkner & Treib, 2008). As was mentioned above, partnership is traditionally seen as a "flagman" of continuous failures to implement EU rules properly. However, there are many reasons to assume that existing literature produces simplistic and somewhat reductionist or even essentialist conclusions and brackets off a significant part of complex reality of policy implementation.

New research on the partnership principle and contestation over it in the new member states can, thus, address these problems through bringing new empirical data and critically engaging with conventional research axioms. It is argued in the thesis that the above-mentioned problems also arise as a result of lack of serious research on the process of contestation as such. Attention from understanding the nature and logic of contestation is diverted towards other partnership-related problematic such as whether practice of partnership delivers on the promise of efficiency and legitimacy or what prevents it from that. Instead, the present thesis argues that much more can be revealed if contestation over partnership moves to the center of research.

Several bodies of literature can offer their insights for a better understanding of the observed contestation. All of them, although often implicitly, adhere to the definition of contestation as the process in the course of which actors engage in advancing their own understandings. The differences between these strands of literature lie in conceptualization of these understandings and locating their sources.

The literature on Europeanization, transposition and compliance generally provide macro perspective on contestation. It is seen as arising due to inherent misfits between the policy practice of the EU and its member states (Borzel & Risse, 2003; Radaelli, 2003). In application to EU policies, the central argument is about incompatibility of institutional and administrative modes and models of policy-making, proposed by the EU and the ones entrenched in the member states. As for partnership, the argument is, for instance, that corporatist-like polities are better equipped for partnership arrival due to existing traditions of collaborative policy-making (Breda-Vazquez, Conceicao, & Fernandes, 2009; Falkner, 2004). Analytically, these literatures assume that these traditions and experiences transpire through attitudes, understandings and, consequently, behavior of actors who are faced with

the task of EU policy implementation (Dabrowski, 2012, 2014) Actors thus appear as throughputs of bigger structures, such as culture and traditions (institutional, in this case), that shape their behavior. Empirically, these literatures focus on macro cross-country variation between member states.

The literature on civil society can offer two important contributions. On the one hand, it partially reiterates the argument of the Europeanization and implementation literatures by viewing contestation as a clash between the mode of state-civil society relations imposed by the EU through partnership and the one preexistent in the member states. Analytically the argument works similarly. The only exception is that it is civil society actors who are in the limelight of research attention, unlike in the Europeanization and compliance literatures with their primary focus on state bureaucracies as the ones who either obstruct or contribute to implementation of EU policies. Actors check partnership against their understandings of how state-civil society relations shall work and either agree with or contest partnership. Empirically, cross-country variation is sustained as the dominant pattern of contestation. On the other hand, this literature views partnership as non-working in a particular country due to incapability of civil society actors to contribute to it (Borzel & Buzogany, 2010; Kutter & Trappmann, 2010).

To the contrary, the literature on partnerships in public policy goes to another analytical extreme. It almost completely denies the role of macro frameworks as shaping actors' understandings of partnership. Instead, it sees contestation as emanating from differences between actors (Barnes, Knops, Newman, & Sullivan, 2004; Rumbul, 2013; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2003). Actors are believed to interpret partnership differently due to peculiarities of their interests or other properties, most frequently within one partnership arrangement and, potentially, noticeably differently within single country context. The literature brings attention to micro variation across groups of actors and further across partnerships, as opposed to macro variation across countries.

All three bodies of literature provide important and useful analytical short cuts for study of contestation. At the same time, all short cuts arrive with serious analytical drawbacks when it comes to research on partnership in the context of cohesion policy.

First and foremost, existing frameworks are unable to analytically capture the complexity of partnership practice. In empirical terms, there are various degrees of contestation over partnership across countries *and* across groups of actors, which makes it possible to speak, tentatively, about *both* cross-country and intra-country variation. Indeed, partnership brings together different groups of actors, not only state bureaucracies, the

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primary domain of interest for Europeanization, transposition and compliance scholars formulating their conclusions largely about "state behavior". Expectations from partnership and, consequently, extent of contestation and, finally, practice of partnership noticeably vary within domestic contexts. At the same time, that the overall context of the EU cohesion policy is different for all four countries cannot be denied either. All four member states have their unique histories of enlargement and unique positions in the complex setting of cohesion policy. Thus, one is expected to deal with both intra- and inter-country variation in practice of partnership and, correspondingly, degrees of contestation.

Hence, in dealing with partnership, all literatures are capable of taking only one particular stance – boiling the complex dynamics down to differences either between countries or between groups of actors. In essence, contestation is approached in either macro or micro terms, a research programme based on mutual exclusivity of two polar conceptualizations of where actors' understandings that sparkle contestation originate from. They are viewed as rooted either in cultural backgrounds that, by the way, are theorized as encompassing and structuring actors' experiences, dispositions, choices, and other properties of actors' indiscriminately or in unique actors' interests and preferences. That both factors can be at work simultaneously, yet to a different extent, and, additionally, within one country context is not assumed as possible. What is more important, it can hardly be grasped analytically with the help of existing analytical tools. As a result, only extremely partial depictions of partnership practice are available.

This analytical flaw is produced by the strategy of solving the logic and patterns of contestation by assumption rather than detecting it through immersion in the complexity of empirical reality. Conclusions that actors contest partnership, for instance, due to differences in cultural backgrounds are the result of conceptual work that preempts actual research. Arguments of literatures on Europeanization and civil society are built around conceptualizations of particular benchmarks and expectations as to what constitutes partnership and makes it work. These conceptualizations already hold presuppositions about contestation - certain administrative cultures of policy-making or state of development of civil society or certain capacities of civil society actors. Partnership practice is tested against these benchmarks and the reasons behind contestation and, consequently, its logic are explained. Likewise, scholars of partnerships in public policy work with the same logic yet when they assume *what* actors actually contest (flaws in communication, trust etc.) or which interests they acquire. Such a strategy inevitably leads

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to dissecting complexity and accepting either or another explanation to the detriment of others.

Inconclusiveness and scarcity of existing research as well as obvious analytical difficulties of the bodies of literature that can potentially be used for the study of contestation render necessary a new research on the partnership principle in the new member states. The present study aims at tackling empirical, conceptual and analytical gaps in existing body of knowledge on partnership for Structural Funds. It departs from centrality and importance of acquiring a better systematic understanding of contestation over partnership. Thus, the present thesis addresses the research question *how* is partnership principle for the Structural Funds contested in four new member states?

Understanding contestation demands a shift towards reconstruction of meanings of partnership and how actors arrive at particular interpretations. The framework generated for and approbated in the course of this research identifies the logic behind meaning-making process around the partnership principle in four member states. In order to capture how actors' understandings of partnership emerge, it combines assumptions of all three bodies of literature. The thesis argues that rather than identifying single instances of macro (belonging to a particular national or cultural context) or micro (specific configuration of actors' interests at a certain point of time) logic of meaning-making at work, one can acquire a better understanding of how actors interpret partnership by applying the notion of *professional background* as the practice that shapes understandings.

1.3. *Opening up contestation: analytical framework for the study of partnership*

To answer the question posed above, the thesis analyses how actors interpret partnership. Building on the literature on contestation of norms in IR and, more precisely, on work of Antje Wiener, it proposes a framework for the study of contestation and meaning making. The framework proposes a new and more accurate conceptualization of partnership as a by default contested requirement ontologically similar to norms. In analytical terms, such a conceptualization implies reconstruction of meanings that actors attach to partnership and their further comparison by means of methodology of interpretive analysis.

The first crucial component of the framework is the theoretical assumption of critical constructivists about the dual quality of norms as both structuring and constructed as opposed to the behaviorist tradition that envisions norms as stable variables (Laffey & Weldes, 1997; Wiener, 2007, 2008). Wiener convincingly argues in her work that norms

are contested and there is no end-point of norm internalization against which implementation can be "checked" (Wiener, 2004, 2007, 2008). This is especially relevant for particular types of norms, namely constitutional principles as opposed to, for instance, standards for behavior that, allegedly, possess more clarity (Wiener, 2004). The meanings of norms are never fixed and evolve through interactions. Wider social context and social practices are constitutive of the meanings and should be seen as locations of meanings. That is why one shall expect shifts and changes in meanings of a norm once it travels form one context to another. The meanings of norms, Wiener (2008) agues, 'are embedded in the structure of meaning-in-use', specific for any context (p. 57). From this perspective, she continues, contestation appears as 're/enacting of the normative structure of meaning-in-use' (p. 146). In other words, while contesting the norms, actors enact meanings of norms developed and embedded in specific contexts and shaped by specific social practices. Therefore, empirically critical constructivists suggest studying contestation through reconstructing structures of meaning-in-use and further comparison between them to identify patterns of contestation.

The second component of the framework is the assumption of Wiener about the dominant logic of contestation that can be captured empirically. Identifying the patterns of contestation, Wiener develops and empirically sustains the notion of "cultural validation" of norms as the prevailing pattern. Cultural validation occurs with the change of context of interactions, for instance, from national to transnational. In a new context and when interpreting the norms, actors are believed to resort to the so-called prior normative resources that they acquire in their communities of origin and social contexts where their understandings of norms shaped. As a result, actors *validate* the norm by enacting their own normative baggage or, in other words, meanings of norms that developed and crystalized in a larger social context from which actors come from. Empirical research, thus, seeks to uncover the input of these social practices, namely of the **cultural backgrounds**.

In application to international encounters, the primary task becomes to identify what happens to cultural practices in a new context of transnational policy-making, whether they remain primary lenses or filters through which actors interpret norms or understandings, born and shaped in specific cultural contexts, totally erode. Empirically, research thus needs to focus on individually transported interpretations in order to identify the effect of cultural practice on meanings on norms.

The thesis critically engages with these assumptions. Partnership is quite a specific requirement that, first, lacks clarity and remains remarkably vague even in the EU documents. Either it cannot be seen as a fundamental norm, organizing principle or standardized procedure yet has all of these attributes. Second, just like any other internationally established norm, partnership travels from the EU to the domestic context, which is expected to contribute to higher contestedness. Finally, third, partnership brings together several very different groups of actors with clearly diverging functions, interests and identities.

The thesis argues that the latter allows extending the framework by adding **professional backgrounds** as a social practice constitutive of meanings of partnership, the third element of the framework. The proposed framework suggests that actors' interpretations of partnership can also be shaped by their professional backgrounds, namely experience of representing a particular group of actors, be it state bureaucracy, CSO or economic and social partner. The assumption is that cultural backgrounds do not have such a homogenizing effect on actors' understandings of partnership. Validating partnership, actors also draw on their professional backgrounds or complex interplays of own experiences, interests and institutional identities. This assumption is especially relevant to better understand contestation, which mainly unfolds within *domestic arenas* rather than at the transnational level as in international encounters. Contestation over partnership, in this light, acquires another pattern – while contesting it, actors enact meanings of partnership shaped by their professional dispositions. The proposed framework, thus, calls for bringing actors' dimension back in and makes an attempt to bring together both "integrationist" perspective of macro foundations of contestation and "differential" perspective with its focus on micro logic.

Hence, conceptually, the present inquiry builds on work of Wiener and her contribution to the study of contestation over norms in IR. Empirically, it focuses on uncovering individually held meanings of partnership with a view to establishing what social practices might shape the interpretations of it – cultural or professional backgrounds. Hence, the central research question can be further specified as **what are the patterns of the contestation over partnership**. The pattern, in this light, is defined as not only *what* meaning is enacted but rather *which* social practice shapes the meaning.

Table 1 summarizes the major referenced concepts used in the framework of this analysis.

Table 1. Main concepts

Concept	Definition
contestation	The process in the course of which actors call into question the practice of partnership through enacting specific meanings of it.
structure of meaning-in-use	The "normative structure" or the structure of a norm's meaning, a "map" of meaning, a particular framework of reference for norm interpreters (decision-makers, for instance). Empirically, its elements are 'discursive interventions that secure reconstruction of the values, norms and rules entailed in it' (Reus-Smit, 2001; Wiener, 2004: 190)
cultural background	In existing research on contestation of norms in IR a social practice that shapes interpretations of norms; broadly seen as day-to-day experience of individuals that constitutes their "normative baggage" (Wiener, 2004, 2007). In the present research, it is seen as transpiring itself through differences in interpretations of individuals coming from different countries, yet it is not merely reduced to national identity but encompasses a wider set of experiences frequently referred to as culture.
professional background	Social practice that shapes actors' understandings (of partnership); refers to, first and foremost, professional dispositions of actors as members of specific types of organizations (actors) and appears as a complex interplay of actors' institutional identities, self-perceptions and interests related to these dispositions.

1.4.   Research design and methodology

The study reconstructs of the structure of meaning-in-use of partnership for representatives of three groups of actors – state officials, CSOs and economic and social partners – across four new member states, namely Hungary, Slovenia, Poland and Slovakia.

1.4.1. Countries

There are several reasons why the context of the new member states is particularly productive for the study of contestation over partnership. First, as was mentioned above, overall extent of contestation over the EU rules and requirements, especially, the partnership principle is quite high despite ten years of the EU membership. It gives a good opportunity to capture how actors on the ground relate to Europeanization as a process of massive restructuring of domestic modes and formats of policy-making in real time, when these modes have not deeply entrenched yet. Second, introduction of such modes of policy-making as partnership was condensed into a noticeably short period of pre-accession. Moreover, such forms of state/civil society interactions were largely a pure novelty for these states. This gives an opportunity to observe these interactions "in the making" and makes it easier to capture their logic. The study of contestation over partnership informs a theoretical framework that can explain gradual change in how state and civil society actors interact and find new grounds for collaboration, while the dominant literature considers the CEE member states as a "closed case" of hopeless failure.

Selection of four countries as sites of partnership implementation seeks to test the assumption about *cultural backgrounds* as creating basis for shared understandings between actors. To remind, this assumption is endorsed by research on Europeanization, compliance and also political economy, for instance, which point to cross-country variation rather than variation across groups of actors (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012a; Fagan, 2006; Falkner & Treib, 2008).

In empirical terms, this would imply that shared understandings of partnership are more likely to be found for individuals coming from the same country rather than representing the same group of actors. Thus, selection of four countries seeks to test the strength of analytical assumptions endorsed by the above-mentioned literatures. If they are correct, the outcome of cross-country divergence coupled with convergence across groups of actors, is expected to be found (outcome 1).

Following the cross-country variation argument found in the above-mentioned scholarship, countries representing different cases have been selected. Slovenia is very frequently viewed as an outlier among the new member states in terms of its political system (neocorporatist) or policy-making traditions (Andreou & Bache, 2010; Fink-Hafner, 1998). Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are widely believed to represent a world of similar Visegrad states (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007a, 2012a). Although the Baltic states are considered to represent quite a distinct case, it is assumed that if the thesis about cross-country divergence holds it can already manifest itself through comparison across four countries.

Bulgaria and Romania, although belonging to the category of new member states were not selected either. Implementation of cohesion policy in these countries, including the partnership principle, has only started in 2007, and these countries have not been through intensive and very important period of testing partnership in 2004-2006. Cyprus and Malta have been excluded due to lack of any research on either cohesion policy implementation or partnership as well as due to limited resources for research in those countries.

1.4.2. Actors

Focus on three groups of actors is explained by, first of all, the fact that representatives of all three groups are involved in implementation of partnership, as required by the EU documents and held in practice. It is also linked to the empirical observation of contestation of partnership – representatives of all three groups take active part in the process. The major criteria of selection of actors into the research was involvement in cohesion policy-making and, more specifically, in implementation of partnership at different stages - programming, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, - membership in institutionalized platforms of cohesion policy-making (working groups, task forces, committees etc.) and directly in partnership structures (the MCs etc.).

However, the major reason behind selection of three groups of actors for empirical research is to test the assumption that *professional backgrounds* as social practices structure actors' understandings and, consequently, constitutive of meanings of partnership. In other words, individuals representing a group of actors with identical professional backgrounds, are expected to validate partnership similarly. If the assumption is correct, one outcome of the empirical exercise of reconstruction of meanings-in-use can

be found, namely divergence of meanings of partnership across groups of actors (outcome 2).

To sum up, empirically the project seeks to reconstruct structures of meaning-in-use for three groups of actors across four member states. This is to be done in order to identify the pattern of contestation as in what structures shared understandings and interpretations of partnership. The existing literature points to two possible outcomes: a) divergence across countries yet convergence across groups of actors or b) divergence across groups of actors yet convergence across countries. The thesis explores whether the logic of contestation over partnership indeed unfolds in accordance to one or another scenario or, conversely, some diffusion can be found as a mix of both and as an outcome that testifies that differences between both are more fine-grained and subtle than depicted in the literature.

1.5. Data collection and analysis: interpretivist research

As regards the methods and for the purposes of data collection and analysis, the thesis also builds on the methodology of research on norm contestation, worked out and used by Wiener. It hinges on several key theoretical assumptions and techniques.

Firstly, since the task of the research is to extract *meanings* of partnership, a particular set of methods and techniques labelled as "interpretive" is seen as the most relevant and appropriate. Bevir and Rhodes (2004) summarize: 'interpretive approaches … focus on meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so' (p. 130). Meanings, in this tradition, are not see as mere representations of people's beliefs but something that actually fashions these beliefs. Since, ontologically, the world is seen, by interpretivists, as inter-subjectively constituted, it is assumed that one can only reach *some* comprehension of the reality from the contextualized perspective of the subject. Adherence to this assumption shapes the central agenda of interpretive analysis, as summed by Dvora Yanow (2013) - to allow 'the meanings of the key concepts, and often, the concepts themselves, to emerge from the field' and in language defined by human subjects themselves (p. 3).

The guiding principle of the present research is the assumption of interpretive research paradigm that meanings are inscribed in language, acts and physical settings (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012a). Ideally, interpretivist research brings together analysis of all three components in an ethnographic study of a phenomenon. However, due to

constraints related to time and other resources, the present research focuses on language and texts as locations of meanings accessible through interviews and analysis of written documents.

Secondly, in light of the above, the major focus is on individual discursive interventions. Interventions are obtained through interviews, analyzed and then compared in order to identify convergence or divergence of meanings. Critical discourse analysis provides theoretical grounding for such an exercise. Scholars in this tradition claim that discourse is essentially a social practice that transpires and presents itself through language and, at the same time, shapes the language and social reality around (Fairclough, 1995, 2003a). The task of critical discourse analysis becomes to reconstruct this relationship from both sides through analysis of the language of discourse: how the social world and social practices that constitute it are reflected in the language and text, and, conversely, how they structure the social reality. Discursive interventions provide the link between the text and social practice and, in this light, appear as the gates into the world of understandings and the locations of meanings.

Third, a particular interviewing technique is applied. The interventions are obtained in the course of conversational interviews carried out in such a way as to provide an agent maximum space for expressing her reactions without, unlike in using semi-structured interviews, giving away too much through imposing on an interlocutor a structure of the interview. The composed questionnaires follow some structure as they consist of a certain number of direct questions, formulated in advance, of both procedural and substantive character. Procedural questions can be considered as direct questions about existing practice of partnership whereas substantial were formulated with a view to access information on how partnership means for interlocutors. Yet the situation of an interview involves much flexibility in a sense of deviating from the questions through additional questions, elaboration prompts, example prompts, internal logic and restatement questions (Wagenaar, 2011) in order to give way to speculative language rather than mere statements (Gadamer, 1993; Walsh, 2004). The major focus was on provoking descriptive emotional responses rather than explanatory directive use of language (Walsh, 2004). However, information obtained from all ways of language use was analyzed in order to access how interlocutors conceptualize partnership and bring their interventions into a meaningful core (Soss, 2006: 130). An important disclaimer should be made in this respect: although grounded in critical discourse analysis tradition, the present research is not meant to reveal *discourse* about partnership access to which is already obtained once a researcher registers

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directive use of language. Interviewing seeks to access emotive *dynamics* as the data that matters, rather than *content*.

The data for the analysis conducted in the dissertation comes from 90 conversational interviews with representatives of three groups of actors: 44 with representatives of CSOs, 21 with representatives of economic and social partners and 25 with state officials. The texts obtained through the interviews provide the corpus of primary empirical data for further analysis. Upon transcription, a technique of inductive key word selection suggested by Wiener, is applied in order to reconstruct the structure of meaning-in-use for respondents from every group of actors. The keywords are selected inductively through the analysis of discursive interventions of interlocutors and grouping of associative connotations, yet their selection is, at the same time, informed by academic literature on partnership. The point, however, is not to stop at the level of selecting theoretically- and field-informed keywords but to reach their deeper meanings in search for convergence and divergence. Upon completion of analysis, some control interviews were conducted during which the interpretations were tested with interlocutors themselves to achieve more precision. In cases where a second interview was not possible, the texts of transcriptions with notes on extracted meanings were sent to the interviewed to receive feedback.

1.6.   Research scope

The focus of the present research is on understanding the dynamics and logic of **contestation**. This cuts off a number of questions which are not dealt with in the thesis.

The thesis does not pursue normative perspective associated with the concept of failure. Concluding whether partnership works or not or, in the same vein, contemplating about what makes it work better contravenes the purpose of the research. On the contrary, the thesis breaks with the notion of failure as such due to ineluctable normative loading, implicit or explicit, and, as a result, analytical drawback of capturing only a segment of reality that this concept leads research on partnership to. The problematic character of the notion of failure is exactly where the present research endeavor starts and the problem it aims to tackle analytically. The overall focus of the thesis is on the process of partnership and not on its potential outcomes, which is exactly what would require coming back to the notion of failure as theoretically or empirically constructed benchmark of partnership. At the same time, the thesis does not seek to take a snapshot reality of partnership, let alone to

explain it. It rather seeks to explore how this reality is given in the minds of actors and how they contest it.

The primary focus on meanings also requires some clarifying points to be made. First, the present research does not try to capture how these meanings are created. The rich potential of the scholarship on interactive policy analysis that seeks to establish how actors arrive at new understandings in the course of interactions is fully acknowledged (Wagenaar, 2011). However, the question how actors arrive to the new meanings of partnership is not a part of the present research agenda. The primary task is to *register* the meanings and compare them. It goes without saying that meanings of partnership might be completely different outside the context of the EU cohesion policy. In this sense, cohesion policy context delineates the *scope conditions* of the present research. Analysis of whether and how these meanings change as partnership practice develops or extends over other contexts would require different tools and research techniques tailored to another, *activity-type* focus of research (Wiener, 2008).

The thesis does not take any critical stance on the practice of partnership. Despite relying on theoretical assumptions and tools of critical constructivist research and critical discourse analysis, the thesis does not seek to establish the reasons behind existing practice of partnership and wider consequences, the questions that are normally posed by scholars of these two traditions. Reconstructing the meanings of partnership, no questions are posed of how these meanings reflect on existing larger sedimented structures or discourses that contribute to specific power relations, or how these relations are sustained and reproduced, let alone any normative judgments about appropriateness of these relations are made. Nor does the thesis seek to offer any (policy) solutions on how to improve partnership, the second question that naturally follows the first one. At the same time, the thesis sends messages related to the above-mentioned problems. Yet discussing them would be a completely different question worth being more carefully elaborated in a new thesis.

1.7.   *Summary of the contribution*

The central argument of the thesis reveals the inner logic and patterns of contestation over partnership. The findings demonstrate that while contesting partnership actors enact meanings which are shaped by, linked to and rooted in their professional rather than cultural backgrounds. One can observe divergence across three groups of actors rather than countries or cultural contexts. However, for one particular group of actors, namely CSOs, cultural backgrounds also play a visible role contributing to the diffusion outcome rather

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than clear convergence or divergence. Analysis of associative connotations behind the keywords in the interviews of respondents from CSOs demonstrates a clear division between actors from Slovenia and the Visegrad countries. Respondents interpret partnership differently. As for two other groups of actors – state officials and economic and social partners – outcomes of clear cross-country convergence were found.

The thesis makes several important contributions. Firstly, the major contribution is analytical. The analytical framework elaborated and tailored for the study of such a complex arrangement as partnership renders possible to overcome weaknesses found in existing literary accounts, namely mutual exclusivity of existing explanations of contestation (country level vs. actors), inability to capture and explain both intra- and cross-country variation and, as a result, perpetuated partiality, incompleteness and excessive generalization of conclusions. By focusing on contestation and conceptualizing what structures it, the framework allowed for going beyond such exclusionary explanations and providing analytically more accurate account of partnership.

The findings clearly demonstrate that both macro and micro accounts of contestation can be simultaneously at play. If for state officials and economic and social partners professional backgrounds play the major role in cohering interpretations of partnership, in case of CSOs the role of cultural backgrounds also comes to the front. Departing from the view that contestation is enactment by actors of specific meaning-in-use, the empirical findings demonstrate that that *cultural backgrounds* may not be the only base for shared understandings. Additional reservoir of meanings – *professional backgrounds* – is identified and found as contributing to actors' understandings.

This offers a new lens for studying contestation as a multi-dimensional process in which, as in case of partnership, cultural practices and professional backgrounds can be working together in shaping the meanings. It also offers an opportunity to go further beyond cultural or professional backgrounds in identifying what contributes to specific meanings, to incorporate new backgrounds and to conceptually address the issue of how they come together and co-function in the process of meaning-making. For example, the date in the interviews suggests that actors from specific regions, especially in Poland, might be interpreting partnership from the perspective of their regional identities, which can also be conceptualized as specific social practices. Equally, there is clear intra-group divergence within CSOs as a group of actors whose interpretations of partnership are shaped by other backgrounds, namely, the division between small and big organizations or variation across policy areas. Hence, the findings pave the way for further investigation of

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how actors navigate between backgrounds in their attempts to advance their understandings, how meanings emerge and why and how various bases for interpretations move and interact, come to the front, replace each other etc.

Secondly, the thesis explores how the theoretical and analytical potential of the literature on norms contestation can be applied to the study of public policy. It equally builds a bridge between two disciplines and questions the strength of dividing line between two disciplines. The present research demonstrates great potential of the merge of conceptual and analytical tools used within different disciplines into one framework. The findings of the present research, for instance, provoke questions relevant for research on international encounters that still remain predominantly nation-centered (Wiener, 2008). In particular, they raise a question: if contestation works as it has been found within domestic arenas and in application to domestic public policy-making, can it be that the same logic applies to international encounters and how does it "sit together" with dominant representation that national/cultural contestation takes place within international organisations or fora?

Thirdly, the findings contribute to several bodies of public policy and political science literature. With regards to civil society literature, the thesis demonstrates problematic character of strong statements about weakness of civil society actors and adequacy of CEE member states qualification as a space of weak civil society. Analysis shows that civil society actors are not weak if one looks on their active stance on partnership and their concrete actions aimed at bringing it closer to their expectations. Moreover, reconstruction of meanings-in-use of partnership for CSOs demonstrates that these actors actively contest grand ideas of democracy and political participation imposed by the EU. CSOs' interpretations of partnership show that these actors mix and match various elements of the main representations of what a democratic polity should look like yet actively call the EU script and scenario of tackling its own democratic deficit into question. For the literature on European civil society that also signals weakness of its approach to pre-conceive what input of civil society in reconstitution of democracy in the EU can be and, consequently, to conclude how civil society actually contributes to it.

Likewise, the findings invite further contemplation over some insightful claims of the research on 'capitalist diversity on the Europe's periphery', namely the claim about divergence across models of social-economic governance in CEE countries (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012b). The latter refers to the claim about differences between Slovenia and the Visegrad countries in terms of entrenchment of social partnership as a mode of socio-

economic governance. However, the findings of this thesis clearly suggest that there is actually more convergence than divergence between Slovenia and its Visegrad neighbours, at least, in the context of cohesion policy. It shows that all attempts at classifying CEE member states should be taken with precaution. At least, identified convergence of meanings of partnership shows that different logics of socio-economic governance might be at work across different policy contexts, and this can either depict CEE countries as similar or different. Furthermore, the thesis also suggests that some conceptual tools used in this literature for the sake of classifications, namely reliance on the concept of "corporatism" can hugely mislead. The findings show that beyond visible institutional differences between supposedly corporatist Slovenia and non-corporatist Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, policy-making practices, perceptions and understandings are inherently similar.

1.8. Thesis structure

The remaining chapters of the thesis are structured as follows. Chapter 2 introduces political history of partnership principle and traces evolution of its meanings as reflected through several major reforms of partnership. It sketches out the complex context of evolution of partnership and makes an argument that throughout its history partnership evolved into a highly complex requirement loaded with a number of diverse ideas such as efficiency, democratic legitimacy etc. Chapter 3 engages more deeply with existing literature that can be utilized for study of partnership and more thoroughly identifies conceptual and analytical difficulties. Chapter 4 builds on the results of critical reflection on analytical potential of research literature done in chapter 3. It synthesizes into a new conceptual, and analytical framework borrowings from existing literature with theoretical and conceptual potential of the literature on contestation of norms in IR. It also introduces the methodology of studying contestation and elaborates on peculiarities of its use for research on partnership. In doing so, chapter 4 delineates the structure of further empirical analysis.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 analyze the results of the empirical exercise of reconstruction of the structure of meaning-in-use of partnership for three groups of actors, namely state officials, CSOs and economic and social partners, respectively. Each chapter is devoted to analysis and discussion of the results of empirical inquiry for each group of actors. In terms of structure, each chapter is divided into two parts: the first one articulates complex operative context within which actors belonging to each group encounter partnership; the

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second analyzes meanings of partnership through engagement with the empirical data, namely interviews with respondents from each group of actors. Each empirical chapter relates to the findings analyzed in the previous one in order to provide a comparative perspective on interpretations of partnership.

Finally, chapter 8 synthesizes the empirical findings and the contributions of the thesis. It juxtaposes the findings against existing literature on Europeanization, political economy and European civil society to highlight the major contributions of the thesis to existing scholarly debates on implementation of the EU policies, development of European civil society and, thus, prospects of EU partnership.

Chapter 2. Partnership in the EU cohesion policy

Empirical observations over partnership implementation in the new member states lead one to conclude that no agreement about what a true partnership is can be reached or, at least, theoretically possible. Actors advance their own understandings and interpretations. This thesis aims at answering the question what structures these understandings or, in other words, how do they come about. This chapter makes the first step in this direction.

The partnership principle did not arrive in a context of vacuum devoid of any pre-existing ideas of what a true partnership should look like. Neither did the requirement come as an "empty shell" devoid of previously constructed and assigned meanings. More interestingly, nor did the interpretation of partnership remain unaltered while actors in the new member states were busy with its decoding and putting into practice. The main argument discussed in this chapter is the one about a highly contingent nature of partnership. The partnership principle is the requirement that has never been stable in terms of which meanings it conveyed. Long before it was introduced as a part of the cohesion policy package in the new member states, it had already had quite an interesting and vibrant history of development. The European Commission as well as other member states reinterpreted the partnership principle numerous times, thus, adding various layers to its highly complex meaning. Furthermore, meaning making around partnership never stopped. On the contrary, this process intensified further once actors in the new member states were invited to take part in it. As a result, partnership, throughout its history, has always been quite a contested idea and acquired a whole range of diverse meanings related to such problems as the purpose of cohesion policy, in general, interrelations between the European Commission and the member states or reducing the democratic deficit in the EU.

The chapter reconstructs evolution of partnership as a policy requirement in the context of the EU cohesion policy and broader developments in the EU. In light of empirical observation of intensive contestation over partnership, the major goal of the chapter is to set the overall context within which contestation unfolds through identification of the main themes that organize debates around partnership and are potential "hooks" for actors' expectations on the ground. Partnership is a policy instrument that 'bears certain values and shapes different purposes and effects in different contexts' (Kassim & Le Galès, 2010, p. 5), it truly 'promises all things to all people' (Scott, 1998, p.

182). The chapter traces how partnership evolved into a concept of such contingent nature and attempts to trace what values, expectations and promises the concept of partnership embraced as it arouse as the flagman of cohesion policy.

Three distinct periods in the history of the principle are identified. During the first one, partnership was a practice mainly associated with a new type of governance that hinges on close cooperation between supranational, national and regional actors. Additionally, in the first period of its history, partnership was carefully watched for its efficiency effects, namely a promise that cooperation between national, sub-national and societal actors is most likely to lead to greater outcomes of cohesion policy, mainly in terms of vaguely defined "cohesion". In the second period, partnership took several other guises and evolved from being a technocratic tool of efficient decision-making to a political tool of coordination of various interests and views on overall goals and interventions of cohesion policy. Once civil society was brought into the partnership-related discussion, partnership started to hold a considerable promise related to grand issues of democracy, EU democratic deficit and citizens' political participation. In the third phase of its development, discussion of partnership embraced issues of further proceduralization of interactions, even bigger stress on efficiency, evaluation and expertise-based policy-making.

The chapter examines in more details peculiarities of each phase and, thus, provides a first snapshot of existing map of meanings of partnership that actors on the grounds may draw on. The chapter is divided in three sections each of which taking a deeper look into each period of evolution of the partnership principle.

2.1. Vertical partnership: efficiency and mobilization of sub-national actors

The history of partnership is inextricably linked to the whole history of cohesion policy as one of the most debatable policy instruments of the EU. Throughout its development, cohesion policy has been a political battleground for proponents of different approaches to European integration and its directions, ever since the Single market was declared as one of its goals. Whether cohesion policy should be a way to a more regulated market or, conversely, not to unleash free market forces and promote greater competitiveness, for instance, has been one of the fiercest debates along with classical argument between defenders of its redistributive mission based on solidarity principle and opponents of such an approach (Leonardi, 2005). Contestation over and justifications of partnership were,

from the very beginning, closely linked to grand battles around cohesion policy, even though rhetoric of partnership has never been used to support arguments of any side. Ian Bache, following the sociological tradition of conceptualizing policy instruments, argues that in this respect one can be speaking of partnership as a specific policy instrument that, from the outset, carried serious political meanings that were changing along the way of cohesion policy development (Bache, 2010a). Moreover, like any policy instrument that is meant to organize social relations according to the meanings it holds (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007), partnership was an idea in which the European Commission invested a lot, pushing for a particular agenda.

Partnership was introduced in 1989, following the major reform of the cohesion policy in 1988. The reform of 1988 changed several important things. First of all, it reformed the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) which was in place since 1975. After the reform, ERDF became a financial mechanism of the so-called Structural Funds or, in other words, became one of the policy instruments of newly established cohesion policy. Before that, the ERDF was a special compensatory measure for national treasuries whereby the net contributors to the Community budget received a part of their money back. The role of the Community institutions was practically zero: they did not have any control over the distribution of the ERDF means as all the allocation decisions were taken by the national governments (Rynck & McAleavey, 2001). The ability of the European Commission to fine-tune the ERDF to promote any policies or address any issues of regional development within the member states was exceptionally weak.

Yet in the light of two important events, namely the Iberian enlargement and adoption of the Single European Act, the ERDF, in the form it existed from 1975, looked like a huge anachronism. The accession of Spain, Portugal and Greece brought three much poorer member states into the Community who, had the ERDF been left unreformed, would have been completely left out of the existing system of compensatory measures due to not being net contributors. This raised the question of a new system of transfer of resources among the member states. Furthermore, certain expectations of solidarity were floating in the air as the process of integration advanced. These concerns were expressed in the course of negotiations around the Single European Act when several member states demonstrated open reluctance to the neoliberal agenda behind creation of the single market and required strong financial commitment to cohesion (Rynck & McAleavey, 2001). The strong leadership of the then European Commission actively participated or, as some scholars argue, actively directed the whole debate and framed overall transformation of the

ERDF into cohesion policy as a counterbalance to potential side effects brought by the single market, thus making it a specific absorber of highly likely economic shock (Behrens & Smyrl, 1999; Jabko, 2006; Keating, 1995; Leonardi, 2005). As a result, the 1988 reform was, as Liesbet Hooghe (1998) mentions, 'the bedrock of the anti-neoliberal programme' although "sold" (framed) to the member states as being closely related to single market (p. 459). Cohesion policy was framed as not geared towards paying off the losers of the single market but to increase the economic potential of the lagging regions or, as is put in the Single Act 'to reduce disparities between the various regions and the backwardness of the least-favored regions' (Official Journal L 169:9 29 June 1987).

Scholars also argue that such a reform of regional policy into a massive complicated mechanism of regional development with commonly defined goals and policies and complicated institutional system, was not driven by a purely political agenda of eliminating the imperfections of the single market (Begg, 2010). Although arguments in favor of upgraded cohesion policy were closely interlinked with the ones about the single market and, as some argue, even framed cohesion policy as a gateway to the single market, which may seem contradictory content-wise (Behrens & Smyrl, 1999), one can easily reconstruct a hidden agenda. Gary Marks, one of the founders of the theory of multi-level governance, claims that the reform was also a way for the Commission to acquire more power and influence (Marks & Hooghe, 2001). New cohesion policy seriously empowered the European level of decision-making by making the Commission the principal actor in formulation of policy, conducting oversight and audit (Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996). Partnership principle was one of the major tools to achieve this.

The formulation that was put into the new Regulations of cohesion policy in 1988 defined partnership as 'close consultation between the Commission, the member states concerned and the competent authorities designated by the latter at national, regional, local or other level, with each party acting as a partner in pursuit of a common goal' at all stages of cohesion policy-making (Official Journal L 185:9 15 July 1988). It clearly allowed new actors to enter the political process around cohesion policy implementation and, more than that, to circumvent their national governments. Thus since its introduction partnership was designed for consumption by a very limited group of actors, namely sub-national and local authorities. It goes without saying that some framing labor on the part of the Commission was needed to form consensus around introduction of partnership. The major argumentation behind its introduction rested upon strong intellectual assumptions of endogenous growth theory. Development of the territory was believed to be enhanced and

speeded up through mobilization of all interested forces who, by entering networks (and coalitions) of development would bring together the resources and formulate common solutions (Bauer, 2002). Since new cohesion policy (re)discovered the territory as the primary locus of development, it, consequently, sought to activate regional actors to achieve fulfillment of developmental goals and to adjust spatial inequalities in the first place (Mendez, Bachtler, & Wishlade, 2013). Partnership was thought to be a mechanism to create and sustain those networks of cooperation, discussion of common solutions and exchange of expertise and, consequently, bring about desirable efficiency. Efficiency was most oft-mentioned added value of partnership which, as Bache argues, was also a way to persuade some especially reluctant member states into accepting it (Bache, 2010a).

There is little consensus in the academic literature on whether partnership truly led to reconfiguration of power between the Commission, national and sub-national authorities or brought more efficiency to allocation of the Funds. As regards the former, scholars are divided. Some argue that none of the expected high mobilization of regional actors who would seriously challenge national authorities ever took place (Bachtler, 2007; Piattoni, 2006, 2009). Implementation of partnership was still left to the discretion of the national authorities and in some member states the requirement was practically ignored or, at least, met with open resistance (Bache, 2001; Bauer, 2002). The framework regulation of 1988 ensured that decisions on who is included in partnership are made in accordance with 'national rules and current practices' (Official Journal L 185:9 15 July 1988). Michael Bauer argues, in this light, that this condition is enough not to take very seriously the thesis that visible transfer of power from the national governments ever took place or, conversely, that any "renationalization" of cohesion policy occurred later in the course of other reforms (Bachtler, 2007; Bauer, 2002; Sutcliffe, 2000). Yet, some scholars provide empirical data that proves such mobilization took place and, most importantly, is hard to ignore (Keating & Jones, 1995; Piattoni, 2009).

As regards efficiency, the empirical data is scarce to practically non-existent. Research in the early 1990s focused more on highly political issue of power redistribution rather than efficiency gauged in terms of various indicators (Blom-Hansen, 2005; Thielemann, 2002). It is interesting to note that efficiency, as benefit brought by partnership, was neither very visibly present in the rhetoric of the Commission until the end of the first programming period in 1995. The First Cohesion Report, for example, places hardly any emphasis on partnership, and where it does, links partnership to innovation and revealing "best practices" (European Commission, 1996). Partnership is

very scarcely mentioned in the report, yet where it is mentioned, it conveys the message of vertical collaboration of the Commission and state actors in the member states.

What is crucial to learn, then, from the first years of partnership as an integral part of the EU cohesion policy talk and rhetoric, is that framing, done by the Commission in the course of negotiating the new rules of future cohesion policy, brought about two specific meanings of partnership. During the first programming period partnership was essentially a vertical interaction between the Commission as the EU gatekeeper, national governments and subnational authorities. Efficiency, as the rationale behind partnership, was the second important element of the whole partnership discourse, yet it stayed on the periphery and in contestation over partnership rather ceded to high political issues of, as argued by Simona Piattoni (2009), 'tug-war between supranational, national and sub-national institutions' (p. 107).

2.2. Partnership and political participation: from verticality to horizontality

The previous section has sketched out the history of the first years of partnership in the EU cohesion policy and made a point about entrenchment of a particular meaning(s) of it. More specifically, partnership as a concept in the early days of cohesion policy communicated the idea of cooperation between supranational, national and subnational institutions. These meanings came to the front mainly as a result of intensive effort of the Commission to, introduce cohesion policy, in the first place, and to ensure its own stronger voice and role in it. Once this had been achieved, the Commission made further steps in promoting partnership and came up with a number of initiatives which, as is argued in this section, significantly altered the meanings behind partnership. It is argued in this section that extension of partnership over to social and economic partners and later on to civil society organizations let to two interconnected results. First, such a move changed the overall focus from vertical to horizontal partnership. Second, in the complex context of continuous accusations of undemocratic character of the Union as a whole, such a transformation added a highly political dimension to partnership. Partnership became related to images of democracy and civil society. Previously purely technocratic reading of it was pushed to the margins. The overall effect of this, though, was that partnership became prone to even higher contestation.

Partnership did not remain solely vertical for long. Already in 1993, when the new legislative package for the new programming period was being prepared, an important

clause was added to the Regulations. Article 4.1 adds economic and social partners to partnership 'within the framework of each Member State's national rules and current practices and in full compliance with the respective institutional, legal and financial powers of each of the partners' (Official Journal L 193:5 31 July 1993).[8] Inclusion of social partners into cohesion policy-making was also very much in tune with the EU-wide process of redefining the role of social partners in the course of which they were becoming more privileged actors in policy-making. Maastricht treaty was a breakthrough in this respect as the newly introduced social chapter allowed the Commission to create binding legislation out of agreements by European social partners (Barnard, 2002; Gold, Cressey, & Leonard, 2007). This innovation significantly enhanced the role of social partners, at least at the EU level. On a larger scale, it drew out new contours of and further nuanced understandings of partnership – privileging social partners sort of signaled about European Commission's preferred model of policy-making that hinged on importance of structured dialogue with organized civil society" (Armstrong, 2002). Hooghe and Ian Bache, in their turn, link this move to deepening of European Commission's adherence to the idea of regulated capitalism (Bache, 2001; Hooghe, 1998).

The partnership-related provision in the Regulations on cohesion policy had quite serious implications. Hooghe (1998) notes that it certainly indicated a 'shift form territorial partnership among three partners to a looser collaboration involving a variety of actors and tailored to national circumstances' (p. 471). In a way, this move contradicted the initial focus on the territory because economic and social partners, especially in the context of nationally entrenched practices, were most likely nation-wide actors rather than tied to specific regions or territories. Joanne Scott claims this laid the foundation for partnership becoming a bone of contention in the future due to the fact that identities of economic and social partners were forming at the national level (Scott, 1998). Second, this caused some confusion in the member states on who is meant by economic and social partners as Commission's instructions on belonging to this category of actors in the context of cohesion policy were totally absent. The term itself was, in reality, as noticed by Catherine Barnard (2002) 'a shorthand for a differently configured group of actors depending on the forum (supranational, national, or subnational)' (p. 80). Partnership was gradually acquiring reputation of a highly blurred requirement and confusion around its meanings started to transpire. The principle was clearly going beyond multi-level interaction to

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[8] The First Cohesion Report already contained referenced to economic and social partners (European Commission, 1996)

incorporate horizontal dimension of multi-sectoral collaboration. Inclusion of social partners brought a completely new perspective into the discussion around partnership. The resolution of the European Parliament on the annual report on the Structural Funds, for example, is illustrative in this sense – in the section on the partnership principle it is equated with employment pacts, for instance, which signifies that actors started thinking of partnership in totally different terms - conventional terms of social dialogue, in this case.

The end of the second programming period (1994-1999) contributed to further unfolding of contentious potential of partnership. The new 1999 reform of cohesion policy is also known for the provision that extends partnership to 'the regional and local authorities, the other competent authorities, including those responsible for the environment and for the promotion of equality between men and women, the economic and social partners and other competent bodies' (Official Journal L 161:1 26 June 1999). Although the provision remained vague, it still indicated a further move down the path of opening cohesion policy-making to wider participation and away from strict vertical character of policy-making.

The reform of 1999, and especially the redefinition of partnership, only partially reflected the deeper-seated process - the EU was gradually acquiring a more political profile followed by deepening of integration and its impact on citizens' lives. The post-Maastricht era brought the EU closer to citizens and posed the questions of how relations with them could and should be organized. In light of this concern, Beate Kohler-Koch argues, in the years after the Maastricht Treaty parallel yet contradictory processes were unfolding. On the one hand, there was a "flocking" of citizens groups in Brussels and attraction of those groups by the Commission (Greenwood, 2007, 2012; Knodt, Greenwood, & Quittkat, 2011). On the other, a growing dissatisfaction with alienation from the integration was taking place, and resulted in open rejection of the process in many member states (Kohler-Koch, 2012). The problems with democratic legitimation of transnational policy-making process, that manifested themselves through various "NOs" to EU-wide referenda on constitutional issues, came to the front, and for the EU it was time to do away with practical and conceptual "divorce" with issues of democracy and legitimacy (Armstrong, 2002). Additionally, issues of efficiency of the EU policies came to the front and sparked heated debates (Kendall & Brandsen, 2009; Kendall, 2009; Will & Kendall, 2009).

Policy initiatives that accompanied these changes naturally affected cohesion policy and partnership. The major impact on the latter was further opening up of the

contestation box through tying partnership in to the concept of civil society, a concept itself heavily contested in Brussels, and through that, though implicitly, to debates around democracy and reanimated debate on political participation in the Community.

Remarkable career of the concept of civil society is also the consequence of heated debates on political destiny of the EU (Armstrong, 2002; De Schutter, 2002; Kohler-Koch, 2009, 2010, 2012; Smismans, 2003, 2006). Turn to civil society was an extremely promising way of bringing the Union closer to its citizens when other attempts, like, for instance, an attempt to make the European Parliament a linking bridge, either failed or were misunderstood. Kenneth Armstrong, for instance, claims that by the end of the 90-s the pitfalls of the liberal model of representative democracy were so obvious that no reform of the Parliament could restore citizens' trust in it (Armstrong, 2002). In this light civil society was a very powerful tool to channel various democracy-related aspirations, not least due to its ambiguous character. Civil society was a very attractive diverse "menu" that could satisfy tastes of the many. Yet to assume that career of civil society in the EU political discourse was unproblematic would be a mistake. A glance at the major EU documents demonstrates how particular visions of involvement of civil society actors were evolving and how bumpy this evolution was.

The first Commission's communication entitled "Promoting the role of voluntary organizations and foundations in Europe", further develops the concept of "civil dialogue", coined by the DG (V) for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, and especially emphasizes that voluntary associations 'provide essential underpinnings of [our] democracy' (European Commission, 1997; Smismans, 2003). What is also interesting is that the Communication especially stresses that 'in the light of the challenges now facing the European Union, and *indeed in the different countries of East and Central Europe*, these functions have never been more vital' (European Commission, 1997). This reference quite unequivocally draws a line between civil society and democracy in application to the new member states, the context where democratic function of civil society was in the epicenter of all civil society-related debates. However, the Communication, even though making an important reference to democratic credentials of civil society actors, still mainly approaches civil society actors as assistants in social policy implementation, the message that the concept of civil dialogue was sending at that time. It also remains silent with regards to the forms and formats of such dialogue and focuses more on how such dialogue contributes to employment and provision of better services. Armstrong claims that at that

time the dialogue was still defined in multi-level terms and as unfolding across tiers of governance and not as structured in Brussels (Armstrong, 2002).

Soon the contours of a different approach to relations with civil society emerged in the Commission discussion paper "The Commission and non-governmental organizations: building a stronger partnership" (European Commission, 2000). First, the paper openly advocates for a more formalized relationship between the EU institutions and civil society. It devotes much space to discussion of existing formats of consultations and suggests steps to improve it through identifying precise guidelines for consultations, structures and working groups, terms of provision of information and even calls for creation of some legal basis through amendments of existing Treaties. Secondly, the paper is even more explicit about the political role of civil society and elaborates on its link to legitimacy of governance. In particular it stresses that NGOs, as proxies of civil society, are 'fostering a more participatory democracy', contribute to formation of the European public opinion as well as enhance audibility of voices of marginalized and disadvantaged groups (Smismans, 2003).

Armstrong, analyzing the history of emergence of the White paper on governance, concludes that these two themes, namely *structured dialogue* and *political role* of civil society, found their direct way into that important document (Armstrong, 2002). In this aspiration the Commission was also supported by European Economic and Social Committee that also drifted from citizens-centered horizontal and loose vision of civil society to its organized version (Geyer, 2001; Jarman, 2011; Smismans, 2003). Furthermore, Armstrong traces the origins of emerging approach to civil society to existing practice of social dialogue, and assumes that European social dialogue served as a model for the Commission to structure its relations with civil society actors too, despite significant differences between economic and social partners and other civil society actors (Armstrong, 2002).

The White paper, however, as noted by Stijn Smismans, adds some confusion into the debate about definitions of civil society. First, it takes a broader view of civil society by departing from NGOs and adds trade unions and employers' organizations, professional associations, charities, grass-roots organizations, organizations that involve citizens in local and municipal life with a particular contribution from churches and religious communities' and even European political parties (European Commission, 2001; Smismans, 2003). The paper, thus, leaves much room for any interactions with any actors to be qualified as civil dialogue. Yet at the same time, in its parts about institutionalizations

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of interactions and structuring of dialogue, the Paper mentions only NGOs. Additionally, the Paper specifies the criteria for involvement in policy-making and stresses importance of NGOs being representative bodies in their fields.

Scholars point to several important implications of the above-described developments. The documents produced by the EU institutions can be seen as drawing out a specific EU approach to and even a certain model of relations with civil society. In this model, civil society appears as a catch-all entity or, in other words, as a broadly defined group of actors, not exclusively limited to NGOs. Its functions are also not limited to certain ones but include expertise provision for policy implementation as well as democratic legitimacy, both representation and fostering participation as well as European constituency-building (Fossum & Trenz, 2006; Kohler-Koch, 2009). Finally, a distinct feature of this approach is an emphasis on structuration and institutionalization of interactions with civil society actors, a move indicating certain modeling on the practice of relations with other actors such as social partners.[9] Looking into the motifs behind such catch-all*ism*, Kohler-Koch (2009) argues that adopting such a diffused notion of civil society was a way 'to foster consensus on the benefits of strengthening civil society in the EU context' (p. 813). At the same time she registers that civil society actors encountered with contradictory expectations of the EU (mainly, the Commission), namely to contribute to both participatory and representative versions of democracy, let alone vague references to building of European public sphere. Thus the EU approach, coined in the major documents, emerged as naturally enabling contestation around the notion of civil society.

All these discursive changes naturally found their way to developments around partnership. In the amended Regulations prepared for a start of the new programming period 2007-2013, partnership is defined differently. Although the disclaimer about 'traditions and practices' of the member states remains in its place, partnership is further extended to 'authorities and bodies' such as: 'the competent regional, local, urban and other public authorities; economic and social partners; any other *body representing civil society*, environmental partners, non-governmental organizations, and bodies responsible for promoting equality between men and women' (Official Journal L 158:3 28 June 2003). In the changed context of debates around reconstituting democracy of the EU and remedial function of civil society in this struggle, partnership was seen as one of the arenas where such reconstitution takes place. The updated formulation clearly demonstrates that

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[9] This rhetoric had concrete outcomes in the form of numerous fora and platforms established by the Commission and other institutions for interactions with civil society actors (Jarman, 2011; Kroger, 2008; Warleigh, 2000).

partnership for cohesion policy should not be taken technocratically but that its implementation is inextricably tied to issues of participation, democracy and legitimacy. References to civil society explicitly invite such considerations.

That different accents in relation to partnership emerged is, for instance, clearly seen from the report on implementation of partnership prepared by the Commission at the end of the 1999-2006 programming period and in the course of amending the Regulations for 2007-2013 period. In the section "Added value of partnership", the list of positive effects actually begins with 'enhanced legitimacy' and later goes on that 'participation of civil society helps to legitimize the decision-making process by counterbalancing any political or other influence' (European Commission, 2005). While this does not substitute for the well-known narrative of efficiency and effectiveness of Funds allocation and absorption but adds an important dimension. The "mantra" of legitimacy has also been repeated in other documents by other institutions such as, for instance, in the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (ECOSOC, 2010). The document from the ECOSOC, for example, directly refers to programming as a political stage in the cohesion policy-making and stresses that partnership serves different purposes at this stage and at other ones, such as monitoring or implementation.

Although not as straightforwardly as with civil society, such a linkage between partnership and issues of participation and democracy through civil society became even more prominent in the pre-enlargement context. References to democracy and civil society themselves were topics for a series of negotiations between the EU and future 10 new members and comprised a big part of enlargement conditionality. Furthermore, civil society actors moved to the center of attention in times of pre-accession. They were both financially endorsed by the European Commission and found themselves in the midst of empowerment initiatives when the European Commission required involvement of civil society actors in implementation of the *acquis* and even made it a condition for availability of funding (Bailey & de Propris, 2004; Borzel & Buzogany, 2010). The partnership principle was especially stressed. A remark of one civil servant from Hungary demonstrates how extending the discourse of partnership from a mere efficiency to political participation fell on a fruitful soil in the new member states: 'we are supposed *to be a modern democracy* and in Europe you have consultations with civil society for that. When you apply for the EU membership, then dialogue with civil society is actually checked'.[10] Thus, partnership requirement arrived to the new member states with specific

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[10] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.

strings attached which may have affected how contestation around it unfolds in terms of contents, namely when the issue of democracy is present in discussions about partnership.

To sum up, the shift from vertical to horizontal understanding of partnership opened it to an ever-bigger contestation. Firstly, it hugely extended the number of actors who can potentially be involved in partnership arrangements by adding social and economic partners and civil society organizations, two completely different groups of actors with the last one being extremely numerous and diverse. Secondly, it linked partnership to extremely contentious issues such as civil society and participation, thus opening it contestation along these lines. Yet, already in following years, partnership kept evolving in the direction of expansion of its contestedness and acquired new meanings.

2.3. Partnership in post-2013 cohesion policy: a focus on better procedures and efficiency

In the 2007-2013 programming period attention to implementation of partnership reached new peaks, both within the EU institutions and in the member states. 2007-2013 was the period of intensive testing of partnership on the ground and attempts of the Commission to connect to the on-going contestation of partnership and bring in some input. In the period, the Commission and other institutions ordered and conducted several studies on practice of partnership; partnership became an issue on everyone's lips during almost every new discussion on the state and future of cohesion policy. Discussion around partnership also naturally intensified due to larger processes of economic crisis and unfolding of its consequences, such as, for instance, recalibration of traditions of social dialogue, a move that had important implications for social partners. In light of this tendency, partnership gained a special importance. Some of the austerity measures in some member states, especially the new ones, were counterbalanced by reallocation of the Structural Funds when money from the agreed priorities were redirected to areas in need of immediate interventions. The latter manifested itself through reallocations for social OPs to programmes on infrastructure and support of enterprises. Most often, such "Structural Funds austerity" affected societal partners. The funds meant to be spent on their financial support dwindled significantly or were even cancelled. Contestation around partnership naturally absorbed these themes too. What also makes these seven years an interesting phase is that actors tried to direct the flow of their demands and aspirations regarding partnership to the EU level. In the final "big" document on partnership, prepared by the Commission, the "European Code of Conduct on partnership", the Commission, in its turn,

attempted to reconcile these demands with its own visions of, first of all, cohesion policy and, secondly, the role of partnership in it. The present section looks at how the discourse of partnership changed again and gradually moved from democracy to the issues of efficiency of Funds allocation and overall management of cohesion policy.

The last programming period is particularly known for intensification of debates around destiny of cohesion policy. The times of economic recession automatically made cohesion policy the first candidate for austerity, the point raised by several (old) member states referring to some critical studies of the effect of cohesion policy (Mendez et al., 2013). There were calls for abolition of cohesion policy due to its failure as a redistributive mechanism, financial fraud, abuse, and overall inefficiency. The critics pointed to side effects of what was captured in the academic debate as renationalization of cohesion policy: weakening influence of the Commission over policy objectives and goals, its weak role in audit and scrutiny over implementation, termination of certain Commission-led initiatives along with overall growing assertiveness of the member states etc. (Begg, 2010). Scholars also argue that by the mid-2000s cohesion policy had drifted far from its initial ethos of 1988 based on calls for solidarity, integration and stronger role of the Commission, and subdued to neoliberal agenda of competitiveness. Yet, at the same time, the recession was a breakpoint for the Commission as it used it to reassert its role in cohesion policy. The first victory was its insistence and success in pushing for an acceleration of expenditure as a response to the recession (Begg, 2010). The second was securing agreement and support of the Parliament and Council on the new reform legislative package in 2012 (Mendez, 2013).

Existing analysis of the post-2013 reform points out that cohesion policy eventually turned into a full-fledged territorially-focused development policy meaning that this discourse and later policy initiatives took ascendancy over well-known redistributive underpinnings (Mendez, 2013). Some scholars even call this turn a paradigm shift since a completely new approach to regional development, namely a place-based approach, substituted an old vision of cohesion policy as a tool of overcoming regional divergence. The core of the new rational, thoroughly explicated and justified in the famous Barca report, is the assumption that instead of seeking to achieve unrealistic goal of convergence across regions measured in GDP or any other macro terms, future allocations shall be driven by specificities and potential of every territory (Barca, 2009). The macro objective of convergence was reported as falsely and inflexibly treating all the territories as facing the same range of problems. In real terms, such inflexibility is widely believed to have

brought enormous financial losses, fraud, abuse and incapability of implementing authorities to connect to the policy objectives. The report also stressed that the overall debate between efficiency and equity proponents of cohesion policy essentially stalls and obstructs regional development. In fact, instead of seeing an irresistible trade-off between these two goals, one can see their mutually reinforcing effect, yet only if a territory becomes an object of growth-enhancing developmental policies, specifically customized for and tailored to its needs (Barca, 2009). In concrete policy terms, this approach manifested itself through a new classification of the European regions, "territorial contractualism" or policy programmes tapped into the needs of concrete territories at different levels, enhanced accountability of the member states through binding contracts (Partnership Agreements) between them and the Commission, enhanced conditionality and evaluation measures. All these initiatives, as argued by some scholars, indicate strengthening of role of the Commission in policy process as it acquires a real grip over previous flexibility of the national governments in either defining or implementing policies.

Reform of the partnership was one of the biggest issues on the agenda for the Commission. By 2012 "poor implementation" of partnership had become proverbial. The DG Regio was constantly pressurized, by partners themselves, to take action in order to make partnership work. In the end, the Commission came up with the proposal to include into the legislative package legally binding European Code of Conduct on Partnership, a document that, first, clarifies the notion of partnership and, second, establishes clear criteria and requirements for its implementation. The document was drafted by the end of 2012 and strongly supported by the European Parliament, EESC and the Committee of the Regions. However, in the course of negotiations, proposal was met with huge resistance on the part of the member states and, as a result, was rejected by the Council, never to become a part of the adopted legislation.

A look at the contents of the European Commissions' working document which never became the basis for the actual Code of Conduct, allows one to see how the idea of partnership changed again and how the European Commission's proposals this time were heavily influenced by the input of civil society actors themselves. What stands out when this and previous documents containing European Commission's vision on partnership are compared is that the overall assessment of the benefit of partnership has changed. The focus shifted from legitimacy and efficiency as attributes of proper policy design to explicit stressing of the importance of *implementation* and its *procedural/managerial*

aspects. Describing the added value of partnership, the document puts 'collective commitment and ownership of EU policies, available knowledge and expertise … greater transparency … reduced coordination and capacity gaps in terms of information, resources, administrative and policy fragmentation' (European Commission, 2012). The latter reflects on general big concern with criticized inflexibility of cohesion policy management. The focus on efficiency remains in its place, stressed more and reveals overall concern of the Commission with what cohesion policy delivers. The document contains, for example, the whole section on how to involve partners in evaluation. Yet, aside from no references to classical added value normally associated with partnership, such as solidarity, societal consensus, participation, legitimacy or even absorption are found. Partnership was rediscovered' more as a tool that can help to improve overall management and bring efficiency rather than enhance democracy or participation.

The Code of Conduct places a premium upon procedural aspects of partnership. The document covers such issues as clear rules of selection, yet without mentioning representativity of partners, formalization of partners' obligations, measures to achieve greater legitimacy such as on-line publication of lists of partners and their involvement in project selection, meticulous registration of partners' input etc.[11] Some procedural aspects are even more heavily stressed. Two themes, for instance, ended up being incorporated because of external pressures exerted by partners themselves, namely inclusion into the project selection and technical assistance to partners. Assistance to partners is the subject of the whole section which describes in great details how such assistance should be carried out.

The list of procedural specifications of partnership is further extended in reactions of other institutions through which partners attempted to make the Commission take more responsibility in scrutinizing implementation of partnership. In the special Opinion on the drafted Code of Conduct, the EESC, for instance, adds 'simplification of procedures and controls' and reimbursement of partners' costs as guidelines of successful partnership (Official Journal C 44/23 15 February 2013).

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[11] Some partners get more attention, though. For instance, the Code contains a special section about involvement of economic and social partners. It prescribes, for example, involvement of all nationally recognized social partners, equality between labor and capital and instructs that social partners are groups representing general interests of industries and branches but in no way of a sole company or economic group (European Commission, 2012). At the same time, the Code mentions research universities and centers as new actors that are expected to be involved.

Finally, what is interesting about the examined Code is how consultations are mentioned as a natural format of partnership implementation. Consultations are seen as providing space for channeling expertise. The same term is used by EESC in its document which can be seen as indicating certain consensus around the right format of partnership. What this indicates is that if previously the Commission refrained from any specification of partnership formats and institutional modalities, this time it opted for structuring understandings around partnership through the use of a clear concept – consultations.

Emergence of the Code of Conduct and other documents elucidating, complementing and specifying what is meant by partnership is an interesting stage in history of partnership. On the one hand, it reflects on a range of new big concerns in relation to cohesion policy – efficiency, management, coordination, procedural simplification, greater procedural flexibility and expertise- and evaluation-based policy-making. On the other hand, it incorporates aspirations of societal partners themselves which also, to a large extent, revolve around procedural aspects such as clear rules of identification, selection, time-related aspects of participation and, most importantly, technical assistance to partners. Issues of legitimacy, participation, representation of interests or channeling the voice of the marginalized are surprisingly absent from the discursive map of partnership.

2.4. Conclusions

Table 2 below provides a shorthand account of how the idea of partnership evolved in the last two decades.

Table 2. Evolution of partnership

Partnership	1988-1994, 1995-2000	2000-2006, 2007-2013	2014-2020
overall context	Reform of the ERDF, Iberian enlargement, Single European Act	Failures of referenda on the treaties, "democratic deficit" criticism, growing social policy profile of the EU, pre-accession process and 2004 enlargement	Economic crisis and criticism of cohesion policy, place-based approach
actors involved	The Commission, national, regional and local authorities.	The Commission, national, sub-national authorities, economic and social partners, civil society organizations, environmental partners.	The Commission, national, sub-national authorities, economic and social partners, civil society organizations, environmental partners, research institutes and universities, experts.
underlying goals of partnership, ideological underpinnings	Efficiency, solidarity between the member states.	Enhanced legitimacy of the EU policies, participation of EU citizenry, reconstitution of democracy in the EU through civil society.	Enhanced efficiency of cohesion policy, accumulation of expertise and knowledge, evaluation and expertise-based policy-making, better scrutiny, technical assistance to partners.

Table 2 summarizes the major turning points in history of partnership. It is clearly seen that meanings behind partnership altered, mainly as a result of the framing done by the Commission, depending on concrete circumstances of the day for the EU and cohesion policy. It can also be seen that in all three periods partnership conveys quite different

meanings: division of power and sub-national mobilization for the sake of efficiency in the first one, greater focus on legitimacy, democracy and normative added value brought by civil society in the second one and greater efficiency, flexibility, output from cohesion policy in the third one. It can be assumed that such a diverse baggage of meanings will inevitably contribute to intensive contestation around partnership. The Commission, being the major advocate for partnership, did not do enough to form consensus around a particular understanding of partnership, just like with civil society (Kohler-Koch 2009) when inaccurate use of the term civil society further enhanced existing contradictions. To the opposite, throughout its history partnership was infused with various meanings that, though, not appearing as radically contradicting each other still increase overall likelihood of intensive contestation.

Moreover, contested character of partnership was further enhanced by opening it up to participation of extremely diverse group of actors. Involvement of all of them served particular tasks and intentions of the European Commission: mobilization of sub-national allies, tackling democratic deficit or better addressing of employment and social inclusion problems as well as increasing overall efficiency. In the Code of Conduct this diversity is even more acknowledged yet without acknowledgement of how this can potentially affect functioning of partnership. Thus, the history of partnership illustrates its inherent problematic character. The idea of partnership appears as infused with ambiguity that enhances rather than reduces contestation.

The next chapter will explore how the problem of contestation is addressed in the existing academic literature.

Chapter 3. Studying partnership and contestation

The previous chapter presented the historical context of the evolution of partnership principle as an EU policy requirement. It traced how partnership developed as a legal provision in the European Commission's policy documents as well as tracking the evolution of its ideological underpinnings. This short historical overview articulated the complex operative context which gives certain meanings to partnership and already explicates where the extreme diversity of actors' expectations from the partnership principle originates.

This chapter continues the endeavor that aims at identification the logic behind contestation. It turns to existing literature and reviews and critically engages with accounts that can offer analytical and conceptual insights to the study of contestation over and meaning making of partnership. Additionally, it reviews existing studies of partnership that rely on these insights. This is done with a view to identify how each of the considered bodies of literature can conceptually and analytically grasp the reality of contestation. In concrete terms, the chapter reviews which of the existing accounts can explain, first, why actors actively question the partnership principle on the ground and, second, how diverse meanings that they attach to partnership emerge and are structured.

There are three main bodies of literature that can offer valuable analytical insights for the study of partnership. The literature on Europeanization, implementation and compliance, and (European) civil society propose solid analytical frameworks that can be adapted for research on partnership at the macro level. Alternatively, the literature regarding partnerships in public policy successfully explores the micro-dynamics of partnership. By and large, research literature that can be utilized for analysis of contestation is divided into two principle camps. The borders between them lie in, first, awareness of and openness about contestation as a process inseparable from the practice of partnership and, second, depiction of its logic. The literature from the "macro" camp, though not directly mentioning contestation, implicitly derives its roots and logic from incompatibility of macro structures between the EU and its member states, thus proposing inherently structuralist accounts. In essence, it argues why the EU ideas, requirements, or rules, find or do not find their way into the domestic contexts of the member states. Scholars, working in this tradition, embark on a comparison between, firstly, two contexts – the EU and domestic one – and, secondly, across domestic contexts. Actors, although fully in the picture, are only throughputs of domestic contexts and carriers of some grand

characteristics of those contexts, such as cultural or institutional practices. Consequently, research is done as a cross-country comparison where countries, as units, come across as internally homogenous and undividable contexts.

Conversely, the literature on partnerships in public policy is very explicit about contestation which is taken as the departure point of research and is thoroughly examined. The major difference is that this literature completely degrades discrepancies between countries, and views contestation as tensions and conflicts arising between actors in the first place. Research focuses on inner complexities of domestic contexts and inter-actors relations as fueling and causing contestation within partnerships arrangements. As regards the empirics, micro-dynamics of interactions come into research focus.

This chapter delineates and critically engages with arguments from these three bodies of literature and then discusses empirical examples of their application to research on partnership. It argues that despite providing extremely useful insights neither of the bodies of literatures are capable of capturing complex dynamics of the practice of partnership, especially in the context of EU cohesion policy. Although all three bodies of literature are not completely silent regarding contestation, they do not delve deeper into defining contestation, its meaning and logic, and instead take all of it for granted. The latter transpires through solving the driving mechanisms of contestation by assumption, a strategy that inevitably casts aside important aspects of its dynamics and produces abstract and partial explanations.

3.1. Partnership in the Europeanization, transposition and compliance literature: structuralist and institutional accounts of contestation

The literature regarding Europeanization, transposition or compliance with the EU requirements, and, partially, cohesion policy literature too, often serve as the first point of entry for scholars trying to understand how the partnership principle is applied in practice. Partnership is essentially a requirement born within and imposed by the EU institutions and is, therefore, external to realities on the ground in the member states. This directs scholars to search for sources of contention around partnership in natural differences between political and institutional arrangements of the EU and the member states. This approach is informed by understanding of European integration as a teleological move towards top-down policy diffusion when a variety of policy requirements, norms and standards are flowing to the member states reducing the gap between the EU as a political

order of new quality and its members (Risse, Cowles Green, & Caporaso, 2001; Sedelmeier, 2012). In light of such research ambition, the central theoretical question within each strand of literature becomes the question about how such a move is possible and what obstructs it. Yet, if the literature on Europeanization is interested in institutional change, scholars of transposition and compliance look at implementation of the corpus of the EU legal requirements (Haverland & Romeijn, 2007; Kaeding, 2006; Toshkov, 2007, 2008). Given that the partnership principle is one in a number of such requirements, the following question is posed - what are the factors that obstruct partnership from being complied with in the member states.

Methodologically speaking, all of the literature provides analytical short cuts that seek to reveal causal mechanisms behind failure or success of partnership. Empirically, the causal factors are believed to be located at the structural level or at the level of institutions, because partnership is taken as a particular institutional arrangement. Hence, all of the literature operates with structural explanations. Obstacles to implementation of EU rules and standards are seen as certain structural/institutional attributes of political orders (institutional systems) of the member states in the form of traditions, styles and entrenched practices.

Scholars of Europeanization have done most of the work on conceptualizations of potential obstructions to the implementation of the EU requirements. Thomas Risse et al. (2001) view it as 'emergence and development at the European level of different structures of governance' (p. 3) which exert adaptation pressures on domestic structures and make them adjust to those pressures. Claudio Radaelli (2003) further expands the definition and sees Europeanization as 'formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms … consolidated in the making of the EU decisions' which get 'incorporated in the logic of domestic discourses, identities, political structures and public policies' (p. 30). Europeanization is seen as a process of top-down uploading of a variety of things from the EU in the member states that eventually brings two political, economic and social realities closer together.

As is seen from the definitions, the range of what can become "Europeanized" stretches from institutions and formal rules and procedures, to individual motifs, beliefs and views. Stephen George and Ian Bache, in this respect, differentiate between two generations of Europeanization studies that can provisionally be called institutional and sociological (Stephen & Bache, 2010). In the first one, institutional change in the member states as a result of the EU membership has occupied scholarly interest as opposed to

behavioral changes that interests scholars within the second generation. Tanja Borzel and Thomas Risse have articulated the central research question - what makes institutional changes within domestic contexts possible and sustained (Borzel & Risse, 2003; Borzel, 1999). Conceptualizing institutional change as wide EU-induced transformations of domestic political (and others) institutions and sustainability of those transformations through time, as opposed to a mere mimicry, scholars attempt to identify mechanisms and logic of the change and embark on explaining the variation. The major analytical short-cut used to explain variation is the hypothesis of "fit", a term that signals the extent of resemblance between EU and domestic institutions (Heritier, 2001). The general assumption is that in the course of Europeanization as a top-down transposition one should expect certain adaptation pressures at the domestic level (Borzel & Risse, 2003). Their strength varies depending on initial similarity vs. dissimilarity between imposed institutions and structures and the ones that exist at the domestic level. Fit is naturally expected to lead to quite smooth and painless transposition whereas unequivocal divergence or "misfit" provokes natural resistance and generally obstructs institutional changes.

As applied to partnership, the argument of "goodness of fit" can be taken quite straightforwardly. Partnership itself represents a new institution that is supposed to sink in in the member states. Following this logic, its implementation (or institutional change) will most likely take place where practices of collaborative policy-making have been present as national/domestic traditions. Being itself an institutionalized practice of interactions between different groups of actors, it naturally fits the realities of member states where such practices are already institutionalized (Bruszt, 2008a). In research on partnership, corporatist polities are taken as the usual suspects of successful application of partnership. It is expected to entrench more or less unproblematically since actors in these contexts are familiar with the rules, practices and mechanisms of such collaboration, although frequently in different policy areas. What the partnership principle requires is to transfer this experience into the cohesion policy, which is expected to occur almost automatically. Conversely, in highly centralized polities application of partnership is likely to be met with natural resistance on the part of actors.

Arguments in support of this causal logic are found in existing research on partnership. For instance, Bache and Olsson (2001) conclude that in Sweden partnership was met as an "old friend" and interpreted through experience of Swedish corporatism, which made it relatively easy to include economic and social partners in cohesion policy-

making. Partnership falls on a fertile soil in Ireland and Scotland, as existing studies show, contexts with entrenched traditions of social partnership, but finds no way to policy-making in centralized Greece and Portugal (Adshead, 2005, Danson et al., 1999, Getimis and Grigoriadu, 2004, Naneti, 2004). The new member states normally score very low in research along the lines of this argument as their institutional traditions or legacies of high centralization are deemed incompatible (Batory & Cartwright, 2011; Dabrowski, 2012, 2014).

This argument has also been thoroughly discussed in literature regarding the Europeanization of interest groups. The literature argues that imposition of any mode of interest intermediation, as part of a wider agenda of the EU policies, will inevitably sit the goodness of fit test and will either be rejected or accepted, depending on existing institutionalized modes of interest politics (Falkner, 2010a). For instance, such an argument was applied to research on the Europeanization of social policy in the member states and especially the functioning of the Open Method of Coordination that introduces interactions between state and non-state actors as an important component of policy-making (Armstrong, 2006). In her research on the implementation of labor law in the EU member states, Gerda Falkner concludes that EU requirements related to bringing economic and social partners to the process of implementation of EU law actually fell on fruitful soil in traditionally corporatist polities and deepened existing corporatist practices rather than leading to their decline (Falkner & Leiber, 2004; Falkner, 2000).

The argument of the goodness of fit is not taken completely uncritically though. Kevin Featherstone convincingly demonstrates the point that the effect of fit is neither strictly confirmed nor disconfirmed as it never works unmediated (Featherstone, 2003). The entrenchment of institutional changes is not necessarily linked to similarities or dissimilarities between institutions but brought about or impeded by actors. Thus, the blunt arguments of Europeanization scholars about emulation and copying are complemented by bringing actors in. Generally theorized as seeking utility maximization, actors are believed to contest EU requirements and either block the EU from exerting its influence or pave the way for the EU rules (Fontana, 2011, Jacoby 2010).

The literature on transposition and compliance successfully takes up this conceptual torch and comes up with a whole range of explanations related to actors. Studies of compliance turn to explaining success or failure of the EU legislation in the member states by looking at either the core executive or bureaucratic efficiency and administrative quality, coordination capacity, preferences of national governments or influence of interest

groups and policy sector-specific interactions of actors (Kaeding, 2008; Mastenbroek, 2005; Steunenberg & Toshkov, 2009). This "actors turn" in Europeanization studies changed the view that the latter is a simple juxtaposition of the EU template on the domestic one. It was admitted that it is always a power game between various actors who might be seeking a variety of strategies, depending on the available resources, which may even go against existing traditions. For instance, existing studies show that EU policies were still implemented where one could observe a total misfit or, conversely, failed to move further formal transposition where a perfect fit was found (Mendez, Wishlade, & Yuill, 2008).

In application to partnership, this corrects expectations about its better applications in corporatist polities as opposed to centralized ones as such a straightforward outcome is not certain at all. Most likely actors will contest the requirement by reasoning from their interests and will either support or block the partnership. Bauer, for instance, in his research provides extensive evidence how partnership brings more tensions and conflict between actors in German context, contrary to expectations that partnership can fall smoothly on traditions of collaborative policy-making (Bauer, 2002). Bache, to the contrary, demonstrates that actors may seek cooperation even in still highly centralized polities like the UK (Bache, 2001). In his case study of partnership application in English regions, he shows that even when traditions and official government rhetoric in the country are quite hostile to this EU idea, implementation of partnership is still a matter of a number of choices of actors on the ground. Moreover, a growing UK scholarship on partnership implementation finds extreme intra-regional variation in how this requirement is complied with in the UK (Derkzen, 2010; Rumbul, 2013).

The second generation of Europeanization studies takes a more in-depth look into the process of transposition of EU policies and requirements. It is normally more sensitive to bottom-up dimension of occurring changes, not exclusively to top-down of the previous generation (Goetz, 2005). It investigates how another mechanism, namely the "logic of appropriateness", champions or blocks domestic changes (Marsh & Olsen, 2006). Inspired by sociological institutionalism, scholars working in this tradition link domestic changes to learning and socialization into EU norms and rules and emphasize the role of networks (epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions etc.) or informal institutions (political cultures, social norms etc.) as mediating mechanisms (Jacquot & Woll, 2003; Knill & Lehmkuhl, 1999). Actors' preferences are seen as liable to change and interests liable to reconceptualization. Extending this argument on partnership, scholars relate its failures or

success to depth of internalization of positive and receptive attitude to partnership. Marcin Dabrwoski, for example, directly links "shallow Europeanization" as an application of partnership in Poland to lack of commitment on the part of state authorities (Dabrowski, 2012).

The arguments of scholars from both camps have been hugely criticized from the very beginning, despite enormous conceptual attractiveness of both. The relevance of criticisms have also been acknowledged by scholars themselves involved in self-reflection on explanatory potential of the concept of Europeanization (Exadaktylos & Radaelli, 2009; Featherstone, 2003; Haverland, 2006; K. E. Howell, 2004). Ramifications of the argument such as focus on domestic politics that may mediate changes are quite unpredictable, or differences across policy areas and generally between "positive" and "negative" integration etc. were acknowledged as affecting simple mirroring of EU requirements in terms of fit or misfit.

In relation to the research on partnership, the analytical points of this literature are of some importance, yet cannot be left without critical reflection. First of all, contemplating the probabilities of changes induced by the EU, scholars locate the variables predominantly at the national level and see the variation as unfolding across countries. Even if such a country-centric view is adjusted by, for instance, acknowledging variation across policy areas or introducing actors as agents of Europeanization and transposition/compliance, conclusions are still formulated for countries. For example, the research on partnership frames it as "working" in one country but failing to function in another depending on various reasons. The new member states, in this light, are predominantly described as spaces of dead letters or contexts where partnership will hardly take off in the nearest future (Falkner & Treib, 2008). Such a focus on homogeneity within domestic contexts does not alter with the transformation of conceptualizations of Europeanization. Even admitting that Europeanization is essentially a discursive and not necessarily an institutional change, a move that has the potential to flag up diversity within domestic contexts, for instance, Colin Hay and Ben Rosamond still bracket the domestic context heterogeneity and only replace institutional traditions as macro structures with discourse as another macro structure of a different nature (Hay & Rosamond, 2002).

Secondly, although actors as mediators of changes and contributors to contestation enter the picture and are taken as carriers of different attitudes and interests, they are still treated as coming from different national contexts and thus deriving their interests from them. Conclusions are still formulated about countries without fully acknowledging the

complexity that can be brought about by actors. Additionally, what makes this actors-centered change of focus within the Europeanization framework still of little use for study of partnership is its predominant focus on state elites as vehicles of Europeanization. Only domestic elites are being studied as potential channels of change (Radaelli, 2000). Political conflict and divisions through which differences among actors might transpire are only examined in application to state actors. Success or failure of partnership are automatically attributed to dynamics within the group of state elites, namely to their willingness or unwillingness to follow the requirement. It is superfluous to state that in relation to partnership such an approach leaves important wider dynamics aside. In reality, partnership throws together three different groups of actors, two of which do not belong to the domain of elites. This important aspect renders it impossible to generalize about *all* actors as, for instance, being poorly socialized on the material of the study of elites. Yet pursued along these lines research would omit this multiplicity of actors.

3.2. Partnership and civil society literature: attempt at analytical refocus

The literature on civil society provides several important analytical short cuts for research on partnership. At some point, it overlaps with the literature on Europeanization, as it also invests in analysis of the reasons behind the failures of partnership. For instance, both find the causes of failure in incongruity and mismatch of the EU and domestic contexts. The differences lie, though, in analytically divergent conceptualizations of a failure. The sustainability of institutional change brought about by partnership, conceptualized as an entrenched practice of interactions, is the benchmark against which Europeanization literature measures its success or failure. Civil society literature approaches it from a different perspective.

Partnership is assessed as the realization of a set of normative ideals usually associated with involvement of civil society actors, namely related to greater democratic legitimacy or efficiency of policy-making. Partnership carries a completely different meaning for scholars of civil society, the one entirely linked to highly normative loading of the concept of civil society (Kocka, 2004; Muller, 2006). Nevertheless, in explaining why these ideals cannot be realized, the mainstream civil society literature would also turn to structural explanations. As a mode of civil society involvement, partnership also has to fit the existing traditions of state-civil society relations, a complex realm of interactions susceptible to particular understandings of how relations between state and civil society are expected to unfold (Esping-Andersen, 1993; Salamon & Anheier, 1997, 1998).

The literature on European civil society also offers a different analytical angle. Partnership comes across as a mode of participation of civil society in European policy-making normally studied under the label of "governance" (Liebert & Trenz, 2009). Civil society actors are ascribed a particular role of assistants to the EU in problem-solving and obtaining greater efficiency of policy-making (Kohler-Koch, 2012). Partnership is thus assessed through the lenses of reaching this greater goal. Its failure, consequently, is seen as a result of "weaknesses" of civil society actors in terms of supplying expertise and policy content.

3.2.1. Reiterating the structuralist argument

Partnership rings a specific bell for scholars with a background in civil society studies. The EU initiative is not only noticeable from the perspective of simply bringing actors together. After all, the interactions of various actors in the policy-making process have always been present in one or another form. In contrast, partnership is intriguing for scholars as it conveys an attempt by the EU to redefine the roles of civil society actors, as was shown in chapter 1. Ulrike Liebert and Hans-Jorg Trenz (2009) claim that in the context of the EU civil society acquires a different role in the conceptual and empirical map of European integration. They conclude that 'a new script is applied to European civil society as a partner in EU governance and a constituent of a new kind of political order' as opposed to classical understanding of civil society as an opponent to the state (p. 2). Such a redefined notion of civil society or its Europeanization is seen as naturally colliding with the peculiarities of the contexts of nation states, still the major harbors of both theorizing about civil society and its actual unfolding (Kendall, 2010). A potential misfit between national traditions of thinking of civil society and practicing it and the idea promoted by the EU raises the degree of contestation around partnership, as this analytical angle would suggest.

Attempts to juxtapose research agendas and analytical frameworks of civil society and Europeanization literatures provide an analytical entry point for research on partnership. Embarking on an ambitious project to trace the influence of Europeanization on third sectors across the old member states, Jeremy Kendal et al. refer to national contexts as mediating the impact of a variety of EU policy initiatives (Brandsen & van de Donk, 2009; Cram, 2001; Kendall, 2010). Kendall (2009) avoids viewing the EU policy initiatives as manifestations of a unique EU approach to civil society and its actors. Yet he, together with the research team, finds that the EU policy initiatives that are built around involvement of civil society actors in policy-making, bring about different results in

different countries. He argues that 'rich assortment of arrangements that exist for structuring horizontally' policy towards third sectors across EU member states affect implementation of such initiatives as drafting of European employment strategy or national social inclusion plans (p. 143). The most important finding is directly related to partnership. Crowhurst and Kendall find that implementation of the so-called "Local social capital programme", an initiative within Structural Funds, that opens up special access for third sector organizations, is also stalled in contexts with certain historically crystalized national models of civil society participation (Crowhurst & Kendall, 2009). The link has been described by Kendall (2010) in terms of 'country-specific national political environment and milieu', an argument that is closely related to the main claims of the literature on Europeanization (p. 42).

Thus, the source of contestation over partnership can be found in incompatibilities of the EU vision of the role of civil society actors in the policy-making process and existing national traditions. Scholars attempt to describe national models of civil society (third sector). The "French model", for instance, *economie sociale,* places the major emphasis on the service delivery function of civil society in a highly etatist polity. The inherently "British model" with a focus on voluntarism or the "Scandinavian model" of civil society, which is only sporadically involved in service delivery yet is heavily concerned with issues of democratic community participation, are also identified (Brandsen & van de Donk, 2009; Fraisse, 2009; Fric, 2009). The EU model of partnership that comes along with such strings attached as democratic legitimacy, regardless of how vaguely it is translated into concrete terms, or efficiency may or may not fall on the right soil in terms of conceptualization of the role of civil society (Saurrugger, 2007).[12] Ideological incompatibilities, for instance, transpire through how the issue of belonging to civil society is interpreted in national traditions. Existing research on partnership shows that the issue of belonging also became a bone of contention in many member states where, for instance, economic and social partners are excluded (or included, to the contrary) from civil society (Batory & Cartwright, 2011). Controversies around who should be invited round the partnership table are believed to block partnership. Research shows that what actors strongly contest is closely related to historically crystallized conceptualizations of civil society, its role and the mode of relations with the state.

In relation to the new member states, this analytical approach may also provide some explanations. In the literature, the EU10 are classified as representing one particular

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[12] Sabine Saurugger (Saurrugger, 2007), for instance, directly speaks about democratic "misfit".

model of civil society due to common legacies of communist rule and similarities of post-communist development. Civil society is believed to acquire a particular reading in the context of transition, the one which strongly links it to the issue of democracy, democratic control and oversight, as well as confronting expansion of the state role in the market economy (Fagan, 2007). Tanja Borzel and Aron Buzogany (2010), based on their research on the implementation of EU environmental directives, make a bolder conclusion and argue that in the context of the new member states, the whole administrative tradition built around antagonism of state and civil society made actors reluctant and suspicious of partnership. Nieves Perez-Solorzano Borragan (2004) echoes the argument on the material of involvement of business actors in EU policy-making. Drawing on existing literature she also classifies the CEE model as predominantly top-down and close to "entrepreneurial" one 'where exchange and ownership of information are more important that the actual impact on the policy-making' (p. 262). Taken from here and on the basis of this analytical approach, one could assume that the basis for contestation over partnership in the new member states may lie at the intersection of certain understandings of civil society. Yet the most controversial feature of research within this tradition is that the homogeneity of CEE member states as the locus of the same tradition is almost automatically assumed.

3.2.2. European civil society: bringing actors back in

The literature on European civil society engages in a different debate about reasons behind failure of partnership. The peculiarity of the overall argument is rooted in understanding of partnership as a specific model of civil society, as an incarnation that emerged in the context of European integration. In the literature such a conceptualization is known as an integral part of the so-called "governance approach" (Deidre Curtin, 2003; Liebert, 2009; Ruzza, 2006; Smismans, 2003, 2006). The focus within this approach lies not on the incompatibility of the EU script of civil society with the ones in the member states, but on the capacity of civil society actors themselves to contribute to realization of the above-mentioned script.

Liebert and Trenz (2009) clearly summarize the essence of the governance approach. They claim there has been a shift in understanding the role of civil society actors, from challengers of the government to auxiliaries of governance. Civil society actors are viewed as assistants in the EU policy-making process with the potential to improve its input and output legitimacy in terms of efficient problem-solving (Liebert, 2009). Beate Kohler-Koch (2009) clarifies and nuances further the peculiarities of this

approach and claims that it can be further specified and even dissected in two. Summarizing the story how civil society entered the EU political discourse, she concedes that three particular images of civil society have implicitly structured the whole debate about it within the EU political institutions. They were built around three different conceptualizations of the nature of the EU as a new political order for which two corresponding functions of civil society seem to be suitable (Kohler-Koch, 2009).

In the first approach, the EU is regarded as a political system in a classical sense that is facing with a sharp input legitimacy crisis emanating from insufficient representation and citizens' participation (Follesdal and Hix 2005). Civil society in this light, appears as an intermediary between the EU and Europeans and encompasses a plethora of voluntary and non-profit organizations who articulate, aggregate and channel citizens' interests.

Within the second approach, the EU is not attributed characteristics of a full-fledged political system but is rather viewed as a multi-level and multi-tier system of governance working primarily for greater efficiency in problem solving and introducing a plethora of the so-called new methods of governance. The major focus lies in achieving greater output legitimacy through involving civil society actors in problem-solving exercises through partnerships and collaborative arrangements (Armstrong, 2006). Civil society actors are expected to offer necessary expertise and skills and other resources. The efficiency of policies in terms of upgraded policy content, innovative methods of problem solving and best solutions are the central benchmark of the success of these collaborative governance arrangements.

Thus, Kohler-Koch (2009), unlike Liebert and Trenz, separates between two images of civil society related to how the EU needs in terms of legitimacy are identified – input or output. Stijn Smismans (2003), by carefully tracing the origins of these approaches as linked to interests of the EU institutions, suggests applying the terms "functional representation" and "functional participation" to capture the same division as well as delineating two additional representations of civil society – civil society as "politicization" and "decentralization".

Partnership, from this perspective, falls under the particular mode of civil society involvement, the one in which civil society actors are seen as expertise providers meant to boost policy efficiency. Therefore, the success of partnership is automatically assessed as whether actors' interactions lead to increased policy efficiency. Thus, being predominantly interested in development of civil society actors, this literature places the major emphasis

on actors themselves as either being capable of contributing to efficiency or not (Liebert & Trenz, 2009). Organizational structures, resources and capabilities of civil society actors and networks and their performance within partnership arrangements are explored in the first place. Most of the research is done on involvement of civil society actors in the EU governance in Brussels. Yet the conclusions are also extrapolated over civil society actors working predominantly in national contexts. Scholars provide convincing accounts of why civil society actors fail to bring more efficiency as expected by the EU and argue that organizational properties of theirs such as dependency on external funding, lack of personnel or strategic planning prevent them from bringing citizens' expertise into the policy process (Carmin, 2010; Kohler-Koch, 2010; Kutter & Trappmann, 2010).

There is no paucity of research on this topic. In her analysis of how NGOs perform in consultation process over the EU legislation, Sandra Kroger (2008) points to the their failures to perform due to analogous problems in addition to language barriers, lack of resources and ideological competition for influence. Looking specifically at partnership in old member states, Piattoni (2006) argues that, apart from working on a different level of governance in general, civil society actors encounter difficulties with overall understanding of the essence of cohesion policy which is very distant from what they normally work on. Simona Milio (2014) echoes her and also emphasizes that partnership in Italian context fails due to lack of competences on the part of civil society actors incapable of contributing to complex decision-making processes around Structural Funds.

Moving to the domestic level in the new member states, Borzel and Buzogany (2010) formulate their main research question as why civil society failed to exploit the empowerment opportunities offered by the EU, including involvement in collaborative partnership arrangements. They conclude that the major reason lay in their explicitly weak capacities 'to make strategic decisions, to act as reliable negotiation partners and to offer state actors something in exchange for becoming involved in the policy process' (p. 164). Similar conclusions about NGOs being incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities due to organizational weaknesses and lack of strategic planning were made by scholars working on country cases of EU policy implementation in the new member states (Gąsior-Niemiec, 2010). Yet in their attempts to generalize about actors, scholars again stop at the county level, pointing that variation necessarily transpires across countries. In this light, the focus on actors and their ability to contribute to partnership does not take civil society scholars far in finding where differences lie. The most widespread conclusion would be wrapped in "country terms" – in some countries civil society actors

are simply more capacitated to partner with the state whereas in contexts like the new member states one should not expect that to happen.

To conclude, the literature on civil society can offer a very encompassing reflection on the fate of partnership as a policy-making mode and several strong explanations why attempts at implementation of partnership may be problematic. Two important aspects of partnership are highlighted, namely the role of traditions of state-civil society relations, described as specific institutional traditions of interactions coupled with certain normative justifications, and state of development of civil society actors themselves. Although not directly referring to the notion of contestation it provides useful analytical tools for understanding its dynamics. What is openly assumed is that the causes of the tension around partnership is to be found across national contexts that differ in terms of understandings of civil society and in terms of how strong civil society actors are. Thus, the accounts found in civil society literature, essentially resemble structuralist explanations that view actors as reflecting the peculiarities of their contexts of origin. The neglect of the fact that national contexts may be extremely heterogeneous and constitute the space of intensive contestation remains the major limitation. Where the literature on civil society undergoes the same actors turn like the literature on Europeanization, it, nevertheless, reiterates the same argument about capacities yet in application to a different group of actors.

3.3. Partnerships and collaborative policy-making

The previously discussed strands of research literature supply a scholar with analytical tools for the study of partnership, however, not with rich empirical material. Wide and prolific scholarship in public policy makes partnership its primary matter of interest and the focal point of analysis and delves into the rich empirical reality of its functioning. Scholars working within this tradition inquire into a variety of aspects related to partnership: inner mechanisms and driving forces of partnership, determinants of its success/failure, direct and side effects on actors and policies etc. Partnership arrangements and their internal dynamics within this scholarship have been studied from a variety of theoretical traditions and approaches which led to the emergence of quite a comprehensive and multifaceted account of its functioning.

One of the major distinct features of this literature, which is of particular relevance for the present research, is acknowledgement of partnership as an arena of huge contestation. The idea that partnerships and collaborations are highly complex and

ambiguous ideas which are open to conflicts and renegotiations is the analytical orthodoxy of the literature (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2003). Contestation is believed to always be there and stem from the inherent complexity of partnership as an arrangement bringing together multiple actors with diverse interests and motives which makes any partnership a terrain of antagonisms and conflicts (Seddon, Billett, & Clemans, 2004). Actors argue about multiple things – rules, solutions, decisions etc. – normally along well-known divides such as citizens vs. state authorities (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003b). Therefore, another kind of variation in relation to partnership comes into focus – the one that resides within national contexts and stretches across types of actors involved. Within this tradition, scholars focus on partnership and its internal dynamics within the national context. Cross-country analysis of partnerships is conducted very rarely (Derkzen, 2010). Instead, one is more likely to find studies on cross-regional variation within one country (Rumbul, 2013).

The literature on partnership speaks openly about contestation. One of the primary angles is research about discourses of partnership and the process of contestation around them. First of all, scholars are interested in contestation around various framings of partnership as advanced by central authorities and (re)interpreted and (re)defined by actors on the ground (Atkinson, 1999a; Hastings, 1996; M. Smith, Mathur, & Skelcher, 2006; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2003). The assumption is straightforward – partnership, as Skelcher and Sullivan (2008) argue, is an 'empty signifier that enables different and divergent actors to associate it with their own demands' (p. 754). Chris Skelcher inquires into content of contestation and how chosen institutional designs tend to reflect it. He discovers three dominant discourses, namely managerialist, concosiational and participatory, each of which construe partnership as certain configurations of actors and institutionalization of relations between them (Skelcher et al., 2005). Furthermore, Skelcher compares partnerships across localities in the UK and concludes that prevalence of a particular discourse and, as a result, of partnership designs can vary across localities. Likewise, Skelcher and Sullivan together identify patterns of framing of successful partnership outcomes, namely 5 of them – democracy, integration, transformation, policy content and sustainability of collaboration - and conclude that what constitutes the true outcome (read – successful partnership) is also a matter of intensive contestation (Skelcher & Sullivan, 2008). Bache conducts analysis of composition of partnerships for cohesion policy in the UK from the same perspective and argues that there is contestation between two big discourses of partnership that reflects on contestation between two understandings of cohesion policy - neoliberal and regulated capitalism one (Bache, 2001).

An essential question for such research is how contestation affects outcomes of partnership, be it deliberation among actors (Hemphill, McGreal, Berry, & Watson, 2006), choice of particular policy content or sustainability of relations between partners (Thomson & Perry, 2006). Thus scholars of partnership, starting from the assumption that contestation is a permanent *sputnik* of any partnership, accumulate serious data on what is being contested.

Advancing further studies of contestation, scholars seek to unravel its *hows*. Here partnerships rather emerge as empirical cases for a different scholarship, namely research on realities of deliberative democracy, its pitfalls and day-to-day practices. In the center of inquiry are communicative relations among actors as conditions of successful deliberation (Akkerman, Hajer, & Grin, 2004; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003b), micropolitics of deliberation as a process establishing specific power configurations, patterns of exclusion or, conversely, inclusion (Barnes et al., 2004; Barnes, Newman, Knops, & Al, 2003) or constituting "the pubic", particular understandings of policy problems or solutions. Being done in high post-structuralist fashion, these studies are especially keen to reconstruct discursive strategies of actors as mechanisms of legitimation of certain ideas or understandings (Atkinson, 1999b; McDonald, 2005). What is interesting within this strand of research on deliberation in partnerships is acknowledgement that partnerships are reservoirs of conflicts among actors, be it conflicts around specific understandings of purposes or partnerships or grand ideas such as public or participation (Prager, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2006).

Finally, contestation is in the limelight of research, although again rather implicitly, on various conditions of collaborative success. Within this extremely diverse literature success of collaboration is evaluated through auxiliary notions and concepts that describe relations among actors, such as trust, communication, allocation of responsibility, resource distribution and identity etc. (Babiak & Thibault, 2007). Numerous studies, conducted primarily with the use of quantitative methods, also carefully look at actors and intra-partnership dynamics, normally even labelled as contestation. Yet here these dynamics are studied with a view to understanding sustainability of collaboration or factors that disrupt it (Coaffee, 2005; Dowling, Powell, & Glendinning, 2004; Gazley & Brudney, 2007). A valuable analytical point here is about the impossibility to generalize about partnerships within even one domestic context. Conversely, generalizations across actors are believed to naturally transcend national borders. For a better understanding of contestation around the partnership principles for Structural Funds the major assistance of this literature comes

through huge pool of accumulated data on topics of contestation or, in other words, actors' concerns and expectations. Among them are communication, trust, responsibility etc.

3.4. Reflections

At first sight, all these bodies of literature seem to provide quite sufficient tools to capture the dynamics of partnership implementation. Conclusions of Europeanization and civil society scholars have been crosschecked and corroborated numerous times whereas the literature on partnerships has accumulated a comprehensive and systematic pool of accounts of inner logics, processes and mechanisms of partnership functioning that can easily be extrapolated on workings of partnership for cohesion policy. Yet, on closer examination, all three bodies of literature miss out on important bits and pieces of the reality of partnership, leaving its empirical picture incomplete and lacking essential parts.

To begin with, the Europeanization scholars, whilst convincingly making the argument about institutional legacies, neglect the role of actors as agents capable of changing paths and trajectories of institutional developments. Actors seem to be entrapped within existing institutional traditions, to simply mirror them in their attitudes and understandings and hardly ever overcome them. The talk about working partnership nearly makes no sense in contexts where practices of certain kind, like corporatism, are absent. However, that partnership for cohesion policy brings together actors who may have never been necessarily involved in corporatist policy-making, regardless of whether that is old or new member states, is not taken critically. After all, only civil servants and economic and social partners are normally engaged in corporatist encounters, although partnership invites civil society organizations as well, not the usual suspects of corporatist practices. How such ways of policy-making are expected to trickle down to partnership is not clear at all.

Additionally, a more important point is that such determinism denies possibilities of learning by actors and arriving at certain forms of partnership even in contexts deprived of the "right" institutional legacies. Thus, the literature denies agency as such, diversity of agents and their role in leading the change or advancing particular understandings. The only type of actors who get some attention is state elites whose attitudes are taken as a benchmark of Europeanization or timely compliance and automatically as proxies and accurate representations of attitudes of other actors.

The scholarship on civil society essentially makes the same mistake and extends its conclusions without having a closer look at peculiarities of partnership in cohesion policy

context. A telling example is automatically treating economic and social partners as civil society actors, a move that is debatable both from the perspective of existing literature, that provides convincing data on differences between them, and civil society organizations and from the perspective of actors themselves who insist on clear dividing lines between them and others (Gold et al., 2007; Heery, Williams, & Abbott, 2012; Iankova, 2007). Yet, following the assumptions of the literature, both groups of actors can equally be viewed as representing civil society and, most importantly, equally representing pitfalls and imperfections of civil society development in a particular country, if one takes seriously the argument about cross-country differences between civil societies.

Another analytical extreme of civil society literature that transpires during research on partnership is the strict oscillation between numerous conceptualizations of functions of civil society actors, depending on the theoretical grounding. In empirical terms, it means moving from one normative benchmark that ascribes particular roles to civil society actors to another. In relation to partnership civil society actors could, for instance, be conceptualized as either dealing exclusively with policy or representation or constituency-building etc. Yet the fact that actors, invited to collaboration within partnership arrangements can serve different functions, combine them, redefine and reinterpret them, let alone share specific self-perceptions is neglected by default. The point that it is exactly diversity of actors, their perspectives, functions and domains of interests that is at the core of the partnership principle is dismissed.

The literature regarding partnerships appears to be better equipped to stand against these criticisms. The complexity of partnership arrangements is fully recognized and attempts at cross-country comparison are critically approached as not bringing much understanding about how partnership works. To the contrary, the literature acknowledges agency as causing this complexity and provoking contestation due to various identities, interests, backgrounds and understandings. It also equips researcher with a comprehensive list of differences across actors that cause contestation. Although that represents a move to the opposite direction – boiling everything down to actors and the refusal to see the influence of cultural practices that two other literatures place at the center of analysis – research within this tradition reveals a lot about important micro-dynamics. The problem with this literature would be similar to the above-mentioned one in civil society research – scholars move from one cause of contestation to another in search of corroborations or rebuttals. Most frequently, by looking at micro-dynamics of interactions and processes that either disrupt or encourage collaboration, the literature misses out on the whole complex

context of partnership implementation, its relation to the EU and implementation of the EU policy as well as historical and cultural peculiarities of the new member states. The exclusive focus on the functioning of partnership in terms of micro-dynamics of disrupted flows of communication or unclear lines of responsibility leads to neglect of the fact that partnership carries a bunch of other meanings for actors in the new member states. These are related to a range of pressing questions, such as history of civil society development in the region, identity-building process, history of the EU enlargement and membership in the EU, debates on high issues of democracy, and so on.

The latter reflects on a larger general problem of all the literature surrounding the topic – their ability to capture only a part of complex dynamics. When looking at contestation over partnership each of them offers an analytical tool which is useful yet at the same time very limited in its use. Contestation becomes linked to peculiarities of either macro or micro dynamics and is seen as either revealing cross-country or cross-actors differences. The trouble is caused, and simultaneously aggravated, when researchers' decisions about what informs those differences are taken in advance, solved by assumption and not derived from the empirical reality on the ground. In the end, conclusions about partnership are inevitably one-sided, partial and over simplistic.

The next chapter offers a solution to overcome the tension between expectations of the examined literature and the complex reality of partnership. It proposes an integrated analytical framework and interpretive analysis as a methodological tool. It will, first of all, help to account for why actors actually question partnership, why their opinions are so divergent and whether there is any hidden logic behind this diversity. Secondly, the proposed framework will render possible departure from partiality in concluding about partnership and contestation around it as emanating from either macro or micro dynamics or, alternatively, revolving around either issues of democracy or communication or failed trust. Thirdly, it will allow accommodating complexity of the practice of partnership, be it multiplicity of actors involved or peculiarities of the context of the new member states.

Chapter 4. Understanding actors' interpretations – a new analytical framework for the study of contestation

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, contestation over the partnership principle can be studied from several conceptual and analytical angles. More specifically, three main bodies of research literature have been identified as possessing valuable conceptual and analytical tools for researching contestation – literature on Europeanization together with the literature on transposition and compliance, European civil society and partnership in public policy. The previous chapter critically assessed how existing bodies of literatures explicate that actors contest partnership and ascribe different meanings to it. Upon critical reflection on potential of all three scholarships, it was concluded that each of the existing accounts is, in fact, problematic due to certain flaws in conceptualisations of, first, the origins of contestation and, second, depictions of its logic and patterns.

It has been established that all three bodies of literature are, by default, quite receptive, albeit implicitly, to the notion of contestation over partnership. Although all of them find ground for clashes over the ways and formats of practicing true partnership at different levels, all of them can provide convincing arguments about how actors come to particular understandings of partnership. Together these strands of literature outline that actors advance specific understandings of partnership due to belonging to either a) different national institutional contexts, which supposedly leave their imprint on their conceptions of partnership, or to b) different groups or types of actors.

All three strands of literature seem to be misdiagnosing important aspect of the problem, though. The major pitfall is that all of them invest too much into conceptualizing the links between successful partnership and factors leading to its success or failure. However, neither of them problematizes the notion of partnership which is hardly ever been a clearly designed template expected to be progressively complied in a linear and top-down fashion. As a result, each of these accounts approaches partnership from the perspective of end-point transfer of this requirement. This inevitably leads to constructing benchmarks of implementation and, consequently, making assumptions about *a priori* either macro or micro logic of contestation. Yet, in fact, the question whether it is the national context that structures the contestation or factors related to actors and how exactly these factors play out, remains open. Moreover, all of the above-analysed strands seem to be ill-equipped to explain empirical reality of both macro and micro logics of meaning-making playing out at the same time. In concrete terms, existing accounts remain

analytically numb when faced with the reality of actors' complex narratives when, whilst discussing partnership, they link it to traditions of their countries, their own interests, make points about their institutional identities or experiences as well as attempt to reveal their deep-seated beliefs.

The present chapter presents solutions to detected gaps. It builds on work of Antje Wiener on contestation over norms in international relations. Drawing on Wiener's work, it elucidates conceptual and analytical framework better equipped for tackling both complex empirical reality of partnership and conceptual and analytical imperfections of the existing literature. Additionally, the chapter details the interpretive methodology for conducting research on contestation and the steps of obtaining empirical data.

This chapter proposes conceptual and analytical framework that addresses three main problems. By bringing the literature on contestation of norms in IR into the present research, it solves the problem of insufficient or partial explanations of contestation over partnership. As was mentioned, the problem arises from seeing partnership as a stable norm, requirement or a variable that can be captured in one or another conceptualisation. The scholarship on contestation or norms in IR is much better equipped to accommodate contingent nature of partnership linked to its being not a stable norm but an element of social practices constitutive of its meanings. This conceptualization invites to look at contestation as enactment by actors of specific meanings-in-use embedded in particular social practices. Research on contestation is, thus, expected to make those meanings "accountable" through reconstruction of the structure of meaning-in-use (Wiener, 2007).

The second problem addressed in the chapter is integration of the assumptions of the above-mentioned literatures on patterns of contestation within a new analytical, framework. The framework brings together assumption about *cultural backgrounds* as structuring and, most importantly, homogenizing and cohering interpretations of norms by actors and the assumption about *professional backgrounds* as having the same effect. Following the theoretical argument of the theory of social construction of norms, both are seen as social practices constitutive of meanings. The framework, thus, integrates both macro and micro accounts of patterns of contestation. In empirical terms, research on contestation, therefore, seeks to establish which of two backgrounds serve as providing the basis for shared understandings. Comparative analysis, in its turn, seeks to establish whether understandings converge or diverge across countries or groups of actors, respectively, or co-exist in a diffused manner.

Finally, the chapter offers a methodological solution to the study of contestation over partnership. It examines the methodology of research on meaning-in-use. It argues that the gaps in understanding of how partnership is actually practiced originate from solving mechanisms and patterns of contestation over partnership by assumption. Actors are ascribed particular interests and aspirations which they advance in the process of contestation and which are claimed to structure their understandings of partnership. The chapter makes a point that the problem can be addressed through pursuing an interpretivist logic of inquiry. In reconstructing the meanings behind partnership, it relies on deriving conceptualizations used by actors themselves through analysis of discursive interventions made in the course of conversational interviews. In light of the above-described debate around practices that structure meaning-making, such a logic allows for maximal reception to complex nuances of actual meanings on the ground. Moreover, this methodological stance, in turn, tackles another problem directly related to the puzzle of contestation, namely the one of similarity of actors' narratives of partnership when they seem to be disagreeable to exiting practice of partnership yet talking about it in the same terms.

This determines the structure of the chapter. It is divided in three parts each of which addressed one of the above-mentioned problems.

4.1. Taking contestation seriously: social construction and enactment of norms

The section reviews the contributions of the literature on norms, especially thoroughly advanced by critical constructivists and their research on norms in international relations. Research on norms is concerned with the question of diffusion and compliance with international norms, which makes its insights extremely helpful for a series of questions regarding transposition of norms, rules and requirements in the EU context. Theoretical contribution of critical constructivist research can be successfully applied to research on implementation of partnership due to ontological proximity of this policy requirement to norms. Breaking with approach that sees norms as stable structuring expectations or variables, critical constructivists especially emphasize contestedness of norms, their intersubjective character and their meanings being embedded in specific social practices and contests (constituted by and constituted of specific use) (Jepperson, Wendt, & Katzenstein, 1996; Wiener, 2008).

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Constructivist research on norms in IR develops in several major directions. The dividing line between them is drawn around the agreement on ontology of norms (Fierke, 2006). The first one – the behaviorist perspective – operates with a stability argument about structuring effect of norms as stable "social facts" (Jepperson et al., 1996). The second is the reflexive perspective that stresses the dual quality of norms as both structuring and constructed and approaches them as intersubjective agreements firmly embedded in social practices (Fierke, 2002, 2006). The research agenda within the first approach, apart from discussion of ontology of norms, embraces questions of how agents react to robust established norms as either exogenously given facts and as prescriptive standards for actors' behavior. It neglects the notion of contestation and its logic as this prevents from coming up with the measure of norms' strength and efficiency, the major point of research interest (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). It is in this vein that questions about what obstructs the process of norm implementation are posed and a number of variables for the analysis of implementation are discussed (Katzenstein, 1993). Among them are institutional trajectories or learning abilities of actors.

Sociological reading of the thesis of Europeanization exemplifies such research: answering the question how EU rule or normative impositions find their ways into policy-making practices of the member states it looks at how norms are becoming integrated into individuals' beliefs and operates with the notion of "logic of appropriateness" (Marsh & Olsen, 2006; Radaelli, n.d.). Research on partnership, consequently, concludes that failures of its implementation are the result of shallow Europeanization or insufficient internalization of the normative content of this requirement (Dabrowski, 2007, 2008). One distinctive feature of this approach is that it does not differentiate between types of norms, mainly between legal and social, and treats them as the same phenomena implementation of which can be traced and enforced (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The second approach does not conceive the norms as stable but as evolving during the process of norm validation and, thus, emphasizes their intersubjective nature. While, as Wiener notes, the behaviorist perspective "circumvents the intersubjectivity … by assuming that the 'other' will be persuaded to share the dominant validity" (2008, p. 43), the second approach problematizes stability and shared validity and opens up towards accepting that norms are contested before normative understandings freeze. Norms evolve through interaction and are contested by default. As a result, a change in *all* actors is produced in the course of contestation, not only in those one who are to be persuaded or

socialized into a norm (Wiener, 2008).[13] For instance, research on argumentation and justification is an example of how scholars attempt to take intersubjectivity and contestation seriously (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Wagenaar, 2011). In the course of interactions actors engage in validation process through deliberation and arguing with subsequent supposedly stable outcomes of such validation (Puetter, 2006). In this approach, norms should be seen as reasons for actions, orienting devices and references frameworks that designate room for individual judgments rather than fixed orienteers and guidelines for action. Research, consequently, shall focus on unveiling the processes of argumentation and justification and how such freezing of the normative meaning occurs (Schwellnus, 2009).

However, such openness of the arguing approach to contesteddness of norms is taken further by critical constructivists. Critical constructivists argue that it does not take into account that achieved recognition and validity of norms may be limited to deliberation settings only. Indeed, the thesis that validity and social recognition of norms achieved within certain deliberation settings are stable and can travel across social contexts is a statement that needs rigid empirical proof. Legitimacy of norms is rather postulated, yet what is more important and needs a better understanding is how it is achieved. This gains especial importance given implementation of allegedly agreed upon norms is never a purely technical process and is never about organizational but substantive impact. Legitimacy needs to be reestablished beyond deliberation settings all over again, which makes contestation over norms a rule rather than exception. Moreover, even in deliberative settings arguing about norms is not merely strategic referring to stable norms. In the course of strategic bargaining actors, by referring to norms, in fact, employ certain meanings of norms born elsewhere and only carried to deliberative settings (Wiener, 2007).

The reflexive approach suggests extending the "arguing" approach by adding wider social context and social practices as constitutive of meanings of norms. Norms are seen from a dialectical perspective or as acquiring their meanings in particular social contexts and social practices. Hence, special perception of the contexts in which norms work is required in order to establish which practices led to emergence of specific meanings. Taking seriously the point that meanings of norms evolve in context, one need to bear in

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[13] Wiener speaks about conditions that enhance contestation more thoroughly. Three conditions are mentioned: historical contingency, moving of social practices between the contexts within which the norm is established and the situation of crisis. She also links enhancement of contestation to the type of norm. Contestation progressively intensifies depending on what type of norm gets into the heart of interactions: standardized procedures, organizing principles or fundamental norms. The latter ones are expected to trigger the most intensive contestation due to inherent vagueness and lack of agreement (Wiener, 2007).

mind, Wiener (2009) notes, that "any process of contestation will reflect a specific re/enacting of the normative 'structure of meaning-in-use' (p. 146). The latter, in turn, requires a more contextualized approach to norms that would examine the impact of social practices on meaning-making. Wiener convincingly summarized the essence of this stance ('rule-in-practice assumption'): '1) norms entail a dual quality; 2) the meaning of norms is embedded in a structure of meaning-in-use; and 3) meaning evolve through interaction in context – it is embedded in social practice and therefore subject to change' (2008, p. 57).

Furthermore, being concerned with legitimacy of norms in international politics, critical constructivist research is interested in identifying the logic of contestation. Against the background of increasing transnationalization and highly contested character of fundamental norms, scholars are intrigued by how cultural practices contribute to contestation. The main assumption that critical constructivist research departs from is that in international encounters agents bring in their own "normative baggage" which differs across their context of origin and affects validity perceptions of actors" (Wiener & Puetter, 2009: 8). Norms are believed to be "inexorably linked to a larger social context from which they accumulate and transport meanings for strategic actors" (Wiener, 2008: 49). When contesting norms, actors mobilize discursive resources acquired prior to the process (for instance, prior to the deliberation context and elsewhere than the deliberation setting) in social contexts or "communities of origin" they come from. These prior resources of agents are constitutive of the meanings attached to norms. Research, consequently, needs to take into serious account this cultural dimension and establish whether and how those meanings come to the front in the process of contestation and whether they change with the change of context, when individuals travel from domestic to transnational contexts, as the rule-in-practice assumption suggests.

On a global scale, such a research agenda pertains to a bigger question, namely how wider social contexts and day-to-day practices that actors are engaged with are reflected in meanings of norms that they enter the process of contestation with (Wiener, 2009). Contestation is the process of enactment of those meanings and, supposedly, unfolds according to certain logic and patterns. When applied to international politics, researchers are interested whether "cultural validation" is the dominant pattern of contestation. In empirical terms, research focuses on making visible how those hidden cultural practices affect meanings attached to norms, "invisibly" contributing to political struggle over norms, and whether and under what conditions convergence/divergence between those meanings can be detected.

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These theoretical assumptions provide a firm ground for understanding the reasons behind contestation and the meaning-making around partnership. Partnership, ontologically, can be seen as having attributes of a norm. As was shown in chapter 1, partnership as a requirement communicates significantly more than desired formats and procedures of interactions between actors. Partnership also holds democracy-related promises (Scott, 1998). It can be equally as both a standardized procedure and organizing principle (Wiener, 2008). Some other conditions contribute to partnership being hugely contested. One example is that partnership appears to be a very vaguely worded requirement, the fact that seriously affects even formal validity dimension. Furthermore, having been defined at the EU level or, in other words, within specific deliberation settings or sites of policy-making, the requirement is to be implemented in a different social recognition-free context where "re/enacting of a specific structure of meaning-in-use", the one that reflects on peculiarities of contexts of implementation, is likely to be expected. It is obvious that when encountering partnership, actors, consequently, are also expected to validate it. However, in a situation when neither "shared social recognition nor collective deliberation to establish legitimate interpretation of a norm's formal validity" are available, as in the case with partnership, actors are left with the only means of validation – their own normative baggage (Wiener & Puetter, 2009). The aim of the present research is to identify the sources of this normative baggage, the issue dealt with in the next section.

4.2. In search for grounds of contestation: a zoom in at actors

The previous section introduced the theoretical assumptions of the critical constructivist research on norms. It reiterated the conceptual argument that norms entail dual quality and that the meanings of norms are embedded in wide social practices and contexts. Such conceptualization calls for a closer look at the process of contestation as enactment of those meanings. The framework also opens up a possibility to establish patterns of this process as in which social practices produce these meanings. The present section critically engages with how the extant research on contestation of norms accounts for its logic and patterns. It mainly departs from the framework offered by Wiener in her research that convincingly demonstrates the power of cultural practices (cultural validation) as driving mechanisms of contestation in transnational context of interactions among elites.

The present section, though, reviews the conceptual framework and adapts it to the needs of the present research. It is argued that the notion of cultural validation should be revised to make space for further specification and clarification. Wiener suggests that

domestic contexts bring actors' understandings of norms together and provide common ground for validation as sites of specific social practices. In other words, actors coming from the same "community of origin", share similar understandings. Yet it can be hypothesized that when this thesis is applied to domestic contestation over internationally established norms, such proclaimed homogeneity of domestic contexts may not be the case. Domestic contexts are likely to be constituted of and embrace other social practice that contribute to meaning making. The revised framework suggests including groups of actors involved in contestation as an additional analytical dimension. It is argued that not only generally defined **cultural practices** can be identified as constitutive of meanings enacted by individuals. In enacting meanings individuals can draw on complex **professional backgrounds** which are believed to contribute to emergence of sedimented shared understandings.

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In her research, Wiener tests two major assumptions: that cultural practices contribute to "invisible politics" behind norm contestation and the rule-in-practice assumption. Norms are contested by default, and contestation especially enhances in the transnational context where one could see decoupling of organizational and social practices. Transnational beyond-the-state context sustains such a decoupling and brings together differently socialized actors in a situation 'where no categorical imperatives are in practice' (2008, p. 64). Due to such decoupling and absence of social recognition at the transnational level one is likely to observe "cultural validation based on the experience of an individual's day-to-day life" when individuals would be enacting meanings they have access to, namely the ones that originate and are being embedded in social contexts of their communities of origin (Wiener, 2007). In this light, one would expect divergence of meanings brought up to the transnational level by actors from "their" contexts. At the same time, Wiener argues, according to the rule-in-practice assumption "normative meaning is constituted by social practice in context" (2008, p. 57). From this perspective, one would expect change and convergence of meanings in a new contexts of transnational encounters when understandings and interpretations fuse in the course of interactions.

Studying four elite groups (Londoners, Berliners and UK and German Brusselits) in two arenas – domestic and transnational – Wiener corroborates her assumptions. When comparing the structures of meaning-in-use for all four elite groups she identifies that full convergence was found only in relation to domestic samples of respondents: respondents coming from the same country converge on what meanings they assign to particular norms

yet diverge across countries. At the same time, at the transnational level partial convergence (diffusion) was discovered – UK and German respondents who spend significant amount of time interacting at the transnational level demonstrate "breakdown" in normative understanding with their counterparts of the same national origin. This does not signify full convergence though – Londoners and Berliners working in Brussels do not share identical interpretations and reserve for themselves the space to mobilize culturally specific understandings. Therefore, the findings demonstrate that an additional layer of shared interpretations that do not overlap with the ones found in domestic contexts emerges because of interactions in Brussels, the finding that corroborates the rule-in-practice assumption (Wiener, 2008).

When applied to contestation occurring within the domestic contexts, Wiener's framework needs some revision. It should be taken for granted that described decoupling of practices, when internationally established norms travel to domestic contexts, indeed takes place. In relation to research on implementation of the EU policies this is a rule rather than exception (Bruszt & Stark, 2003). Given that implementation is never a simple technical process, such decoupling is more likely to spark visible contestation than have no effect. In case of partnership, this has to transpire too - the requirement is the product of policy-making at the transnational level in Brussels by the EU bureaucracies, the fact that guarantees the clash between domestic and EU understandings due to immense discrepancies between social practices.

However, such an approach, endorsed by Wiener's findings, implies equating domestic context and social practice. If divergence between meanings assigned to norms is found across countries this implies that domestic context is the "common" grand social practice that homogenizes understandings on a grand scale. At the same time, the point that domestic context is the grand reservoir or somewhat a "super structure" for converging meanings can be read as taken unreflexively due to implicit denial of complexity within it. That no boundaries within domestic context between "smaller" reservoirs, contributing to meaning-making, exist is assumed rather than critically assessed. Yet the questions still remain - how likely and strong is the homogenizing effect of the domestic arenas as sites of emergence of shared understandings? Can additional layers of interpretations be discovered due to inherent complexity of domestic arenas as consisting of numerous social practices?

Moreover, although Wiener claims that 'converging interpretations do not seem to depend on *nationality* but on *contextualized social practices* instead' (2008, p. 183,

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emphasis original), eventually she looks at only one contextualized social practice of that kind, namely a transnational encounter. Without assuming that divergence of meanings can potentially be found within domestic arenas and that different grounds for validation can be discovered there (read – different social practices), this argument can still be read that convergence/divergence is brought to light by national differences although such possibility is somewhat refuted.[14] Yet it is also possible to assume that wider social contexts within which meanings emerge can be more complex than abstractly conceptualized "domestic arenas". In other words, domestic arenas are equated by Wiener with social practices of a single type (and are contrasted with transnational arenas as another type) responsible for similarity of interpretations and, as a result, little inner contestability of norms. Thus, what needs an additional empirical proof is whether domestic arenas can be seen as the only social practice constitutive of particular meanings or some other practices that influence meaning making by individuals can be found within them. In terms of the discussion about cultural validation, this means a *zoom in* on it and further specification.

Critical constructivist research on norms operates with an assumption that while enacting meanings individuals are expected to mobilize specific resources that they acquire in their life-words. They enact individually experienced expectations envisioned under the label of cultural practices. The question arises what are those resources and whether the notion of "cultural practices" can be further specified (and conceptualized) as embracing additional layers. In application to present research, the latter comes to the front as individuals involved in contestation represent three groups of actors – civil servants, CSOs and economic and social partners. It can be hypothesized that belonging of an individual to a particular group of actor can, therefore, be a basis for validation of norms. Group belonging can be that common context constitutive of meanings that individuals enact. Partnership brings together individuals representing actors with distinct identities, professional backgrounds and embedded in different routines and practices. That these differences matter is the postulate found in numerous bodies of existing research literature. These groups of actors are depicted as pursuing different goals, possessing different strategies, values etc. and enacting their professional practices. That thesis is relevant for civil servants who are depicted as firmly embedded in their professional contexts that provide the room for action and enactment of routines (Wagenaar, 2004). The vast

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[14] Wiener claims, though, that she 'disaggregates the category of the "national" and states that domestically established meanings are often mistakenly labelled as "national" (Wiener 2008: 70). Nevertheless, she invests very little in explaining what are the conceptual boundaries between these two categories.

literature on civil society contributed a lot into establishing how civil society actors are different from, first of all, the government actors and, secondly, from each other, both organizationally and routines-wise and in terms of strategies, values and beliefs (Beyers, 2002, 2004; D. Curtin, 2003; Quittkat & Kotzian, 2011; Uhlin, 2009).[15] Whether these differences in professional backgrounds are reflected in meanings that individuals, belonging to these groups, operate with or, alternatively, national backgrounds remain the homogenizing basis for validation is in itself a matter of additional empirical research. If the former assumption holds, then one can expect these differences to transpire in the structure of meaning-in-use identified for every group of actors. The present research aims at pushing further the exercise of 'making hidden meanings accountable' by tracing down which social practices are constitutive of them.

Scholarship on epistemic communities (ECs) operates with similar claims about collective interpretation of policy problems and solutions shared by members of one EC (Adler & Haas, 1992). Peter Haas (1992) defines ECs as communities of individuals distinguished by 'shared set of norms and principal beliefs, causal beliefs, notions of validity of knowledge and involvement in common policy enterprise' (p. 3). Despite apparent similarity of such a community to community of professionals, Haas explicitly distinguishes ECs from a "profession" and argues that 'epistemic communities may always be a certain group of profession, but never the profession itself' (p. 19). In this vein, he, for example, does not look at representatives of one profession as constituting one EC. At the same time, he never mentions that profession cannot be the basis for collective interpretations or serve as the locale of meanings. Belonging to the ECs appear, if juxtaposed with the notions of critical constructivist research on norms, as another social practice that produces meanings. Haas just omits profession as the level or independent layer of shared interpretations. Moreover, another distinct feature of ECs is sustained agreement of its members around interpretations. Members of ECs, as he argues, may periodically be involved in reinterpreting certain ideas, thus, striving for achieving a new level of common understanding that would eliminate "pockets" of understandings within the community. Hence, the main trait of the EC is a denser and regularly reinstituted and specified agreement around certain interpretations. Additionally, one can infer that Haas,

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[15] It should be noted form the onset that the project is not aimed at investigating the micro processes of meanings emerging out of interactions although the critical constructivist stance assumes this would be the case. Thus, the project stays away from the debate whether actors unreflexively enact professional dispositions, the point made by the literature on logic of practicality, or meanings embedded in professional backgrounds are also subject to change in the course and as a result of interactions (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003b; Kurowska, 2013). The project aims at tracing the static meanings ascribed to partnership.

placing an emphasis on reestablishing the agreement, even touches upon the issue of how (new) meanings emerge out of interactions. Conceptually none of these propositions contradict the assumption about professional background being one specific level of interpretations and producing certain layer of meanings which do not need to be reestablished every now and again but which are sustained overtime.

4.3. Reconstructing the meaning-in-use of partnership – interpretive methodology for the study of contestation

The study addresses the empirical questions posed above and aims at tracing down the meanings of partnership. It is also concerned with the question of locations of those meanings (normative input) as either found in cultural or professional backgrounds. To fill the gap in understanding how actors validate externally established norms in domestic contexts, i.e. to establish logic and patterns of contestation, a comparative research designed to identify patterns of interpretations is needed. The study engages in reconstructing the structures of meaning-in-use of representatives of three groups of actors – civil servants, civil society organizations and economic and social partners – in four new member states. Departing from the assumption of cultural validation that would ascribe the decisive role in bringing interpretations together to national contexts, the case study compares meanings found in different *domestic arenas*. Due to all member states being a part of a wider environment of the EU and due to the requirement of partnership being a requirement to be universally complied with across the EU, this would allow to reveal the extent of harmonization or Europeanization. Yet at the same time, comparing structures of meaning-in-use for different types of actors allows putting to test the assumption about *professional backgrounds* as constitutive of meanings of partnership and as being additional reservoirs of meanings. The study uncovers which of these backgrounds (social practices) become sites of meaning making about partnership and for whom.

Empirically the present research engages with meanings. The methodological premises and techniques of the group of methods coming under the label of "intepretivist" are utilized as guiding and structuring data collection and analysis. Focusing on extraction and comprehension of meanings of political phenomena, interpretivists depart from several strictly formulated ontological and epistemological positions. Social and political phenomena (and realities) are viewed in this tradition as inter-subjectively constituted. One can only reach the point of comprehension of those realities form the contextualized perspective of the subjects (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012b; Yanow, 2007). Central to

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analysis, as summarized by Yanow (2013) becomes 'allowing the meanings of the key concepts, and often, the concepts themselves, to emerge from the field' and in language defined by subjects themselves (p. 3). The latter is contrasted with research within the positivist paradigm that implies that conceptualization precedes actual immersion of a researcher with empirical data (Lynch, 2014). For instance, in research driven by the Europeanization literature this transpires through operationalizing the logic of contestation over partnership in advance: actors are believed to contest partnership due to feeling uncomfortable with is as unusual institutional setting. Such a move is criticized for silencing the subject and thus distorting the actual reality. This shift requires putting aside the intention to define and conceptualize actors' beliefs and motifs prior to encountering them in the field, let alone taking prior definitions as true assumptions about the meanings of actions. Rather than neglecting the way agents themselves define situations and interactions and settling this on the basis of assumptions, interpretivist approach allows subjects speak for themselves and takes their own conceptualizations as reservoirs of meanings (Pader, 2006; Yanow, 2007).

The present study follows the interpretivist research tradition and 'takes language seriously' as one of the ways in which meanings are communicated and as one of many evidentiary sources, in addition to acts and physical spaces and objects (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012b). Meanings are believed to be inscribed in language, and that is why interpretivists draw on a variety of discourse analysis methods, especially on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003b; White, 1992). The latter, being concerned with conceptualizing the relations between language, text and social reality, describes the link between discourse and social practices. Social practices are defined by Norman Fairclough (2003a) as 'articulations of different type of social elements which are associated with particular areas of social life' (p. 25). The most important point for analysts working in this tradition is that social practices articulate discourse and vice versa – discourse reflects social practices that produced it. In concrete terms, discourse analysis is concerned with identifying how this link works out in language or, in other words, how social practices transpire and make themselves visible through discourse, more specifically, through discursive interventions of agents. Discursive interventions, Fairclough (2001) notes, are 'linguistic phenomena of a special sort' and provide the gate into the world of social interactions and practices that give rise to production of texts and set standards for their interpretation (p. 19).

The latter designates empirical research programme of critical discourse analysis. Since discursive interventions are believed to represent the link between the text and social practice, the focus, therefore, lies on them as "locales" of day-to-day practice (Fairclough, 1995; Wiener, 2008). In application to the present research, discursive interventions of representatives of three groups of actors are seen as the primary sites of meanings of partnership. Yet taken in pure linguistic form or as discrete verbal reports, as follows form the assumptions of the critical discourse analysis, they in no way convey the meanings (Fairclough, 1995, 2003b). To be able to extract the meaning words and phrases need to be examined within the contexts of their use since, as Wiener notes, 'the meaning of a comment rests in its usage in a specific situation' rule) (2008, p. 74). The task of a researcher engaged in interpretive analysis is, by situating individual interventions within broader contexts, to reconstruct the meaningful whole or the structure of meaning-in-use and to show, argues Soss, how individual interventions 'hint to broader concepts and … fit together as parts of that whole' (2006, p. 129).

4.3.1. Data collection, analysis and evaluation

The data for the analysis comes from conversational interviews with representatives of three groups of actors across four countries. Conversational interviews as the main method (triangulated later with analysis of secondary documents and texts) were chosen as the most convenient method of data collection despite the wide-spread reliance on participant observation in ethnographic research (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The study takes seriously the major limitation of interviewing, namely placing individuals outside the actual realm of interactions and, as a result, unavoidable data loss as opposed to what participant observation would have allowed. The solution was to opt for conversational interviews as opposed to semi-structured ones (Soss, 2006). The interviews were conducted as free-flowing conversations with the majority of questions arising from the interview setting itself with a special focus on experiential accounts by respondents as opposed to officials statements (Soss, 2006; Walsh, 2004). Official statements would have only supplied data related to formal validity of norms. This pertains to the distinction between direct language use (statements) and speculative language use, as explicated by Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1993). Only the latter, a meaningful event of speech, is considered as an act through which understanding occurs; the former, on the contrary, distorts understandings (Walsh, 2004)

At the stage of empirical data collection sensitivity to language use was ensured through not only asking interlocutors procedural questions that would provide data on formal sides of partnership, but rather encouraging them to go for emotional responses. The latter was believed to open a door into a realm of respondents' own conceptualizations of partnership embedded and represented in metaphors, local and idiomatic expressions (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012b). Although the ultimate goal of capturing the meaningful social discourse related to partnership would never have been reached with interviewing only as this discourse is not limited to the verbal realm, interviews provided a sought for entry into conceptual maps of individuals as well as the ways coherence and consistency of those maps are handled (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012).

In the analysis of data, the technique described and approbated by Wiener in her work was partially used. The process of analysis included several stages the central of which were keyword selection and comparison (Richards, 2005; Wiener, 2008). The exercise of keywords selection was meant to reconstruct respondents' structures of meaning-in-use of partnership as well as to compare them across groups of actors and countries under scrutiny to assess divergence/convergence or diffusion of meanings. The selection of keywords was informed by both academic literature on partnership and discussions of respondents. In the course of analysis, associative connotations extracted for six main keywords or themes that organized interventions of respondents were compared in order to reveal the meanings: communication, procedures, rules, recognition, empowerment (capacity building) and implementation. The list of keywords is not exhaustive though as interlocutors discussed a range of other themes that reflected their unique concerns and expectations in relation to partnership. However, only six keywords/themes that popped up in interventions by interlocutors from *all* three group of actors were selected for further analysis and comparison. Analysis of keywords/themes, common for everyone, pursued the goal of ensuring adequate comparison and illumination of convergence/divergence.

Regarding the latter, several outcomes are seen as possible. First, an outcome that finds divergence of meanings of partnership across domestic arenas yet convergence across groups would indicate that *cultural backgrounds* prevail as a basis for validation. Second, an outcome that finds divergence across groups of actors rather than nationalities would be indicative of *professional backgrounds* being the basis for validation yet national belonging having an insignificant impact on meaning-making. The third option can be these two different grounds for validation being found as "working" for different groups to

a different extent or, in other words, diffusion rather than convergence/divergence. The third outcome, if found, might be of particular interest for the present research. Depending on within which group convergence/divergence of meanings and as being embedded in national or professional backgrounds, several patterns can be detected which would be indicative of the level and extent of harmonization and in relation to which groups. For scholars of civil society a potentially interesting question is whether convergence of meanings could be found within the group of civil society actors, a finding that pertains to a bigger question on whether any harmonization, as a result of EU membership, reached civil societies in the member states. Identification of divergence/convergence of meanings within the group of state officials would also speak either in support of the assumption that harmonization occurs at the elite level or refute it.

4.3.2. Case selection

The study is designed to identify logic and patterns of contestation over partnership through reconstruction and comparison the structure of meaning-in-use. The whole exercise also pertains to the question on what grounds partnership is contested. The starting point about cultural (national) backgrounds serving as the common ground for similarity of meanings is complemented by the assumption that professional backgrounds of individuals dealing with partnership might as well appear to be important basis for validation. Selection of cases for further scrutiny is driven by these main assumptions.

4.3.2.1. Countries

Following the assumption about cultural backgrounds serving as the basis for similarity of meanings four new member states were selected. A focus on new member states is analytically important due to them frequently being described as representing one particular case with little, if any, variation within (Falkner, 2000, 2010b; Perez-Solorzano Borragan, 2006; Sedelmeier, 2011). The literature on transposition and implementation of the EU norms and rules explicitly makes a point about CEE member states being one particular "world" due to cultural proximity as well as common history and legacies. Selection of several cases form this seemingly homogenous political and social space would put that assumption to test.

Selection of countries was also done with a view to test the assumptions of the literatures on Europeanization, transposition, compliance and political economy about countries' contexts being conducive or obstructive to emergence of substantial partnership.

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Thus selected country cases are expected to represent not only different cultural contexts but also different cases in terms of institutional practices that can mediate implementation of partnership. A variety of institutional practices is claimed to matter the most: levels of centralization, modes of organizing relations with civil society actors (pluralist, statist, corporatist etc.), cohesion policy institutional set-ups etc. Following this assumption Slovenia has been selected as representing a neocorporatist polity with strongly institutionalized practices of interest intermediation (Andreou & Bache, 2010). Three of Visegrad countries – Poland, Slovakia and Hungary – have been selected as representing a diffused model of interest intermediation and socio-economic governance, also referred to as embedded neoliberalism in political economy literature (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007b). Although only cursorily directly touching upon non-state and civil society actors, the political economy literature explicitly speaks about domestic contexts being the loci of consensus and common understandings behind formats and ways of interactions between major state and societal actors (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012b)

The cohesion policy literature stresses a different yet also important dissimilarity between these countries. It looks at types of institutional configurations that emerged as a result of pre-accession conditionality and reforms (Bruszt, 2008b). Scholars argue that in relation to cohesion policy implementation one can clearly see several types of multi-level governance in CEE countries (Andreou & Bache, 2010; Schneider, 2011). Differences can be found along two lines: the configurations of administrative/institutional systems, in terms of extent of decentralization and share of competences between administrative tiers, and openness of emerged systems to involvement of civil society actors, resulting from it. From this perspective four countries represent different cases: Slovenia – a case of excessive centralization of cohesion policy-making, Poland – deep decentralization and regionalization, Hungary and Slovakia – a diffused model of "unfinished decentralization".

4.3.2.2. Actors

In her work, Wiener suggest that for a better understanding of contestation 'desegregation of the unit of analysis from the national towards the group-based (actors)' should be pursued (2008, p. 6). Following the assumption that actors matter and interpretations of partnership can potentially diverge/converge across types of actors, representatives of three groups of actors have been selected to be interviewed – state officials, economic and social partners and civil society organizations - the main types brought together by the requirement of partnership according to the Regulations. Involvement in cohesion policy-

making, at any stage, and experience of interacting with each other, be it within formal structures and institutions of partnership or informally, were limiting the population of the actors.

As for the state officials, people working for two types of government bodies have been contacted and interviewed: the coordination ministries, structures responsible for overall steering over cohesion policy in a member state, and the line ministries. If for the former cohesion policy-making constitutes the core of their activities and professional domain, for the latter it represents only a segment of a vast expertise and policy-making routine. In the first ones, officials who work in departments responsible for partnership (for instance, communications departments) have been contacted. In the second ones, the primary interlocutors were people employed in cohesion policy or EU Funds departments.

As for both CSOs and economic and social partners, potential interlocutors have been identified through several exercises. First of all, programming documents for OPs in all four countries have been analyzed. Normally, these documents contain sections on implementation of partnership which, most frequently, describe the scope of involvement of partners and provide lists of actors involved in programming. Lists of members of the MCs and protocols of their sessions have been used to identify names of concrete representatives of partners involved in cohesion policy-making who later have been contacted.

4.4. Conclusions

The research project aims at comparative examination of how actors from three groups of actors – state officials, civil society organizations and economic and social partners – interpret partnership across four new member states. It seeks to acquire a better understanding of the logic behind puzzling and seemingly chaotic contestation over partnership when different actors advance noticeably variegated interpretations of it.

Existing research accounts are very helpful yet still insufficient tools for establishing what patterns contestation. Explanations produced within these accounts are inherently partial and frequently empirically inadequate as they leave out a great part of the lived experience of partnership on the ground. As was shown in this chapter, though, the theory of social construction of norms coupled with methodological potential of interpretivist methodology and critical discourse analysis contribute to conceptual and analytical framework sufficiently better equipped for the study of such a complex

phenomenon as partnership. First of all, it places the emphasis on contingent character of partnership principle as a norm-like requirement whose meanings are not fixed and stable but are embedded in existing social practices (meaning-in-use). Secondly, the framework identifies two possible ways of how these meanings can be structured (social practices), namely cultural and professional backgrounds. Thirdly, it proposes a methodology for further reconstruction of structure of those meanings-in-use, comparative analysis and identification of social practices that come to the front as ensuring common grounds for validation of partnership or, in other words, converging interpretations.

In its empirical part, the project seeks to address this question or, more precisely, seeks to detect either of three hypothesized outcomes: divergence of meanings across countries (outcome 1), divergence of meanings across groups of actors (outcome 2), or diffusion pattern.

The revealed patterns of convergence/divergence can pertain to several bigger questions. If cultural backgrounds are to be found as structuring individuals' perceptions of partnership, this outcome would endorse the assumptions made by literatures on Europeanization that expects any attempts at harmonization made by the EU as a transnational political order to be mediated (and, as a result, hampered or hastened) at the country level. In application to partnership this will confirm general "culturalist" argument that implementation of partnership is indeed a matter of a cross-cultural differences between, let's say, Polish or Slovak actors, and that inherently Hungarian or Slovak understandings of partnership can be found. In contrast, if cultural backgrounds are to be found as less contributing to meaning-making and in case divergence across groups of actors rather than countries is what is found to be prevalent, this finding will confirm the assumption about professional backgrounds as more important basis for shared understandings than cultural backgrounds. This will mean that in formulating their expectations, navigating in a complex environment of partnership practice and advancing their understandings in the course of contestation, actors rely on their professional dispositions as representatives of either state officials, CSOs or economic and social partners.

The more interesting outcome is, though, the one indicating diffusion. This would suggest that professional backgrounds matter more for a particular type of actors whereas not being basis for validation of partnership for another one or, in another case, being on par with cultural backgrounds in structuring understandings. A further look at whether this is the case for state officials, CSOs or economic and social partners would reveal where

and for whom harmonization is actually occurring. In light of contemplations in the literature about how far harmonization, as induced by the EU, reaches, knowledge whether it has already reached civil societies or stopped at the elite level can be enriched as a result of the present comparative analysis.

The following chapters present the empirical findings of the project.

Chapter 5. Partnership and state officials: a rule and an obligation

Actors who are involved in implementation of the partnership principle for Structural Funds define it in extremely various terms. For some partnership means certain procedures and institutional format, while for some it is more a process-related category that signifies a particular format of communication or adherence to democratic values or all of it altogether. Actors may be even speaking about partnership using the same terms yet nevertheless very little agreement exists as to how it should be practiced. The present study seeks to detect how these meanings emerge and whether there is any logic in how actors cohere these expectations of partnership. Two possible logics of contestation have been identified in the previous chapter – actors' interpretations might converge due to a) their similar cultural or b) professional backgrounds. The chapter presents the first results of an empirical inquiry into the process of contestation over the partnership principle.

In order to identify which of the two logics is at play, the chapter begins to examine meanings of partnership shared by the representatives of the first group of actors – state officials involved in implementation of the EU cohesion policy and, especially, the partnership principle. Actors from this group represent a particularly interesting case for a variety of other reasons. On the one hand, as discussed in chapter 3, scholars of Europeanization, transposition and compliance argue that success or failure of EU implementation requirements depends on domestic bureaucrats who may choose to either encourage or impede timely and meaningful compliance and change (Kaeding, 2008; Mastenbroek, 2005; Toshkov, 2007). Most importantly, it is through investigation of behavior and understandings of state officials that the role of cultural backgrounds in contestation over the EU rules is conceived and conclusions about cross-country variation are formulated (Knill, 2001; Risse et al., 2001).

On the other hand, the case of state officials in the new member states is interesting as all four countries have experienced an intensive process of pre-accession. Wide harmonization of legislation and policy-making practices and institutions between the candidate countries and the rest of the EU have been prioritized during this process (Bailey & de Propris, 2004; Sedelmeier, 2012). The present chapter analyses whether these expectations can be sustained.

The chapter traces the meanings-in-use of partnership as enacted by state officials. It does so within the conceptual framework developed in chapter 4, based on critical constructivist reading of the nature of norms and their enactment as embedded in social

practices (Schwellnus, 2009; Wiener, 2007). The main empirical question this chapter addresses is *where* does the basis for interpretations of partnership for state officials lie?

The conceptual framework highlights three possible outcomes. Divergence across countries could be found which will support the assumption that cultural backgrounds provide bases for structuring understandings and interpretations. The second outcome could be convergence of meanings across countries. This should prove that professional backgrounds of state officials are the primary context within which specific understandings of partnership emerge and get interlinked. The third outcome is diffusion. It should occur when both cultural and professional backgrounds are found as affecting actors' interpretations at the same time.

The exercise of comparing meanings shared by state officials is carried out through analysis of discursive interventions of individuals representing state actors involved in cohesion policy implementation. Associative connotations for six keywords that structure discussions of respondents have been analyzed in order to establish the meanings of partnership and to compare them across four countries under scrutiny. This data will be used for further comparison with interpretations of partnership shared by representatives of CSOs and economic and social partners.

The chapter is organized in three parts. The first introduces the complex institutional context and practice of cohesion policy-making in the new member states. It aims to map out the complex context in four countries in which partnership acquires its meanings-in-use shared by state officials. The second part shows whether and how this context complexity manifested through variability of institutions and practices gets reflected in the meanings identified. The third section summarizes the findings.

5.1. Cohesion policy and its implementers in the new member states

EU cohesion policy is widely believed to have had profound effects on member states' administrative structures and styles of policy-making. In the literature on multi-level governance, it is normally associated with a radical break from traditional methods of (developmental) policy-making or almost a "revolutionary" change (Hooghe, 1998; Leonardi, 2005; Marks & Hooghe, 2001). It is underlined that such innovations brought about by the cohesion policy as involvement of different administrative levels and societal actors, multi-annual character, legal framework at the supranational level, specific modes of planning and implementation and, certainly, overall policy objectives have remarkably affected ways and modes of policy-making, reshuffled existing practices and led to their

harmonization across the member states (Kohler-Koch, 2006). Two particular effects are discussed: a) provision of access to policy-making for multiple actors at different levels (Bache, 2010b; Keating, 2008; Piattoni, 2009) and b) emergence of a unique configuration of institutions and actors for implementation of cohesion policy (Bachtler & McMaster, 2008). Scholars who study how the first effect came about are interested in capturing changes in how governance tiers relate to each other and whether imposition of the EU requirements led to emergence and mobilization of actors who traditionally have not been actively involved in policy-making such as regions (Bruszt, 2008a; Greenwood, 2011; Heinelt & Lang, 2011; Heinelt & Niederhafner, 2008; Keating, 1995). In contrast, other scholars focus on how new cohesion policy institutional systems changed domestic actors and styles of administration (Bauer, 2002; Milio, 2007).

The present section analyses how these effects came about in the new member states under investigation – Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia. It looks at the changes induced by the cohesion policy in relation to one group of actors – state officials and representatives of national administrations directly involved in policy-making and implementation. The subsection describes the diversity of responses of national administrations in CEE member states to pre-accession conditionality in its cohesion policy component. It maps out configurations of actors within national administrations that became involved in cohesion policy-making or have been purposefully created to comply with the EU enlargement requirements related to necessary institutional changes in the candidate countries. The purpose of such mapping out is to delineate a complex realm of social practices of cohesion policy-making in the member states. In light of the overall task to make a snapshot of meanings-in-use of partnership as shared by state officials, such an exercise provides a way to illuminate origins and sources of particular understandings.

5.1.1. The fate of regional actors

To better understand how cohesion policy-making works in the new member states, one inevitably needs to contextualize it against general background of enlargement and massive changes that the candidate countries have gone through. Institution-building for cohesion policy was an instance of a massive transposition of the EU *acquis* to the spaces where almost no similar structures or actors existed before (Brusis, 2002, 2010; Jacoby, 2001). Scholars of enlargement and institutional implications of the EU conditionality analyze two types of closely interlinked institutional changes related to emergence of new actors: a) the process of regionalization or political devolution and creation of a regional

tier of governance, and b) transformation of systems of national administrations for management of the Structural Funds (Ansell, Parsons, & Darden, 1997; Jacoby, 2004, 2011; Sedelmeier, 2012). Both are important to understand what configurations of actors have congealed around cohesion policy and became involved in its implementation.

Cohesion policy was one of the most contentious issues during the pre-accession negotiations. The famous chapter 21 of the *acquis*, that prescribed all the changes that the candidate countries were supposed to implement, produced so many controversies that its closure was left until the latest stages of negotiations (Hughes, Sasse, & Gordon, 2004). There was a lot at stake for all parties during negotiations. The size of the financial package as well as speculations about possible repercussions and economic costs of transfer of huge amounts of money to ten new members generated much political contention between the (old) member states and the Commission. The debates grew out of skepticism with regards to efficiency of administrative systems in the candidate countries and inevitably raised the issue how extant institutional set-ups should be reformed to address the challenges of the cohesion policy (Dezseri & Vida, 2011).

The controversies over the requirements were not solely due to divergent opinions of how such a serious problem of efficiency should be addressed. As James Hughes et. al. (2004) convincingly show in their book, those controversies, which also influenced the kind of institutions that have eventually been established, were also emanating from the European Commission itself. It demonstrated sharp inconsistencies in its approaches to the suggested reforms due to internal struggles between two groups of actors: the ones insisting on careful spending of the Community money and the ones advocating for deepening of multi-level governance and empowerment of regional actors.

The issue of political regionalization became a major stumbling block. Initially the requirement for greater decentralization, wrapped in arguments about greater efficiency, regional ownership and stronger partnership between the European Commission and regional actors, was a uniform requirement for the candidate countries despite the fact that the legislative basis for such ambition was very thin and no specific "EU model" could be identified for proper emulation.[16] The pro-regionalization signals were well-received in the candidate countries, especially in some, like Poland, where the process of decentralization started long before the accession negotiations, was the result of national political consensus

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[16] 'In application of the principle of subsidiarity, the implementation of assistance shall be the responsibility of the Member States, at the appropriate territorial level according to the arrangements specific to each Member State, and without prejudice to the powers vested in the Commission, notably for implementing the general budget of the European Communities' (European Council Regulation, 1999, Art. 8).

and even deepened in the pre-accession period (Bailey & De Propris, 2002; Brusis, 2010; *EU Cohesion Policy after Enlargement*, 2009). Even traditionally centralized candidates like Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia made quite impressive steps towards fulfilling the requirement of devolution. Yet the results of the reforms were divergent.

Poland was the closest country to meeting the chapter 21 requirements. The process of decentralization was initiated in the end of the 1990s and by 2000 a complex decentralized system of self-governing institutions was created including 16 regions (voivodeships)[17], 44 bigger counties (gminas) and 373 smaller counties (Bailey & De Propris, 2002). Such a hierarchical system of regional governance was complemented by a visible political devolution which established democratically directly government bodies at all levels (Bachtler & Gorzelak, 2007). Polish authorities did not conceal that this political reform was linked to the European Commission's conditionality and requirements and was a preparation for the arrival of the Structural Funds and, in this light, they were acting in full accordance with the European Commission's desire to pursue deep regionalization. As a result, a group of new regional political actors emerged (literally created) to take part in future management of the Funds, including implementation of the partnership principle.

Hungary was also a very good performer in demonstrating commitment with the enlargement conditionality. The Hungarian government continued reforms that were begun in the end of the 90-s when the government quickly enshrined almost all the principles associated with the cohesion policy (programming, subsidiarity, additionality and co-financing). Seven NUTS II regions were created, mainly for programming purposes, albeit without any political devolution (Jacoby 2006). Despite absence of political governance at the regional level, the government carefully followed the Commission's recommendation for greater involvement of regional actors and granted truly wide competences in regional policy-making to the Regional Development Councils, established back in 1996, and Regional Development Agencies.

Slovakia had gone through hard times of disrupted negotiations with the EU due to heavy criticisms of the Meciar government and ended up as a case of frozen accession negotiations. Yet the difficulties with and concerns about sustaining its democratic image were not linked to the conditionality related to decentralization. The regionalization reform was initiated already by Meciar when in 1996 the country was divided into eight regions, a step perfectly in tune with the European Commission requirements. The Meciar

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[17] The idea of voivodeships was not entirely new. Historically, the term has been in use since the 14th century and was an equivalent of province (Yoder, 2007).

government demonstrated willingness to go on with the reform, an impulse which was ignored in Brussels due to concerns with health of democracy in Slovakia (Brusis, 2002). After Meciar lost the elections the coalition government of Dzurinda reaffirmed the European Commission that the country would pursue further decentralization and started discussing potential projects with partners in the coalition. Yet the reform stalled midway through: the Commission in 2001 mentioned in the report that the country has successfully fulfilled modernization and decentralization of public administration whereas the decisions on devolution of competences were still being postponed (European Commission 2001). Eventually regional self-governance was created, yet with seriously limited competences, the fact which does not allow seeing Slovakia as the country regionalized in accordance with the EU ambitions.

Even in Slovenia, a small country which does not even qualify for more than one NUTS II region, according to the statistical *nomenclature*, the government seriously committed to pursue decentralization and came up with a plan according to which the country would be divided in two NUTS II regions. Such an intention was in full spirit with the EU aspirations of regional actors taking policy design and implementation in their hands. In the end, though, this plan was not implemented and Slovenia remained a country with one of the most centralized institutional set-ups for cohesion policy.

Had the reforms been implemented along the lines they were already unfolding and had the European Commission insisted consistently on fulfillment of its regionalization agenda, in all four countries, new actors would have been potentially involved in the cohesion policy-making and implementation. Yet as convincingly shown in the literature, the European Commission demonstrated inconsistency in pursuing its goals of regionalization (Hughes, Sasse and Gordon 2004). Not only formal conditionality agenda was vague and open to various interpretations. The learning process within the European Commission as well as intra-DG and intra-departmental debates over whether it should be about proper absorption in the CEE or political goals of empowerment of regional actors, contributed to diversities in the final results. At some point, the European Commission rolled back on its regionalization requirements and passed the message that it was more concerned with insufficient administrative capacities in the candidate countries, especially at the regional level (Grabbe 2006).

The issue of capacity got interlinked with the issue of absorption of future sums of money. Faced with this U-turn in the European Commission's priorities, the candidate countries reacted differently. The Polish government decided to stick to the initial plan of

decentralization and opted for keeping the already achieved results. The government of Hungary followed the European Commission's turn and rolled back on its regional reforms by recentralization (Baun & Marek, 2009). The government of Slovakia stopped in its reform commitment and "froze" further discussions over regionalization, although without radical recentralization as in Hungarian case. Finally, the European Commission itself pressurized the Slovene government to abandon the idea of dividing the country into two regions and insisted on a no-regionalisation scenario.

The literature identifies two major implications of such a roll-back on the regionalization requirement. First, the natural result was scant involvement, if any in some countries (Slovenia) of regional actors and, as a result, even further strengthening of the central administrations in cohesion policy-making, the process that was already speeded up by whole context of enlargement negotiations and power asymmetries between domestic actors (Knill, 2001; Lippert & Umbach, 2001). Secondly, the issues of capacity and absorption gained enormous importance for state officials in CEE and became the notions that started to largely inform their actions with regards to cohesion policy (Milio, 2007). Efforts of CEE national administrations to overperform and demonstrate careful compliance with the EU requirements and rules regarding implementation of the cohesion policy through introduction of new and often unnecessary mechanisms into the management system of the Funds have been defined as "defensive over-bureaucratization" (Dezseri & Vida, 2011). The comments made by respondents in the interviews about partnership also indicate that conformity and compliance with the EU rules comes to the front when state officials refer to their daily obligations or discuss partnership:

> … it is important to see that the EU Funds is the primary financial resource for all kinds of development programmes: infrastructure, local authorities and NGOs. There is a huge race for funding among all the sectors and a risk of irregularities, fraud, whatever. *There is a very big pressure on Hungary and all MSs from the Commission that the money is spent in a regular and transparent way … we receive a huge number of comments from the Commission and the Court of Audit*. If the general rate of error is too high then a certain a certain percentage of money shall be sent back. This can be a really huge amount! *This is the other side of the coin - that Hungary and all other member states fear losing money. That's why we have to be strict in audit and requirements in the calls for proposals.*[18]

When examined in relation to the partnership principle, the failed (or on-going, as described by some scholars) regionalization led to the whole group of actors being out of

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[18] Interviewee SO Hu, 13 Jun 2012.

the partnership game. The situation itself is quite paradoxical given that the initial narrow idea of partnership promoted by the Commission was framed around cooperation between the Commission, state and regional actors meaning the ones representing regions as political entities (Bache, 2010a). However, when the enlargement negotiations stopped and four member states found themselves with new institutional systems created for and adapted to cohesion policy, it turned out that regionalization led to active involvement of new actors only in Poland, to a very limited engagement in Hungary and Slovakia and almost nil in Slovenia.[19] In partnership-related terms that meant that the task to apply and practice partnership stayed largely with central state officials. Regional actors in three countries (to a lesser extent in Poland) have been left with few competences related to routine implementation (aka Managing Authorities) and largely insulated from, for instance, programming and policy design which, if speaking in terms of partnership, is exactly the phase that implies intensive cooperation with partners around formulating the content of policy documents. Respondents representing these bodies often put a label of partnership on something which is not defined as such by the Commission, like this respondent from a Slovene Regional Development Agency: 'yes, of course we practice partnership – *we intensively cooperate with other bodies, ministries, from other regions*'.[20]

However, in Poland the actual strength and extent of involvement of regional actors in actual policy-making should not be ignored. Regionalization in Poland has produced and created a set of actors with clear stakes in cohesion policy-making linked to their positions in the system of policy implementation as well as to their institutional identities – two crucial elements of the context within which those actors encounter the requirement of partnership and which influence how they make sense out of it. Established to implement regional policies yet having to continuously renegotiate and redefine the volume of their competences with Warsaw, Polish regional administrations advance a particular understanding of partnership, that related to collection of input for an important exercise of preparing regional strategies. Yet respondents persistently ignored the term partnership in their utterances and replaced it with the term "public consultation" pointing out that what they were concerned about was compliance with the Polish law rather than the European

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[19] In the cohesion policy literature the indicator of the percentage of the EU Funds implemented in the regions is often used to measure the strength of the "regions". If in the first programming period no funding was transferred under the control of the regional actors and even purely regional OPs were implemented from the centers (Bachtler, Downes, & Grzelak, 2000) in the 2007-2013 perspective Polish and Hungarian regions were responsible for 25% of the Funds, while in the future 2014-2020 period the Polish government decided to increase the "regional share" up to 68%.

[20] Interviewee SO Sl, 4 Sept 2012.

Commission requirements. Another peculiarity was that the term partnership was linked to intra-regional and cross-border cooperation, as explained by one respondent:

> Our public consultation process was organized on the basis of task forces, both thematical and sub-regional. We have had conferences in each sub-region dedicated to the problems and potentials of each sub-region. We also have had thematic meetings, for example, dedicated to the environment, transport, human capital and so on. *We also had other meetings for partnership, for example, with neighborhood regions from Poland and Euroregion Baltic, we are member of that Euroregion, so we had a special meeting with other regions from this Euroregion.*[21]

Ambiguous and controversial evolution of the pre-accession negotiations, in general, and regionalization, in particular, produced quite a specific attitude towards cohesion policy in the new member states. Issues of proper compliance with a set of incredibly complex requirements such as absorption etc. have been prioritized whereas goals of political devolution set aside. Paradoxically, the argument that efficiency goes hand in hand with the devolution was very soon forgotten. In the end, greater efficiency became linked to greater centralization and exclusion of additional actors.

5.1.2. Strength and diversity of central authorities

The negotiations on Chapter 21 did not revolve solely around regionalization. The major part of coordination between the European Commission and the member states touched upon a different aspect – creation of new structures/bodies within bureaucracies in the candidate countries or adaptation of the existing ones to the demanding task of disbursement of Funds and compliance with all other accompanying requirements, including the partnership principle (Begg, 2010; Thielemann, 2002). The thesis argues that it is these developments that proved crucial in understanding how state officials interpret partnership and, in the end, how they practice it.

The requirements of the European Commission in relation to new structures and bodies were very precise.[22] Three particular institutions were (and are) mentioned in the Council Regulations: the Managing Authority, the paying authority and the so-called intermediary bodies. Robert Leonardi (2005) concludes that the EU approach to cohesion

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[21] Interviewee SO Pl, 11 Sept 2012.
[22] For example, in 2000 the Commission produced an informal working document for internal entitled "Main administrative structures requirement for implementing the *acquis*" which in great details described the institutions required to implement corresponding chapters (Grabbe, 2006).

policy implies strict 'conceptual distinction and practical differentiation between decision-making and implementation', a feature that makes cohesion policy so distinct from traditional policy-making practices (p. 69). Such a distinction is sustained through distribution of functions between these bodies mentioned in the Regulations.

The Regulations prescribe the Managing Authority as the body which would bear overall responsibility over cohesion policy implementation. The system must include "paying authority" or the body responsible for compliance with the EU rules related to certifying, procurement and general financial transactions. Intermediary bodies were to be created in case the national governments decide to delegate some of the implementation functions to third parties for considerations of efficiency and policy concentration. These bodies perform different functions regarding cohesion policy. Yet the candidate countries, being under enormous pressure to ensure proper disbursement of money and under severe criticisms for low administrative capacity as well as faced with the reality of huge sums of money flowing in, opted for for further complication of the institutional system around cohesion policy.

The first step was separation between two kinds of Managing Authorities. Carefully following the Regulations, governments in the candidate countries established so-called Central Managing Authorities, governmental bodies entitled with nation-wide policy coordination. Throughout two budget periods their forms and "localizations" in four countries changed several times. In Poland, the choice was made in favour of creating a Ministry for Regional Development, a structure that did not exist before. In Slovakia and Slovenia this function of overall coordination was merged with already existing ministries but with clear separation of competences between created departments and the rest of the ministries' work. In Hungary, the function of the central Managing Authority was given to the newly created National Development Office.

The crucial competences that these bodies were delegated were strategic programming and oversight over compliance with the EU rules. The higher echelons of state officials – offices within the Prime Ministers' administrations – are normally responsible for negotiations over the financial packages whereas the central Managing Authorities were designated to provide the actual strategic content of the policy, first of all, in the form of National Strategic Reference Framework and contents of all Operational Programmes (OPs). Together with the function of oversight, this makes these institutions primary communicators with the Commission on practically all matters of cohesion policy, starting with country priorities and goals and ending with sanctions for fraud. In practical

terms, delegation of such functions rendered the issue of coordination an extremely important daily routine for state officials working for these bodies.

First of all, although being responsible for the creation (and discussion) of the content, these bodies nevertheless do not appear as fully-fledged direct contributors of the policy content, but deal more with collecting the content and, thus, are involved in a complex web of interactions and negotiations with other bodies. Coordination between numerous "others" (both governmental and societal actors) in order to ensure that the content fits into previously negotiated deals with the European Commission, "putting together" the documents and communicating with the European Commission their approval or disapproval constitute the daily routines of people working for these institutions.

Second, these bodies are meant to oversee the application of 5 key principles of cohesion policy including the partnership principle and, most importantly, to report to the European Commission on compliance with those principles which also renders coordination and interactions with other agents the primary routine. In case of partnership the central Managing Authorities become the first interlocutors for the European Commission when it comes to checking on compliance with this requirement, a fact very actively reflected upon in respondents' narratives around partnership, as will be shown later.

However, as mentioned above, the practice of cohesion policy entails strict division between decision-making and implementation, which is not only sustained through the terminology of cohesion policy but also through contours of institutional set-ups. The term "Managing Authority" is also used in relation to bodies which are designated as coordinators of concrete OPs. The Regulations prescribe that these structures carry out all sorts of activities related to the OPs. First, they provide concrete policy input which later, finds its way into the OPs and is negotiated with the European Commission. Second, they deal with actual implementation which, in the context of the cohesion policy, means registering applications and selecting the projects, carrying out of information and publicity services and evaluation and reporting (Official Journal L 158:3 28 June 2003).

The crucial dimension as regards their functions is that OP Managing Authorities are the structures who translate general objectives and priorities of the OPs into concrete policy content through two major instruments: the annual Action Plans, documents which operationalize general priorities, and calls for proposals, documents which outline all the necessary information for future projects. In all cases except for Hungary, the national

ministries are appointed as Managing Authorities for the OPs depending on the thematic scope of the OPs. Hungary represents a deviant case of high centralization as the National Development Office hosts the Managing Authorities for all OPs under its roof leaving the national ministries with a very small role (Bachtler & Gorzelak, 2007).

This division of functions between two kinds of Managing Authorities proves to be of vital importance in understanding their roles in the whole system of cohesion policy management. The Managing Authorities serve different though partially overlapping functions: highly strategic planning, in the former case, through defining general priorities and objectives and actual policy implementation, in the latter. In reality, stricter division is drawn between the assigned role of "controllers" for the former and "implementers" for the latter. In application to partnership, such separation also becomes crucial as it provides these bodies with different incentives, aspirations and perceptions with regards to partnership, as will be shown below.

This seemingly clear-cut institutional design turns out to be quite hazy in reality and is characterized with extremely unclear spheres of responsibility and relations between institutions as well as frequent overlapping of their competences. Even in Hungary, where the NDA is often reported (and was originally meant to be) to be the institution that centralizes all the power around the cohesion policy at the expense of other actors, such as national ministries, one can, in fact, find a complex set of practices of intrabureaucratic interactions and coordination which makes it impossible to draw the boundaries between competences. Being formally excluded from real content production, representatives of the ministries, nevertheless, "populate" numerous committees where they can exert a lot of influence over the policy content. As one respondent, ex-employee of the NDA and a head of one of its divisions noticed:

> I think it is crucial to understand that it is not like all the functions are with the ministries or the NDA. There *will anyway be several parties involved*. It is never the situation when each unit is responsible for something strictly limited. Every decision is always a collective one.[23]

This remark is vital in understanding that in practice the division "designers vs. implementers" can be hard to capture, even in allegedly centralized systems like in Hungary. State officials are constantly involved in intensive intrabureaucratic coordination which goes along with continuous definition and redefinition of competences and, eventually, power, and identity-building.

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[23] Interviewee SO Hu, 19 Mar 2013.

Another source of complication is the existence of numerous intermediary bodies entitled with functions of implementation which is very often framed as "administrative tasks" by respondents. In Poland, for example, the Labour Offices which have been delegated the task of implementing particular priorities of the national OP "Human Capital" have joined the group of actors busy with cohesion policy. Their roles differ across the regions – what functions they serve and how they are related to policy process in the regions was the point for extensive negotiations between the regional governments and Warsaw. In Slovakia and Slovenia, though, such bodies are largely absent due to their institutional systems of cohesion policy management being quite compact compared to their bigger neighbors. In Hungary, though, the government paid special attention to involvement of independent bodies (companies) and the Hungarian institutional set-up includes several big players like, for example, three biggest bodies: ESZA, Energy center and VATI. These bodies *de facto* appear to be quite important participants of the policy process even though *de jure* they are expected to deal exclusively with "administrative tasks" of contracting, procurement, reporting etc. Through their knowledge of the details of, for example, complicated EU procurement rules, they can, in fact, participate in the formulation of policy content. They are also represented in various coordination committees that deal with selection of projects or discussion of future Action Plans. Knowledge of the EU audit rules makes the "paying authorities", ministries of finance in all four cases, extremely important agencies capable of exerting enormous influence on the policy.

All these actors, involved in one or another way in cohesion policy-making, might also potentially be involved in practicing partnership. As was shown the Chapter 2, the Regulations on partnership especially underline that partnership is expected to be in place at all stages of policy process, regardless of whether that is policy-design or implementation (Official Journal L 158:3 28 June 2003). From this perspective, even intermediary bodies, although most often they position themselves as serving exclusively administrative functions, can theoretically get engaged with collaboration with partners.

In practice, in all the countries under scrutiny only certain types of actors attempt and take part in practicing partnership: in Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia these are central Managing Authorities, line ministries and regional actors (to a limited extent), in Poland this group includes regional governments, both centrally appointed (voivoda) and democratically elected (marshalls) and country-wide intermediary bodies. The list is not

exhaustive though. The overall number of institutions involved in cohesion policy-making can exceed 100, for instance, as in Poland (Dabrowski, 2007, 2008).

A look into complex reality of cohesion policy implementation, including the legacy of pre-accession and outcomes of negotiations, unveils the context within which interpretations of partnership by state officials are rooted. Cohesion policy-making in the new member states appears as quite a specific and distinct zone of activity for a distinct category of state officials. This section revealed a rich texture of actors' positioning – state officials who deal with cohesion policy-making are embedded in a complex and multidimensional system of (inter)relations. One such dimension is that of relations between central and regional authorities. It was shown that cohesion policy institutional systems in the member remain highly centralized with capitals-based actors defining the terms and conditions of policy implementation, including the partnership principle. At the same time, it was demonstrated that these unique systems of institutions still remain highly segmented. In concrete terms, state officials represent quite different institutions with different functions and roles in cohesion policy-making. This fragmentation is also believed to forge the space for meaning making around partnership and induce various expectations from it.

The next section zooms in on how these identified traits of cohesion policy practice are reflected in interpretations of partnership by the state officials in four countries. It aims to establish whether this context, described in the present section, contributes to cross-country convergence or divergence of meanings.

5.2. Partnership for state officials: in between the policy practice, interests and beliefs

These six quotations picture a polysemy of meanings that partnership acquires for state officials in four countries.

> I [...] think this is very important to include people into the programming phase as we have *to ask them what they would like to do …* partnership is that we include all the partners in negotiations *so they can tell what they want in the OPs*, *how do they want to be included in the process*.[24]

> And we invited them [partners – *A.D.*] because this is something they should be involved in. I don't think this was formal - this was something we believed in, *that they should be informed*.[25]

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[24] Interviewee SO Sl, 7 Sept 2012.
[25] Interviewee SO Sk, 11 Nov 2012.

We organized lots of workshops and lectures in all of Hungary, in the largest cities just to generate the expectations and provide the information and *create an impression that they can participate*. We were not sure we could make an impression that they should participate but, anyway, we tried to be as close to people as possible.[26]

I think partnership is this cooperation with different organizations and letting them influence the Funds. Partnership principle means that we treat ourselves like partners. But at the end of the day the Ministry of Regional Development *is the one who is going to be responsible for spending of the EU money ... we can give them the vote, we already did it, but you cannot expect from us that we will let them to block something or to choose projects that we know will not done clearly*.[27]

They [partners] *shall act in a more constructive way, not always to be institutions criticizing and complaining, to set up themselves as equal partners to work with*.[28]

Partnership *is being equal partners and by equality I mean their ability to see the wider context, ability to think at the strategic level, ability to read all the documents, to comment on them and also to be able to make linkages with other policies*.[29]

One can notice that partnership is understood as a certain obligation of state officials towards the partners ('we have to ask them what they want to do'). Some respondents think of it as a process, organized in a particular manner ('lots of workshops … to generate the expectations and provide the information'). The others approach it as expectations from partners themselves ('ability to see the wider context') etc. Most frequently, though, all these representations pop up in the interviews and, thus, constitute respondents' narratives.

Table 3 summarizes the associative connotations for six keywords taken from the interviews with state officials.

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[26] Interviewee SO Hu, 26 Mar 2013.
[27] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[28] Interviewee SO Sk, 15 Nov 2011.
[29] Interviewee SO Sk, 12 Jul 2012.

Table 3. Keywords: state officials

Keywords/concepts	Associative connotations
rules	Importance of the compliance, responsibility, EU rules, reporting, regulations, equality of treatment, representation, fairness
procedures	Public consultations, on-line platforms, accessibility, openness, transparency, selection.
empowerment (capacity building)	Benefits for partners, capacity building, activating the partners, collecting wishes/inquiries, informing and asking, consulting
communication	Listening and hearing, giving the voice, asking, registering preferences, answering inquiries
recognition	No complaining (to Brussels), constructive critique, no, prepared, professionalism, culture of a dialogue, knowing own needs, being organized, knowledge, being pro-active, treating policies as "their own", strategic vision, country-wide perspective
implementation	Ensuring partners' status as applicants, ensuring access to money for partners, simplification of rules for access to money, assisting in absorption

Source: 25 interviews with state officials.

Table 3 demonstrates how this multiplicity of utterances and interventions about partnership by state officials can be structured around six main keywords defined for further comparison. Table 3 also illustrates what associative connotations "hide" behind these six themes. It is these connotations that provide an entry point into the realm of meanings of partnership shared by state officials in four countries. This section uncovers these themes with a view to draw a map of state officials' interpretations of partnership.

5.2.1. Partnership as procedures and rules: public consultations, collection of input and equality

Discussions of partnership by state officials almost unfailingly followed a very strict pattern in terms of how certain themes were unfolding in the course of conversations. That interlocutors came from different countries and, most importantly, from various sub-groups and sub-divisions of the group of state officials would not alter the structure of their

responses much. Discussions of partnership would start with remarks about certain procedures and rules: partnership as a) public consultations for b) collection of policy input and c) giving accounts on programming developments, conducted with especial attention to the principle of d) equality of access and treatment for partners.

State officials would start their elaborations on partnership with reporting on how partnership is (or has been) implemented. These reports would, most frequently, cover the initial phase of the 2007-2013 programming period, namely the period of policy design, formulation of policy goals and drafting of the OPs, the major policy documents that prescribe thematic and spending priorities for the Funds. It is interesting to note that it is at this stage that partnership is seen as the most necessary exercise despite the fact that the European Commission insists on partnership being implemented at all stages of cohesion policy-making. However, it can also be explained by the fact that partnership at the programming stage is also the most monitored phase or form of partnership. The European Commission keeps an eye on whether partners have been involved at the programming stage. The latter, in turn, makes reporting on how partnership has been complied at this stage a natural priority for state officials. Partially because of this, state officials would provide very detailed accounts on how partnership principle was applied and would also accompany their oral accounts with numerous supportive written documents. However, it is not the eagerness with which state officials would report on partnership but the contents of all these narratives that reveal the deeper meaning of partnership. Some examples illustrate this.

Representatives of the central Managing Authority in Slovenia, the Ministry of Economic Development, when responding to the question of how the Ministry implements partnership principle, started off by explaining how programming period for 2014-2020 period is organized in Slovenia:

> Now *we are also collecting proposals from the regions … We are planning to go to each regions* in the end of this year each Fridays and *we will present them to all partners, social and economic ones, NGOs, local authorities…* we will present them our activities, the guidelines from the Commission, what is the government going to do and *in the end we will collect their proposals, together with the regions and these partners.*[30]

People working in other ministries in Slovenia, where departments or sub-divisions dealing with the SFs exist, told the same story. An employee from the Ministry of Public

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[30] Interviewee SO Sl, 7 Sept 2012.

Administration, for instance, provided a detailed account of how this idea of 'going to the regions' emerged and was discussed, and how her Ministry was appointed as a body to technically support these partnership "journeys". The task of this Ministry is to create and financially support twelve regional NGO networks/hubs who would be primary contacts of the government in the regions when it comes to programming. The respondent mentioned that although legally there was not any specific prescription to involve the public, her Department was given the task to work on promotion of public participation through organization of numerous events and procedures such as consultations on future legislation, including the contents of the OPs.

Slovak state officials tell the same story, as illustrated by these quotations:

> We [the Ministry- A.D.] also with the Minister for Regional Development, *we had this virtual going to differentf regional capitals and introducing different OPs*. I went to sic of them or maybe more. I was meeting with *local stakeholders* of regional development, municipalities, visited this event which was from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon and there were several blocks, like the first was infrastructure and stuff. I had like a 45 min *presentation*, 20 min for a discussion. Actually*, we introduced to them the proposed measures so they are informed by that. They asked questions and proposed something*.[31]

> If you look at the document of our OP "Health", in the end you will find a section that contains all the remarks *that we received throughout the programming period when this document was available to the public on the internet or all of the comments that we received during our consultations*. You can also see *how these comments were taken into account and how the ministry reacted*.[32]

Their Polish counterparts seem to have applied this format to programming especially seriously. Officials representing regional governments in Gdansk and Krakow particularly carefully described their experiences of massive multi-level and complex public consultations organized in their regions. Employees from Gdansk Marshall's Office, the regional government responsible for implementation of the cohesion policy, traded the stories about arranging mobile conferences in all municipalities in order to ensure inclusiveness and provision of input from the public:

> This was *the idea of partnership for public consultation* but it was also that *we have organized a possibility just of making the remarks from each of the partners*. We have got 180 written remarks from 180 institutions from the region … After the public consultation we made a special report. The report

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[31] Interviewee SO Sk, 11 Nov 2012.
[32] Interviewee SO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.

is, part number one: *the summary of all the remarks made and our reaction to these remarks*. And the second part is *in the huge Appendix which is all the remarks with our comments and way how we used it in the final documents*.[33]

All these quotations vividly illustrate that state officials across three countries equate partnership with a certain procedural format of collecting the policy input for OPs. This format implies organization of big *public consultations* which are meant to serve as *fora* and *platforms* in which the public, not necessarily the organized partners, can express their preferences.

At the same time, there is another side to these consultations. State officials view these meetings as an opportunity to report to the public on their own visions of how the policy should be implemented and on what policy content has already been created, thus, seeing them as feedback channels. Organization of presentations, which are meant to acquaint the public (local stakeholders) with the progress of programming and drafting of the OPs, is especially emphasized as an integral element of partnership.

Absence of remarks of Hungarian officials from the above picture does not signify that the country stands out as a deviant case. On the contrary, the case of Hungary exemplifies how the idea of partnership as a massive public consultation aimed at 'fishing for policy ideas' has been honed to perfection. Its case is also important for a better understanding what meaning state officials assign to partnership. Hungarian state officials perfectly summarized the arguments behind such a procedural format, the ones relevant for their counterparts from other three countries and the ones that reveal how such a practice of partnership matters for them.

In Hungary, the National Development Agency (NDA), Hungarian analogue of central Managing Authority, was responsible for implementation of partnership for the 2007-2013 programming period. The way the NDA implemented partnership for 2007-2013 programming period received especially positive feedback from the European Commission and was called 'the best practice in the region'[34], a story which reappeared in almost every account of partnership. Instead of institutionalizing interactions with partners within working groups convened for consultations - the way it was frequently preferred in Slovakia, Poland and Slovenia - the NDA decided to go for an almost direct democracy experiment. All the drafts of the policy documents were uploaded on the internet so that

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[33] Interviewee SO Pl, 11 Sept 2012.
[34] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.

every citizen or citizens' group – to ensure equality of access - could comment on them and leave concrete suggestions. As a result, unprecedented number of comments – more than 4000 – were received and had to be dealt with. Furthermore, the NDA chose an especially challenging and "expensive" way of dealing with the comments, which also zooms in on what partnership meant for them at that time. What is more impressive is that *all* the commentators were sent personal letters reporting on whether their comments were incorporated or dismissed and outlining reasons for rejection. That created an incredible backlog for people working in the so-called communication department of the NDA, the subdivision created to implement partnership. This task was successfully accomplished, though, and in the interviewees' remarks, references to it were used to illustrate how equality of access and, consequently, true partnership, were achieved.

Among the reasons why NDA decided to stick to such a format of partnership, several deserve a particular attention as they provide an entry into deeper meanings of partnership. Remarks of these two NDA employees clearly illuminate how such a format of partnership matters for state officials:

> Most of the people who dealt with the partnership principle at that time thought it was a beautiful phenomenon from the EU. *We had on mind that it can be useful for policy-making. We expected that if we can organize it in a good way it would help us to collect and spread the information …* To understand the whole story better – the politicians were not deciding on goals at the abstract level but they were deciding on projects ... *but we needed legitimacy …* the EU says 'growth and jobs', the politicians stamp it. *This is beautiful but this has not been a politically discussed and legitimized document. So some of us were thinking of partnership as input from the society in order to know where all these goals come from.*[35]

> The reason we organized this partnership was that it is very important *to keep the Agency open*, so *that the public knew what is going here*, this is a very pressing need.[36]

> *We are supposed to be a modern democracy, and in Europe you have these consultations.*[37]

These remarks display the range of concerns of Hungarian state officials which they sincerely aspire to minimize through partnership: the *legitimacy* of decision-making related to spending and defining policy priorities, the need for *policy input* and expertise, *transparency* and, critically, the image of a country as a *democratic polity*.

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[35] Interviewee SO Hu, 26 Mar 2013.
[36] Interviewee SO Hu, 13 Jun 2012.
[37] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.

Transparency and neutrality are crucial elements of the NDA's "identity story" as well as important arguments for state officials from other countries. NDA employees position themselves as a transparent and neutral agency insulated from any political influence and, equally, of all other state officials working for coordination authorities. This concern with transparency and, consequently, with partnership as a public consultation on a large scale is linked to the role of coordination authorities in the system of cohesion policy-making. These bodies have been delegated certain functions - responsibility for strategic planning, pooling together the policy content and oversight over compliance with the EU rules. Their major input in cohesion policy-making lies in coordinating incorporation of content to the final policy documents through immense coordination and negotiations with other actors. It is the coordination authorities who draft the OPs which are later discussed with the Commission, and it is this process of drafting that involves, first, collection of policy input from partners and other governmental bodies and, second, negotiation of this input with the Commission officials.

In practice this constitutes enormous challenge that the coordination authorities face – an immensely huge amount of coordination and negotiations, both with lower authorities such as line ministries and the higher ones such as Offices of the Prime Ministers, a fact systematically reflected upon by the respondents in their interviews, as the reaction by a Slovak official below demonstrates:

> Well, *it was quite a difficult gate-keeping job*: on the one hand, you dealt with high political goals and the state secretary, for example; on the other, *you had to negotiate with intra-Ministerial departments, and that was a completely different game*. It is a slow process, the documents are slowly built: you come up with something, discuss, then the Commission comes in, you cut the number of priorities from 8 till 5, then discuss with the ministries, they say they do not want the priority 4, then you change it… .[38]

Responsibility for programming, pressures coming from engagement in intensive negotiations and highly strategic character of the produced policy documents constitute the context in which state officials are confronted with the requirement of partnership. The assumed role of "gate-keepers" seems to be internalized as part of a wider identity of "guardians" of the country interest, entrusted with the right to take decisions upon weighting all the options and choosing among them.

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[38] Interviewee SO Sk, 21 Nov 2012.

Interestingly, respondents systematically underline such a superior position of theirs - stressing 'no-boasting' but, on the contrary, enumerating difficulties that come along with such position.[39] Their elaborations about partnership clearly reflect such a self-perception. State officials talk about acting in full accordance with all the European Commission requirements in terms of providing access to policy process (programming) to a wide range of partners indiscriminately, to all the categories identified by the European Commission in its instructions. What they equate partnership with is that such principles and rules as *equality of access and treatment* and representativity are respected. As one informant's remark displays: 'We *do not have any role in selection of partners*. If partners come and say they would like to participate in the programming or in the MCs, *then they are accepted*'.[40] Another interviewee echoes the previous one:

> NGOs case is an interesting one because *it is always difficult to choose representatives from the sector with whom you can discuss the things* because of course you can be discussing … in Slovakia we have more than 3000 of them and you cannot be discussing with all of them. It is not possible. For us the challenge was ok, h*ow do we choose the relevant partners capable of discussing the things*.[41]

State officials trade stories about investing a lot into ensuring that only the most representative partners gain access, for example, in the MCs. They emphasize how important it is to provide all interested partners with an opportunity to have a say. Such a concern with equality and representation led to adoption of, for instance, a uniform approach to selection of partners in all countries. In practice, this means provision of access to the major umbrella associations of partners, be it CSOs or economic and social partners. This can be traced through comparing the composition of the MCs in both countries where the same nation-wide associations are represented. In Poland and Slovenia, for instance, the same partners are represented everywhere throughout the country, be it the MCs, sub-Committees for regional OPs or "national civil society group" for the 2014-2020 programming.

Respondents from the line ministries also surprisingly often bring up equality of access and treatment as the major rule of partnership, yet with different meanings. Their

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[39] As one respondent recounted "we sort of … should give recommendations if we see that something is going really wrong with implementation of one or the other OP. The coordination body shall be the one who will alert the government, give recommendation what actions shall be taken. *It is not a very popular role of the coordination body, if you know what I mean*. So we shall be the one *who points the finger and says* "yeah, yeah, this ministry thinks that everything is going alright but look at the final results of the audit …" (Interviewee SO Sk, 24 Jul 2013).
[40] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[41] Interviewee SO Sk, 24 Jul 2013.

involvement in programming is quite limited – the ministries only supply policy content which may not even remain unaltered after checking by the coordination authorities. Their major focus is implementation, namely selection of projects, monitoring and evaluation. Even though the EU Regulations prescribe partnership at all stages, including implementation, whether the rule is complied with by the line ministries is terra incognita even for the guardians from the coordination authorities. As bluntly put by one respondent: '*they are supposed to have their own partnership but whether they do or not we do not know.*'[42]

Yet interviewees from the line ministries repeatedly stress that they are also concerned about partnership due to its being a rule and even lay out their representations in the same terms, namely equality. Representativity as such falls out of their partnership map due to pragmatic preoccupation with efficiency and speed of allocation for which selectivity in relation to partners is perfectly justified, as recounted by interviewees. However, equality remains stressed, though with a different meaning. Dealing with real allocation of money, these state officials equate partnership with ensuring equal opportunities for partners to apply for projects. The role of guarantors of equality of access and voice is replaced with the role of a guarantor of equal access to the Funds which are viewed as resources. When asked about how partnership is being implemented in their ministries, state officials went on about measures that were taken to ensure access to money. As one respondent says: 'So, we were supporting the involvement of NGOs through partnership and *not through specific calls for proposals when NGOs would compete for some money.*'[43] This quote comes from the Slovak interviewee who, when asked about how partnership is being implemented in her Ministry, spoke at length about differences in ways of launching calls for proposals. One of them could encourage extreme completion among potential applicants and, as argued, interfere with equality of opportunities principle. The utterance, made by a Slovene official, echoes the concern: 'First element of partnership – *participation in every call for proposals*. And, we have been quite successful with that […] *the social partners were always included as project applicants. Our task is to make sure everyone has access* to those calls and *that the calls are not secretly fashioned for particular organisations*'.[44]

A look at meanings behind first two keywords – rules and procedures – already reveals that state officials approach partnership quite specifically. The narrative is visibly

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[42] Interviewee SO Sk, 21 Nov 2012.
[43] Interviewee SO Sk, 12 Jul 2012.
[44] Interviewee SO Sl, 7 Sept 2012.

coherent. Partnership is associated with a certain procedural format, namely public consultations. The purposes of such consultations are manifold: to collect the policy input form the partners, to report to partners on policy developments and, thus, to demonstrate transparency and accountability of policy process. Equality of access and treatment of partners is, in its turn, presented as the major principle.

This interpretation of partnership is shaped by professional disposition of state officials who are faced with challenging tasks to ensure flow of policy input, intra-bureaucratic coordination and compliance with the EU rules. State officials also successfully reconcile these considerations with deeply-seated beliefs about democratic nature of this process, a line of reasoning sustained through and, at the same time, sustaining discussions of equality of access to these consultations for partners and their equal treatment.

5.2.2. "Asking them what they would like to do"[45] during a "big family meeting"[46]: communication and recognition aspects of partnership

The phrases used in the title are found in the responses of a Slovene and Slovak interviewees. The Slovak informant refereed to the framework of a "family meeting" when explicating ambiguity and complexity of dealing with partners in the policy-making process. In her turn, the Slovene respondent described the dynamics of the family meetings stressing that she viewed it as an obligation to inquire about partners' visions and needs. These quotes open another door into the world of understandings of partnership shared by state officials – conceptualizations of partnership as a a) communication process that requires certain effort from them but carried out with b) recognized partners. Uncovering wider meanings behind these keywords/themes also deepens understanding of why state officials insist on specific procedural format of partnership, as described in the previous section.

When reflecting on their visions of partnership, all interviewees devote considerable time to description of partnership as a certain type of communication. This quote quite vividly summarizes such conceptualizations:

> Partnership…hm… imagine *the big family meeting* on something like where you all will go for holidays, and with all these family members having

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[45] Interviewee SO Sl, 7 Sept 2012.
[46] Interviewee SO Sk, 26 Jul 2013.

different views and you being the one who has to put on table something that everybody will be happy with.[47]

One category of key words, that the concept of a "family meeting" comes together and directly relates to, embraces all variations of "listening". State officials, especially those representing the coordination authorities, would repeatedly equate true partnership with 'listening to them', letting partners raise their voice and hearing partners' opinions on policies.

> *… we tried to give them an opportunity to talk to each other and to talk to us*, so they are kind of involved in the process […] once the partners announced boycott *because of the feeling they are not being heard by us, that no one listens to them …*.[48]

> When I think of partnership, I think that we have this very good tradition of communication, of hearing each other which was not that easy in the beginning. Partners now know *that they can say whatever they want, that there are conditions for that.*[49]

Alluding to a family meeting at which an important decision is to be made upon everyone is listened to also explains why coordination authorities employees insisted on equality of access and treatment so much. Partnership is viewed as a *communication process* of a certain type. This communication is organized as giving an opportunity to partners to talk and, consequently, is evaluated as positive or successful when '*there is quite a good intensive discussion, people are very interested and ask questions*'[50]. In contrast, it is deemed unsuccessful when '*… we were a bit disappointed as social partners remained completely silent* during the meetings.'[51]

The communication process is depicted as extremely important, frequently overloaded with content and requiring enormous effort from state officials – to ensure compliance with externally imposed rules, equality of access for everyone willing to contribute and hard time of deciding whose contributions to incorporate. The latter is an especial source of frustrations for the interviewees as the times of hard choice between alternatives continuously pop up in accounts of how such communication was arranged. Without questioning their superior position as ones who must decide, but, instead, underlying necessity of that, respondents meticulously explain how the comments were

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[47] Interviewee SO Sk, 26 Jul 2013.
[48] Interviewee SO Sk, 21 Nov 2012.
[49] Interviewee SO Sl, 30 Sept 2011.
[50] Interviewee SO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.
[51] Interviewee SO Hu, 28 Apr 2013.

collected, processed, who was dealing with that and where all the reactions could be found and emphasized that "*no one was forgotten*".[52]

This communication is framed by interviewees as the ideal format of partnership in which state officials keep the balance between desires and needs of partners expressed bottom-up, country's interests and the EU rules structuring the whole policy process. Such an emphasis also further clarifies their vision of partnership as unfolding in a certain procedural manner – only public consultations can ensure the above-described communication during which everyone is listened and given a chance to express their views.

A lion share of respondents' comments on partnership revolves around disruptions of this communication caused by the partners whose actions do not live up to certain expectations. These accounts, scattered all around rich narratives of interviews, eventually came together as interlinked by an important key phrase, namely a "real partner". Real partner turned out to be especially meaning-rich concept that for state officials structures their understanding of partnership as a communication process and, at the same time, provides a passport of actors recognized as partners. The concept embraces several key themes – abilities, behavior and knowledge (cognitive). Meaning-in-use of partnership, thus, acquires an element not related to process or procedures but related to the figure of a partner. Interlocutors frame real partners through negation or by recounting what is missing and what real partners do not possess.

First and foremost, the major "deficiency" of partners is described as lack of the ability to apply **strategic vision**. The stories traded by respondents are built around the following line: first, everyone was so enthusiastic about partnership; there has been an attempt to implement the idea; later it turned out that partners could not see the whole picture and arrived with their narrow particularistic interests and demands. This remarks displays how the last phase of the story works:

> You know it is always like that: they all come and start telling how and where to allocate the money and *they all want it to be spent on their needs*. That is hard and sometimes, I would say, pretty often, *you need to be foxy…* especially when their wish lists are so long.[53]

References to such an imperfection are found in utterances of state officials across the countries. One example from Slovenia is particularly helpful to grasp it: 'I seriously

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[52] Interviewee SO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.
[53] Interviewee SO Sl, 30 Sept 2011.

think that when it comes to partners their interests should become wider *in order to ensure a balanced policy and they should not be so super-occupied with their narrow views.*[54] Actors in the Polish regions echo their Slovene counterparts: 'We wanted the partners to solve the problems of our regions and we said that, ok, *we are not interested anymore in solving your individual problems.*'[55] Hungarian respondents agree:

> Their comments *were not at the strategic level which was quite abstract* but comments were something like: it would be very useful it there would be a new road between two cities. But it is very difficult to build into the OP.[56]

Partners are framed as actors selfishly pursuing their particularistic interests as opposed to what one shall expect from them - commitment to the country's (in some versions - public) interest and strategic approach to Funds' allocation and spending. Normally partners are described as actually coming to the table with a purpose to lobby for their specific interests instead of focusing on wider perspectives, the activity which is sharply contrasted with what state officials are after. Very often, the term "lobbying" is used automatically to define this. One Slovak respondent, when discussing who his ministry saw as partners, directly mentioned that '*trade unions have their own ways of lobbying for the Structural Funds.*'[57]

Stories about disruptions stemming from lack of strategic vision as examples of bad partnership are especially frequently told by state officials working for coordination bodies. The Slovene respondents mentioned numerous times apparently high profile the case of the windmills projects in a place called Krsko. In the story, environmental NGOs provided convincing evidence that the project would negatively affect certain types of birds, and blocked the implementation of the project. The argument of the officials was that the partners did not take into consideration 'new jobs' and 'electricity supply' effect of the project and got stuck to their narrow area of birds protection.

The Slovak officials referred to several examples when NGOs blocked projects on social housing, or when the MC for the OP "Social renewal" did not let the ministry (and the Prime Minister behind the ministry's back) reallocate the budget form this OP to the OP "Transport". The Hungarian NDA officials mentioned several times especially loud claims of some Roma organizations pushing for allocation of additional funding for regeneration of Roma ghettoes. Although in all cases partners were asking for different

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[54] Interviewee SO Sl, 3 Apr 2012.
[55] Interviewee SO Pl, 11 Sep 2012.
[56] Interviewee SO Hu, 26 Mar 2013.
[57] Interviewee SO Sk, 21 Nov 2012.

things - to abandon the ideas of particular interventions, to cancel plans on reallocation of money or to change the technical and procedural sides of the Funds management – all the instances were qualified as missing the point of seeing the bigger picture.

The references to excessive particularism of partners are especially heard from coordination authorities state officials, which does not come as a surprise given the scope of their work. However, the line ministries officials operate with a similar notion yet just referring to strategic view within a particular policy that the Ministry is responsible for. Being a real partner becomes linked to '*the ability to see the linkages within the policy.*'[58]

The claims about lack of strategic vision are closely linked to **behavioral** expectations from partners. Respondents tell quite a coherent story of how a real partner shall act to be considered as such. In these accounts, references to 'complaining' as unacceptable behavior are quite dismissively made by almost all interviewed officials.

> I would expect them to act in a more constructive way, not always expect to be *institutions who are complaining and criticizing*, to set up themselves as an equal partners to work with … the major complaints are on procedural matters, *they never go into theoretical or conceptual issues*.[59]

Dissatisfaction with a complaining attitude is one of many related to partners' behavior. Partners are not only non-constructive, they are also depicted as failing to organize and connect to their real needs. As a result, a real partnership is again "delayed" until partners '*find out what they really want*'.[60] One respondent summarized this in quite strong terms:

> ... they do not know how to organize themselves because, for example, […] *we asked them what their needs were* [...] we said *we needed an identification of your needs*. In the end we got a shopping list ... English course, German course, team-building, computer knowledge, skills in organizations … I mean … skills in negotiations, everything and nothing… *it was a shopping list*. *It was a huge problem that they did not know what they needed for themselves*, I mean in terms of administrative capacity, to have a capacity at all to participate in a society ... *Tell me what your role is and if you can identify your role you can identify your priorities and your needs*. You do not have that?[61]

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[58] Interviewee SO Sk, 26 Jul 2012.
[59] Interviewee SO Sk, 15 Nov 2011.
[60] Interviewee SO Sl, 7 September 2012.
[61] Interviewee SO Sl, 7 Sept 2012.

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The quote feeds back on the previous point of how state officials perceive their role - as collectors of the needs - and sums up perceptions of partners as disconnected from their needs and not knowing themselves. The obvious implication is blockage of partnership as communication.

The list of disappointments with real partners' behavior is long. Partners, for examples, are also depicted as being too passive: 'the practical experience with them was that they were *quite reserved,* and out of 20 people in the group *there were not many who regularly spoke up'*[62]). Alternatively, partners lack the 'culture of dialogue', in addition to being described as seeing no limits in following their desires - 'it is like this, especially with NGOs: *if you give them a finger, they will eat the whole hand* because they want more and more'.[63] All these imperfections are presented as making partnership impossible or extremely difficult to implement. Being devoid of ability to see the whole picture, not being able to articulate their needs and suggestions or, to the contrary, being too articulate and persistent about them up to the point of 'eating the whole hand', partners are seen as able to disrupt the whole complicated process of policy-making. One quote perfectly demonstrates how state officials see the logic of this:

> You have to define this partnership for yourself. To be fair, *we were probably cautious in a sense that we did not want to put a loaded gun into the hands of anybody*. So that is why we kept the participation of social partners just below 50% so that if this really *goes out of control* we could rely on the government majority.[64]

The metaphor of the "loaded gun" conjures up a picture of a dangerous scene when someone is unable to comprehend that the gun can shoot, is not very careful with it or is simply prone to get carried away and eventually causes out of control situations. In application to partnership these extraordinary situations include It should be mentioned, however, that economic and social partners are normally seen as less troublesome, in this sense, and a bit closer to the ideal of a real partner. It is CSOs who are depicted as inherently failing to live up to expectations due to lack of organization, particularism and inability to articulate anything. Economic and social partners are seen as more serious in this sense.

Finally, only partners who possess specific knowledge are recognized by state officials as real partners worth communicating with. Partners are depicted as not living up

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[62] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.
[63] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[64] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.

to expectations with regards to **knowledge** they possess. Here state officials normally speak about two types of knowledge, depending on which type of governmental institutions they represent. Coordination authorities employees stress partners' ignorance about the nitty-gritty of the EU cohesion policy in terms of the steps that the process of policy-making takes. The line ministries officials' understandings partially overlap and they note that partners are unable to absorb and process special technical information which they are expected to understand because they are project-implementers. Yet at the same time another dimension of knowledge comes to light – professionalism of partners as project implementers. Two quotes illustrate these claims:

> It was not like ok, you guys do and add whatever you want [to the OPs – *A.D*], propose whatever you want because, honestly, they did not have the background, *they did not know what the steps are, how it should be prepared, that there are special procedures.*[65]

> …by equality I mean *ability to see the wider context, ability to think at the strategic level, ability to read all the documents, to comment on them and also to be able to make the linkages with other policies.*[66]

These differences in conceptualization of what knowledge is required from real partners also reflect that the primary interests and concerns of these groups of officials reside in different spheres of responsibility. The officials whose views are represented by the first quote react especially emotionally and get somewhat protective over their domain of activities when they face partners' claims regarding the process and procedures. Automatically real partner acquires a particular meaning – a real partner is someone who knows that those rules and requirements, framed by partners as excessive and interfering, are inevitable and may not be easily challenged. Until this knowledge is acquired partnership as a productive communication remains under the question as the effort to establish cooperation is wasted in vain – on explaining to the partners this conventional truth.

The second quote reveals that the issue of knowing the rules and ability to process complex technical information are also inherent attributes of real partners and, consequently, partnership. Knowledge and skills of partners are expected to almost fully match the ones of bureaucrats. At the same time, what is seriously questioned is the organizational and administrative professionalism and knowledge of partners. References

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[65] Interviewee SO Sk, 21 Nov 2012.
[66] Interviewee SO Sk, 26 Jul 2012.

to weak partners who can only carefully be entrusted with implementation of projects are most often made by state officials representing line ministries.

To sum up, partnership is interpreted as a communication process organized so that state officials provide real partners with an opportunity to raise their voice and delineate their desires and needs. At the same time, this communication is seen as an obligation of state officials to inquire into those needs. Yet only those who satisfy criteria of real partners can be listened to. It can also be seen how the theme of listening and inquiring is organically linked with the previous one, namely the one about special procedural format of this communication – public consultations.

5.2.3. Empowerment and implementation

The final group of remarks fall under the big theme of partnership as a set of real actions pursued by both sides, namely a) empowerment of partners, on the part of state officials, and b) implementation as an expectation from the partners. In their discussions of partnership state officials move from abstract contemplations of what they expect a true partnership to be like to operationalization of these expectations.

The picture of communication as 'listening' and 'giving opportunity to talk' is complemented by descriptions of the active elements of state officials' roles when they do not only appear as passive observers, gate-keepers and mediators. State officials start to describe partnership as a number of concrete actions that they take towards the partners. These accounts mainly resemble structured reports on what has been done by the officials for the benefits of partners and, thus, represent an integral part of 'asking what they want' theme'. However, if 'asking what they want' equates partnership with collection of input from partners for the benefit of policies and, eventually, the country, an interesting twist occurs later.

Although they insist on being preoccupied with general interest of a country, state officials from coordination bodies nevertheless refer to pure 'personal needs' of partners when talking about 'what they want' and, thus, make a move away from country's interests. Partnership becomes equated with satisfaction of partners' needs, most frequently, of a quite a down-to-earth character. The interview situation in the Polish Ministry of Regional Development itself exemplifies the meaning behind asking. Several officials were invited for interview and, when the request to discuss what constitutes partnership was made, the moderator gave the floor to an official representing the

Department of Technical Assistance which deals with '*financing of partners… generally, like travel costs, food during the meetings, general financial support and also trainings.*'[67] Later during the same interview, respondents several times referred to what has been done for partners, as illustrated by this interviewee: 'Sometimes they are not supportive as they should be. *I agree to pay their administrative costs, travel and other expenses* but, in exchange, give us something which is important.'[68]

One of the first reactions of a Slovene official to the request to clarify what has previously been said about 'asking what they want' was a story about how the coordination ministry made enormous effort into ensuring implementation of a special priority in one of the OPs – capacity building of the social partners. Later the same interviewee explained how it was extremely important to report on how this priority is being implemented at the regular meeting of the Economic and Social Council, Slovenia's main corporatist body. An interviewee in Slovakia openly recounted that partnership took place when the Ministry asked NGOs to draft the text of the priority axis "Capacity building of NGOs" which later was copy-pasted into the text of the OP "Social renewal".

Such empowerment vigor can take many forms. State officials repeatedly gave examples of the measures they took to support the partners: '*send[*ing*] them to Austria to study*'[69] (Hungary), training of partners and establishment of a system of financial support of their activities as '*input providers through reimbursement of their costs*'[70] (Poland), creation and financing of country-wide networks of NGOs or even activities at the EU level targeted at convincing the Commission to simplify the administrative and technical requirements to projects (Slovenia).

The justifications of such a desire to help partners are pretty conventional: in the situation of underdeveloped partners (especially, NGOs) one cannot expect their full involvement and realization of their full potential as partners. As further reported, given that the added value of their involvement is well-known and manifests itself through '*whistle-blowing about what topics we have left out*'[71], state officials take it as their obligation to '*invest into preparing the partners to their future because they must know what to do*'.[72] Moreover, interestingly, some remarks convey the message that achievement

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[67] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[68] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[69] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.
[70] Interviewee SO Pl, 14 Jun 2013.
[71] Interviewee SO Sl, 3 Apr 2012.
[72] Interviewee SO Hu, 29 Apr 2013.

of real partnership may be postponed until the investment in and empowerment of partners reach their goals. In describing what has been done for partners some respondents straightforwardly point out to that 'when it comes to cohesion Funds, of course, *partners should have their capacity fixed* first ... *we, first, need to make them stronger* so they could really implement some measures.'[73] So far, until these uncertain goals of "fixed capacity" are reached, partnership is equated with actions targeted at such an empowerment of partners. Sometimes this strive for helping out the partners is expressed in very strong terms, as exemplified by the remark below:

> I was totally convinced, personally, I am totally *convinced that one of the things that European Social Fund achieved was a total neglecting of the civil society sector and total destroying of the civil society sector*. My fear is that the new programming period *will be even more complicated and even less appropriate for the civil society*.[74]

However, there is a price that empowered partners are supposed to pay. Normally, interview narratives of state officials are structured in such a way that having finished with discussing partnership as a set of capacity building measures towards partners, respondents turn to depicting their visions of partners' obligations. Here partnership becomes equated with a certain system of state/civil society actors relations.

Informants partially depicted the contours and principles of this system when they elaborated on procedural format of collection of input. However, that is only one element of partnership dynamics, the one that describes policy design aspect of the system. There is another element, namely policy implementation that also falls under certain conceptualization of partnership.

State officials, especially the ones representing the line ministers, approach partnership quite pragmatically. When discussing successful instances or formats of partnership they straightforwardly jump to describing complex schemes of Funds disbursement. The point they make is that the most desirable scheme for them is when the Funds are distributed by the governmental bodies but are actually implemented by

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One should not underestimate the fact of external pressure on the member states authorities applied by the European Commission in relation to this. The Commission was especially keen on including the capacity building priority into all the OPs in all new member states for the 2007-2013 budget period. The seriousness of such devotion is also illustrated by several audit trips conducted by European Commission officials to the member states with a purpose to check on whether "strengthening of the capacity of civil society" is actually being implemented as in several member states the authorities attempted to cancel the priority and redirect the money.

[73] Interviewee SO Sl, 5 Apr 2012.

[74] Interviewee SO Sk, 12 Jul 2012.

partners. Slovak and Polish officials from the ministries of Labor and Social Affairs were especially vocal about that without hiding the reasons:

> We understand here that our ministry does not have enough resources to absorb all these Funds, *we have to rely on partners. I guess this is what you would call a spirit of partnership, when NGOs help us to deal with this.*[75]

> During my period, we would grant the big organizations, big governmental organizations with a huge amount of money and all administration would stay within them *but with a condition that the activity has to be implemented by the NGOs*. So, *actually NGOs would be focusing on fieldwork where they are the best and the administration ... all the administrative burden would be left with the government.*[76]

Hence, partnership takes another form in understandings of state officials when implementation of projects is almost totally outsourced to partners. The above-described frustration of state officials with incompetence of partners is also related to this pressing need of disbursing the Funds through partners as the major implementers. When partners turn out to be unprepared for that task, state officials immediately elaborate on that as a disrupted partnership. One can see that utterances of state officials provide quite a controversial picture. On the one hand, they frequently speak of partnership as this kind of outsourcing due to lack of resources and almost never-ending situation of urgency related to the Funds. On the other hand, they, nevertheless, are still far from fully trusting partners and describe partnership as a situation of entrusting partners with implementation yet under severe control and audit. This, however, does not prevent them from coming up with various examples of true partnership when state officials overcame distrust and involved partners in a productive and successful cooperation in implementation of projects.

5.3. Conclusions

Reconstructing of meaning-in-use of partnership for state officials brings several key findings to light. First of all, it became clear that cultural contexts are quite far from being reservoirs of shared meanings. Crosscutting convergence rather than divergence in how state officials understand partnership was identified. Table 3 depicts this convergence through associative connotations for six keywords/themes selected out from interviews with state officials across four countries. Respondents in all four countries conceptualize partnership largely similarly and no specific Slovak or Polish understandings have been

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[75] Interviewee SO Pl, 15 Mar 2012.
[76] Interviewee SO Sk, 12 Jul 2012.

detected. Partnership is interpreted by across all four countries as a communicative exercise carried out in accordance with special procedural requirements and with partners, whose qualifications and characteristics satisfy a number of criteria. Such communication is to be carried out with a purpose of collecting the information about the needs of partners in exchange for a flow of expertise and information from them. Interestingly, partnership also assumes certain effort on the part of state officials to provide partners with capacity building resources in exchange for partners' commitment to implementation of policies and disbursement of Funds.

Empirical analysis demonstrates that it is their professional background of state officials that, first, structures their understandings of partnership and, second, brings them together across four countries. Based on the first pool of data for state officials, it was detected that respondents sustain meanings of partnership which are brought to life by peculiarities of their work for implementation of cohesion policy rather cultural specificities or national backgrounds. Cohesion policy-making practices are highly uniform across all four countries and create quite a homogenized context of similar roles, competences and responsibilities for state officials. It was shown that this context contributes to entrenchment of particular meanings of partnership, for example, related to rules and procedures. At the same time, actors themselves do not just passively accept the imposed rules, roles and routines but try to integrate them with their own view, beliefs and identities. How they stress importance of their proactive stance towards partners that manifests itself through preoccupation with satisfaction of partners' needs is particularly illustrative.

One could hypothesize about the reasons of such convergence across countries. Although with some caution, this finding can be interpreted as evidence of some harmonization achieved as a result of European integration process, the process that especially affected state officials as a coherent group.

Secondly, an interesting pattern was discovered, namely visible variation within this group of actors. The identified convergence, in fact, shields polysemy and variation of meanings. This variation originates from heterogeneous character of the group of state officials within which practice of cohesion policy-making produced several types of officials with different functions, domains of responsibility and competences. On the one hand, the finding nuances and corroborates the assumption that meanings-in-use are embedded in specific social practices. On the other hand, this should not be read as refuting the previous finding about convergence of meanings and decisive role of

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professional background that brings state officials' understandings together. So far, based on the first set of data it seems that the variation within the group of state officials is the same across all four cases. Yet it is not enough to assume that it is within this group of actors where differences across countries reside.

Given the limited amount of data analyzed so far, as no examination of the structure of meaning-in-use for CSOs and economic and social partners has been offered, no strict conclusions are possible at this stage. The assumption that professional backgrounds can as well be the grounds for validation and replace (or complement) cultural backgrounds still requires additional testing. The larger impact of professional backgrounds on meaning making about partnership will be confirmed if convergence across countries will be found for two other groups of actors. Further empirical analysis seeks to identify whether this tendency is sustained in relation to other actors too.

Chapter 6. Partnership and civil society organizations: debates on formats and purposes of public participation

CSOs are, perhaps, the major contestants of the partnership principle for cohesion policy. They contribute to partnership being a hotly debated problem both directly and indirectly. CSOs are directly involved in boycotting of their national authorities, street actions or launching numerous complaints in Brussels in order to attract the attention of the European Commission to the breakdown of partnership. Their indirect involvement occurs through research and publications of various guidelines and studies on the best practices of partnership. As shown in chapter 1, their effort and intentions to bring to light all the imperfections associated with implementation of partnership have hugely paid off. The European Commission introduced the project of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, almost entirely composed from CSOs' comments. However, as was discussed earlier, CSOs come up with highly diverse interpretations of partnership.

The chapter continues to seek an answer to the main inquiry of this study: what is the logic behind intensive contestation over partnership across four new member states – Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary? It tries to establish whether any patterns can be found in how actors navigate between various claims they make about partnership and expectations from it when they call into question existing practice of partnership. The theoretical point of departure is the assumption of the theory of social construction of norms that while contesting norms or norm-like phenomena such as partnership, actors enact specific meanings-in-use. These meanings are embedded in social practices which provide the common basis for validation of norms. Empirically, the major task becomes to identify these practices that structure understandings. In search for relevant social practices in case of contestation over partnership, it was hypothesized in chapter 4 that cultural backgrounds and professional backgrounds could provide such a basis for validation.

The present chapter applies the elaborated analytical framework to the case of the second group of actors - CSOs. The central empirical question that structures this chapter is, thus, *where* does the basis for shared understandings between CSOs lie?

Departing from this framework, the previous chapter examined a range of interpretations of partnership shared by state officials as a group of actors. Convergence in meaning-in-use across countries, rather than divergence, was found. In their interpretations of partnership state officials represent quite a homogenous group and share similar meanings that reflect their professional dispositions within the institutional system of

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cohesion policy-making rather than cultural/national backgrounds. Identified within-group divergence rather reflects nuances and differences between the roles and functions of civil servants, and also repeats itself across all four cases. The following comparative evaluation of substantive meanings of partnership shared by representatives of CSOs from four countries is carried out with a view to identify whether interpretations of partnership by CSOs are also shaped primarily by their professional backgrounds and, consequently, converge across countries or, conversely, diverge.

In order to obtain necessary empirical data, representatives of CSOs involved in the process of cohesion policy-making in four countries were questioned with regards to partnership. One disclaimer shall be applied though. Given the numerous debates in the civil society literature as well as among practitioners around who belongs to civil society, the study did not take any normative understanding as a benchmark for selection of respondents. Nor did it seek to come up with any assessments of whether actors or their work live up to any normative expectations. For the purpose of the present research CSOs were defined by a process of elimination: the actors not representing two other more clearly delineated groups of actors, namely state officials and economic and social partners, were approached. The questions on how respondents define and interpret partnership as well as requests to share their experiences with it were formulated, as put by Wiener, 'to generate expressive discursive interventions so as to indicate the specific individually enacted associative connotations' (2008: 122).

The next section briefly sketches the overall context of civil society development in CEE member states as a complex historical and cultural background against which meanings of partnership crystalize. The subsequent sections reconstruct the meanings-in-use of partnership shared by CSOs. The final section evaluates the findings.

6.1. Contextualizing development of civil societies in Central and Eastern Europe

It is difficult to find another concept that has provoked so much controversy as well as produced so many expectations and so much disillusionment in Central and Eastern Europe. Civil society became an ultimate promise of democratic transition back in the 80s with the rise of massive social movements (Arato & Cohen, 1992). Paradoxically, later it became an indicator of how this transition slowed down or stalled.

In the research literature the revival or "rebirth" of civil society is directly associated and linked to political developments in Central and Eastern Europe, namely

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engulfing authoritarianism (Arato & Cohen, 1992). The familiar representation of civil society conjures up the picture of popular movements rising to curb the unlimited power of the state and to create space freed from direct state interference. More specifically, civil society was conceived of as a space of freedom and free association between the state and the market, a sphere that would allow for free expression of criticism of existing political order as well as non-participation in existing (economic and political) order (Arato & Cohen, 1992; Kocka, 2004). It was depicted as a sphere of participation and representation of citizens' interests and values which were conceived of as being, by default, in direct collision with interests of the state and the market (Buchowski, 2005; Rau, 1991). Such conceptualization was used by intellectuals to theorize about the events that took place in CEE countries in the end of the 80-s. Hence, the discourse of state vs. society dichotomy with the former keeping an eye on the latter firmly entrenched and became the dominant lenses through which civil society was defined during the years of transition to democracy in Eastern Europe (Fagan, 2005, 2006).

This understanding gradually changed during the years of transition that witnessed practical manifestation of civil society development, namely a rapid growth of non-governmental organizations as commonly accepted proxy of civil society. Soon, though, popular political activity within social movements rapidly diminished for a variety of reasons, including economic hardships brought about by reforms and introduction of elections and other procedures as major channels of participation (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). Alongside these developments, new democracies found themselves in the focus of Western assistance, the lion's share of which was secured for strengthening civil society (Mendelson & Glenn, 2000, 2002; Regulska, 1998).

Against this background, the above-described vision of civil society had to adjust to new realities. The policies of donors, although ideologically justified in well-known terms of greater participation and representation of citizens, resulted in emergence of a specific strata of actors defining themselves as civil society and largely known in the region as "NGOs". NGOs "privatized" the label of civil society and, through the policies of financial assistance and support pursued by foreign donors, were declared as the main manifestations of citizens' activity. This shift in meanings was sustained despite the fact that, form a theoretical perspective, popularized by Eastern European intellectuals, NGOs could hardly be seen as civil society because of being explicitly disembedded from citizens themselves (Buchowski, 2005; J. Howell, 2001; Lomax, 1997; Ost, 2011).

Moreover, during the years of transition another change in understanding of civil society's role took place. NGOs were ascribed the function that transgressed the above-mentioned discourse of highly political role of civil society (Fisher, 1997; Green, 2002; Korkut, 2005). Adam Fagan (2005) argues as a result of donors' actions and policies, the focus has shifted towards 'turning activists into partners in the policy process' (p. 529). Rapacious civil society that challenges hegemonies or transforming the essence of political and societal relations, as would follow from earlier theorizations, would threaten stability of the new neo-liberal political and economic orders and would directly contradict the teleology of political developments in the region. The role that NGOs, as manifestations of civil society, were assigned was the role of watchdogs performing two major functions, as noted by David Lane (2010): 'a means to secure democratic legitimation in then movement to capitalism' and assuming a big part of state's responsibilities in social (and others too) sphere (p. 294). NGOs were thought to carry out these functions through involvement in both policy design and implementation: providing necessary input into the legislation process and assuming some of the state's functions in social sphere. The state-society dichotomy was gradually redefined with a move from "challenging" to "assisting", yet essentially retained the crucial emphasis on inherent opposition between two spheres (Fagan, 2006; J. Howell, 2001).

For the actors themselves, the years during transition were characterized by a fierce competition for financial resources that were initially generously provided by donors but dried up later on. The memory of that time is organized around the theme of numerous programmes of financial assistance for NGOs flocking into the region along with big number of foreign experts and advisers assisting in building civil society. The assistance was directed, first of all, at the creation and establishment of new organizations, capacity building of the existing ones and support for projects that would allow new actors to express themselves as development actors and problem-solvers.

Sometime later critical academic literature turned to evaluation of the implications of two waves of foreign assistance, first by North American donors and, second, through the EU mechanisms. It mostly assesses the synergy effect skeptically (Bruszt & Vedres, 2008, 2013; Stark, Vedres, & Bruszt, 2006). NGOs are believed to have become extremely dependent on foreign aid which stalled their organizational development as well as establishment of desirable ties with their communities. Additionally, foreign aid led to extreme diversification within the sector and emergence of the elite group of permanent aid recipients and the mass of excluded. It also drove to privileging of certain policy areas over

the others due to excessive attention of donors to, for instance, advocacy and human rights, social and environmental policies but only scant attention to development of local groups (Kovach & Kucerova, 2006; Mansfeldova, Nalecz, Priller, & Zimmer, 2004).

By the time the partnership principle was introduced as a part of the accession conditionality package, civil society development in Central and Eastern Europe was largely described in terms of fatigue and disillusionment. Lofty mid-80s imaginaries of civil society as a representation of values and voice of citizenry were thought to have fallen under victorious march of NGOs (Fisher, 1997; Lomax, 1997). Civil society was no longer seen as curbing governments in their attempts to monopolize power but as a set of chronically underfinanced institutions which lack resources yet have to deal with serious consequences of shrinking social welfare (Carmin, 2010; Guess & Abrams, 2005). In its attempts to generalize, existing literature assumes that none of the new member states could be seen as an example of systematic and thorough empowerment of civil society actors, be it in terms of access to policy design or implementation, professionalism or organizational capacities (Kutter & Trappmann, 2010; Sissenich, 2007, 2010).

The pre-accession process in the CEE countries soon also modified the context for civil society actors. The EU institutions especially emphasized organizational development of CSOs as well as their direct participation in the preparation for accession as an essential part of the enlargement process itself (Borzel & Buzogany, 2010; Borzel, 2010). Such attention towards CSOs was, on the one hand, a part of overall conditionality when empowerment and involvement of civil society was a condition for membership and, on the other hand, was justified as a tool to facilitate compliance with, acceptance and better implementation of the *acquis* (Borzel & Buzogany, 2010; Sudbery, 2010). Yet these aspirations clashed with the context where, as was shown above, several analytically different understandings or discourses of civil society got entrenched and where civil societies themselves developed as highly heterogeneous sets of actors divided in terms of strength, resource availability and expectations with regards to empowerment itself. Whether such complex interplay of external factors and historical conditions is in any way reflected in understandings of partnership is the subject of analysis in the next sections.

This brief introduction to the context of civil society development in CEE countries shows that CSOs have had to work in quite a specific environment and have been exposed to a number of very specific problems. Issues of chronic underfinance, disembededdness and, additionally, very widely discussed weak communication with the authorities, almost equivalent to parallel existence of the state and civil society, constitute what actors

representing CSOs refer to as daily reality. Both academic literature and practitioners evaluate prospects of civil society development in the CEE countries as rather doomed to failure and continuous slippage than a progressive move. Whether and how meanings of partnership reflect on these peculiarities is analysed in the next section.

6.2. Partnership for CSOs: fixing the participatory process

Huge degree of contestation over the partnership principle and diversity of actors' expectations become noticeable when representatives of CSOs are asked to elaborate on their visions of partnership. These quotations taken from the interviews with representatives of CSOs from four countries under scrutiny provide the first entry into the world of contestation over partnership by CSOs. A quick look at the italicized parts in these excerpts helps to get the first idea of which meanings representatives of CSOs assign to partnership.

> We were established in 1996 and already in 1998 we started off a special programme on participation – "Regional and the EU policy". The reason was that in 1998 not many people thought about *what this membership in the EU means, what policy-making means, the process itself*. Yet when we looked at this regional policy, we realized *there was something dodgy about this process, in general*. So, we focused on the *programming and what it means, what 'partners' mean in this whole story, how they can influence the process*.[77]

> We had a very good law and the Constitution … but we had to wait for 15 years for the rule of subsidiarity to emerge, we had to wait for it to be introduced as a legal requirement. Yet, when we asked the authorities to change it for us, they did not do. *Instead, they introduced something like partnership, but not the principle of subsidiarity*. So, in the sphere of citizens or citizens and power … *the authorities should be very interested in partnership because they cannot solve the problems themselves. And more than that, the principle of subsidiarity says that they are not allowed to do this, to do what citizens should be doing*.[78]

> At least in our previous Council [Council on Gender Equality – A.D.] *there were debates*, unlike in this MC. The main reason why I am so skeptical about this partnership, and I have no idea why I am still on this Committee, *is that it is very formal*. They do everything *to make the work a formality. No real discussion. They do not understand what the EU wants from civil society participation*.[79]

> Partnership … you know, for us it is important to show them that *we are not the people from another planet*. They *never listened to us, NGOs are very often treated as people or organizations who want to make a mess, to say that everything is*

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[77]Interviewee CSO Sk, 22 Jun 2012.
[78] Interviewee CSO Pl, 12 Sept 2012.
[79]Interviewee CSO Hu, 15 Dec 2012.

wrong and do nothing. That is why this is important, this partnership - *when you participate in dialogue and when you prepare opinions and experts, send everything to the ministries, cooperate in the working groups and when you see that nothing is changed you can say it is for nothing*.[80]

These excerpts of interviews give, primarily, a first snapshot into how individuals working for CSOs conceptualize partnership. It can be seen that, for example, the first respondent is concerned with the whole meaning of the process of policy-making, mostly for his own organization. Later in the interview with him, it became clear that the overall importance of partnership for his organization was linked to the issue of *meaningful participation of citizens* in the policy-making process. The second respondent, in contrast, directly equated partnership with *the rule of subsidiarity* and later described the attributes of such partnership. The third passage depicts a completely different interpretation of partnership linked to *deliberation* as opposed to formalism of existing interaction format. Finally, in words of the last respondent, partnership holds another meaning. Its implementation is seen as extremely important as it legitimizes CSOs as policy actors. Through partnership these actors achieve *recognition*.

Needless to say, these four quotations cannot highlight the diversity of meanings-in-use of partnership identified for CSOs. Nor do they enable an in-depth understanding of their complexity. However, they give the first illustration of how partnership means for CSOs and how these meanings differ from the ones shared by state officials, an illustration important for understanding the logic of contestation over this requirement. Furthermore, references to the EU unveil how CSOs conceptualize their input into the EU policy-making, a question of primary importance for scholars of European civil society.

Table 4 provides a more comprehensive summary of the meanings-in-use of partnership. Just like in case of state officials, the Table presents associative connotations behind six keywords/themes found in the interviews with representatives of CSOs.

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[80]Interviewee CSO Pl, 12 Sept 2013.

Table 4. Keywords: civil society organizations (CSOs)

Keywords/concepts	Associative connotations
communication	Listening, talking, having an opportunity to raise the voice, to have a say, reaction to propositions (feedback), style of communication (culture of dialogue), commenting and providing opinions; deliberation, arguing and debate,
recognition	Explaining, giving feedback, recognition of professionalism, mutual learning, upgrading policy content, demand for expertise, delegating tasks, being taken seriously, attention, respect.
procedures	Transparency, no secret selection of partners, scrutiny, oversight, timely informing, consistency of dialogue
rules	Equality, representativity, balanced voice distribution, voting rules, institutionalization of participation
empowerment (capacity building)	Financial support of partners, material benefits, policy towards sector
implementation	Achieving policy goals, involvement in implementation of projects (project partnership), shared ownership, cooperative problem-solving, subsidiarity, efficiency, outsourcing, contracting

Source: 44 interviews with CSOs

As can be seen from Table 4, the order of the keywords has changed. In the first place, it indicates different structure of interview responses and discussions of partnership by CSOs. When discussing partnership, most respondents from CSOs would start from associating it with communication rather than rules and procedures, unlike state officials. This shift of accent already distinguishes peculiarity of the CSOs' approach to partnership and indicates where the divergence between two groups of actors resides. This section details how CSOs' narratives of partnership are structured and how this structure reflects *their* professional background as shaping interpretations of partnership. Yet, most importantly, the section presents an in-depth analysis of identified meanings-in-use. Its structure follows the one of Table 4.

6.2.1. Partnership as communication: common and divergent interpretations across countries

How respondents representing CSOs interpret the first pair of keywords – communication and recognition – already demonstrates where their understandings of partnership converge and, equally, how they differ with the ones by state officials.

The theme 'communication' is the central organizer of informants' elaborations. A closer first comparative look at the keywords extracted from utterances of CSOs and state officials shows that communication concerns both groups. The words and references to 'listening', 'talking', 'raising the voice', 'being given an opportunity to have a say', 'being listened to' etc. come to the front in reactions to questions about partnership. In different formulations, the message that the respondent from a Slovak CSO tries to get across in the following quotation can be found almost in all reactions of CSOs to questions what goes wrong and right with partnership:

> They are discouraged when they see that their comments are not taken or taken formally, they are discouraged when *they are not treated with respect* like asked to read before the meetings and *are not listened during the meetings*.[81]

Respondents from all countries also depict partnership as a process of communication. This quote, for instance, is found in the interview with a representative of a Hungarian CSO:

> … the only time when we were close to it [partnership] was when the Coalition[82] was pushing for very concrete procedures. *The government was listening*. That was the only time. I think that was the time when *what partnership principle means was actually close to happening*.[83]

Her Slovene colleague echoes her: 'We defined partnership in a special book that we wrote. *The minimum level is, of course, when someone listens to you*'.[84]

Broken communication is equated with the broken or untrue partnership. The mere fact of actually *communicating* with the government officials in a sense of being able to be present at the meetings of working groups or the MCs, being given the opportunity to have a say, express opinions about priorities or policy outcomes or announce their expectations

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[81]Interviewee CSO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.
[82]The respondent is speaking about the Coalition of NGOs for transparency of the Structural Funds, a collaborative structure that was created by a number of Hungarian organizations to ensure monitoring over the Funds.
[83]Interviewee CSO Hu, 6 Jan 2013.
[84]Interviewee CSO Sl, 6 Sept 2012.

or demands are stressed in the interviews as minimum requirements to partnership. A remark by one respondent from Slovenia illustrates the totality of expectations regarding communication. He compares partnership for the Structural Funds with experience of his organization ties with its profile ministry:

> We also have some sort of this partnership with our Ministry, similar thing: *we are being informed, we made comments, we are asked to discuss the documents …* so, it is the first step in partnership, *this should be done for a communication process*.[85]

This quote as well as other respondents' comments helps to see the centrality of interpreting partnership as communication. Most importantly, it makes it possible to identify the difference in meanings of communication shared by state officials and CSOs.

An approach to partnership as a communicative exercise by state officials is quite straightforwardly narrow and outcome-oriented – this communication is meant to ensure the flow of information, expertise, knowledge, policy input and, at best, demands from civil society, as was already shown in the previous chapter. Hence, for CSOs, the outcome as such disappears from the map of representations of partnership. What matters the most is establishing communication in the realm of silence and neglect. In this light, quite emotional stories of Hungarian respondents, for instance, about state officials ignoring all sorts of communication – leaving meetings, not answering calls, emails or official inquiries etc. – are presented as examples of broken partnership. Equally, the meaning behind numerous stories told by Polish respondents became clear. They mention that recently Polish authorities have gradually changed their attitude and started to turn up at meetings, a fact presented as a step forward towards partnership.

Such accent on communication is quite understandable – partnership arrived in a context where both groups of actors have historically been badly communicating. Periods of euphoria and breakthrough in alienation of the state from civil society would be replaced with periods of sharp confrontation, mutual neglect and silencing. It is important to note that references to being silenced or ignored in terms of communication are the most frequently mentioned disappointments related to partnership. The partnership principle, in this sense, is viewed by CSOs as a requirement that creates an opportunity to fix this state of affairs, this time with the help of external mediating actor – the EU.

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[85] Interviewee CSO Sl, 5 Oct 2013.

In this respect, the issue of communication is closely linked to another theme in CSOs' interviews, namely recognition. Situations, described in the quotations below, first of all, give a better understanding what CSOs mean by communication worth being called a partnership. At the same time, one can register how respondents link communicative practice to the issue of recognition, especially when they stress the point of their inquiries being left unanswered:

> Of course they [the ministry – *A.D.*] can *refuse* [to incorporate demands of CSOs – *A.D.*] *but at least they have to meet with them and listen to the arguments. Then people can say ok, the ministry gave us good arguments why this is so, but in reality they just don't give any arguments, evidence, they just say "no".*[86]

> Real partnership would *be a dialogue when you provide a meaningful content and you are listened to …* I mean, they [authorities] do not have to take it into consideration but *what is important is when they explain the reasons why they do not do it, when you do not talk in vacuum.*[87]

> … there is no communication – you write a letter and *there is no answer*, you invite them and *they are not coming or answering*, they simply say "no, we are not talking to you because you are critical!", *that is not a partnership attitude*, in my opinion.[88]

Thus, for CSOs partnership acquires the meaning of actual *established* communication as opposed to the situation of zero communication. Partnership is seen as an opportunity to break with the existing practice of no connection between state and civil society rooted in the communist past, as very frequently argued by the respondents. Such a move away from the legacy, first of all, becomes real through simple talking and listening. A move from nothing to, at least, this kind of interaction is automatically linked by CSOs to a change in status of being ignored and silenced to being recognized.

Communication and recognition are perhaps the biggest overarching themes that forge the space of meanings of partnership for CSOs. Their meanings, at the same time, radically differ from the ones shared by state officials which reflects naturally different experiences of these two groups of actors and different positioning against each other. However, analysis of associative connotations behind the theme of communication indicates there is some cross-country variation in how it is conceptualized by CSOs.

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[86]Interviewee CSO Sk, 24 Nov 2012.
[87]Interviewee CSO Pl, 6 Oct 2013.
[88]Interviewee CSO Hu, 4 Apr 2013.

6.2.1.1. The Visegrad countries: partnership as deliberation and arguing

Respondents from the Visegrad countries organize their discussions of partnership as communication around theme that most accurately summarizes their expectations - deliberation and arguing. The following quotation partially coincides with the previous remarks by CSOs related to their vision of partnership as a communicative process. Yet it also marks peculiarity of understandings of partnership shared by CSOs from the Visegrad countries:

> We simply said that *partnership principle means* that if you come with any comment as the official member of the MC, then the Ministry will take your opinion into account positively or in a negative way, yet *they will explain why it cannot be accepted and give the space for a discussion of that point*.[89]

This respondent was asked to clarify what exactly bothers CSOs in relation to how communication is organized. She later supported her claims with illustrations of proper partnership. She referred to an attempt by her organization (a Polish environmental organization) to reach the authorities with a big pool of propositions to be incorporated into the text of the regional OP on infrastructure and environment in the Mazovia region in Poland. The way the regional authorities reacted to such an initiative when they 'literally called us and invited to theirs and *we spent three hours discussing all the comments*'[90] was described as a manifestation of true partnership. Interestingly, despite the fact that more than half of the comments did not get into the programme, the encounter was called an instance of partnership because '*they explained their positions, provided the date to back up their arguments, showed us where our propositions could or could not work*'.[91] Examples given by other respondents illustrate that the main frustration that CSOs experience in relation to the communicative aspect of partnership also lies in neglect of **deliberation** on the part of state officials. What is important is that such an emphasis radically differs from how the latter view partnership as channeling the information in a format of consultations which does not imply thorough and meticulous arguing and discussions but is geared towards mere collection of input.

Deliberation, understood as exchange of opinions and arguments with the state authorities even without acceptance or incorporation of CSOs' input as the ultimate outcome of the process, is depicted by CSOs as the missing element in the puzzle of

[89]Interviewee CSO Sk, 12 Nov 2012.
[90]Interviewee CSO Pl, 6 Oct 2013.
[91]Interviewee CSO Pl, 6 Oct 2013.

partnership. 'Dialogue' and 'debates' come as the keywords in conceptualizations of successful partnership whereas 'neglect' and 'ignoring' are used to picture the downfall of expectations. Consultancy fora, regular meetings with partners in the regions arranged to present interim results of programming or other mechanisms, such as on-line collection of comments, introduced by state officials, are presented as examples of such failures. The very consultation-like format of partnership chosen by state authorities when 'first comes the bill and *later they ask for our opinions*'[92] is criticized by respondents as leading to sheer hypocrisy and the major breakdowns of partnership. In their words, this leaves CSOs without the 'job' of actually contributing to policy content or participation in upgrading it through deliberation.

> In our opinion, if you really want to act in partnership, to do something about public policy, you *have to talk with them [NGOs] from the beginning, not at the state of project documentation but when the main decisions are taken*, for example, about spending the money.[93]

The participatory framework offered by the authorities, based on principles of *consulting the public,* plus doing it *after wording the documents* rather than before is contested as representing improper partnership, especially in the Visegrad countries. For instance, Hungarian respondents are quite outspoken about the actively used mechanism of uploading programming documents on the web-sites and collecting comments, an innovative format of partnership introduced by the National Development Agency, for which it was praised by the European Commission. Such a practice of partnership is seen as not ensuring incorporation of comments and, ultimately, as a sheer formality. Slovak respondents stressed how bewildered they normally are by such format of programming or its equivalent during the MCs meetings which state officials utilize for reporting and transparency purposes. Polish actors, although, interestingly, referring to the concept of public consultations themselves which is inscribed in the Polish law, especially stress excessive formalism of partnership and insist on deliberative character of these consultations.

Criticizing the existing meaningless format, respondents also elaborate on a variety of pitfalls[94] starting with the communicative dynamics of pseudo-deliberation (style,

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[92]Interviewee CSO Hu, 5 Mar 2012.
[93]Interviewee CSO Pl, 12 Sep 2013.
[94]Some interesting comments are given by Hungarian and Polish respondents. They directly point out to what frustrates them. Especially fierce reactions are caused by registering that "*authorities never come when you invite them*" (Interviewee CSO Pl, 14 Oct 2013).

emotional reactions of state authorities etc.) and ending with heavy criticism of process formalities, as explained by this respondent:

> It was not really transparent, *it was a very bureaucratic*, for us who work on a daily basis with concrete issues […] So, in these MCs *I felt that it was chaired in a very professional manner by state people so that you could not really understand what was going on, where was the point when you could raise your voice, where are the important moments.*[95]

Thus, the whole point of "unreal" consultations, as having nothing to do with problems on the ground, as arranged by state officials and institutionalized in a particular way where the process of collecting remarks and comments is not accompanied with deliberation, is not accepted by CSOs and causes strong frustration and resentment. CSOs report feeling like 'rubber-stampers', the role that they fiercely reject: 'The problem is that our comments *are very rarely included* into the final versions of the papers. So, the consultation process is more *like to legitimate the call for proposals that it has been discussed with NGOs*'.[96] Another respondent points to non-deliberative character of consultations as opposed to real debate which naturally implies disagreements as a manifestation of false partnership: '*when it comes to partnership they only want loyalty, no opposition*, they want us to be always agreeable to decisions'.[97] Finally, one Polish respondent claims existing partnership practice does not live up to what the EU considers as true partnership: '*this is not a partnership like the EU wants it, they want a real consultation process*'.[98] Later she gave examples of what the EU might want: 'The last example – our organization worked on the programme of poverty and social inclusion. So, *some people from my organization just wrote the strategy of the programme for the government*'.[99]

To sum up, CSOs form the Visegrad countries stress one desirable aspect of communication – deliberation as discussion and exchange of opinions, the process outcomes of which are of secondary importance.

6.2.1.2. Case of Slovenia: the importance of format

Although similar linking of partnership to communication can be found in discussions by Slovene CSOs, there are quite visible differences between what meanings Slovene CSOs

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[95]Interviewee CSO Hu, 4 Apr 2013.
[96]Interviewee CSO Hu, 4 Apr 2013.
[97]Interviewee CSO Sk, 15 Nov 2.
[98]Interviewee CSO Pl, 19 Sep 2013.
[99]Interviewee CSO Pl, 19 Sep 2013.

and their counterparts from the Visegrad countries assign to such communication. This does not necessarily imply that Slovenia represents an outlier when it comes to CSOs' interpretation. After all, similar understandings of partnership as proper communication are also found in the Slovene case. Slovene respondents also stress the fact that they would prefer to be listened to more carefully by the state officials or would prefer communication to bring more tangible effects like incorporated input or improved quality of the policy documents. However, it is important to underline that Slovene respondents refer to policy content more frequently than their Visegrad counterparts for whom, as was shown above, content fades into insignificance compared to urgency of deliberation or recognition as participants of communicative process. However, that is one small distinct feature of interpretation of partnership as communication in Slovenia.

A better illustration of divergent character of Slovene respondents' understandings of partnership is how they emphasize a radically different aspect of partnership as communication – the *format* of it. It is exactly this little accent that reveals cultural input into how Slovene CSOs approach partnership.

That the format of communication is of primary consideration for Slovene actors is illustrated by how they organize their discussions and elaborations of partnership as in through which other themes respondents speak about partnership. The quote below displays this:

> In Slovenia the state has traditionally been too large, the public sector … a lot of things depend on the state, I think too much. Especially it is visible in our sphere where there is lots of *corruption or interconnections between the agents and the state*. A of people try to influence the state, too much connections. This relationship needs to be changed so that *there is more distance between the state and NGOs*, more expert-based connections … we are a very small state, people know the politicians. There are many people who say that Slovenia has still not come out of transition! … The 'old' boys are still there and *they are still controlling most of the scene … The idea of partnership is alright, it does not sound strange but our concern is that there are still the same people who decide. So, something should be done about it. There should be more distance.*[100]

This long remark which was also picked up by other respondents reveals one of the major concerns of Slovene CSOs with partnership. The issue of corruption often pops up in the interviews once respondents are asked to express how broken communication should

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[100]Interviewee CSO Sl, 5 Oct 2013.

be fixed in their views. The system of state/civil society relations is portrayed as being hopelessly contaminated by cronyism and personal interconnections, a plague left from the Yugoslav times. Partnership, surprisingly, provoked quite suspicious reactions on the part of Slovene CSOs, as recounted by the interviewed. Overall skepticism is explained as arising from the expectation that partnership would legitimize the system of interconnections between the state and NGOs and deepen dependency of the civic sector. Moreover, it turned out that Slovene CSOs are extremely worried and anxious, a lot more that their Visegrad counterparts, about any communication with the state that signifies any close relations. A telling example is the formation of the National Civil Society group for the 2014-2020 programming period. To illustrate the point, the respondent recalls: 'Initially, they could not *find any volunteers into that Group because NGOs simply did not want. They thought this would discredit them.* So, there was no competition and my organization applied.'[101] To compare, such lack of interest towards this kind of structure and to partnership, in general, is hard to imagine somewhere in Poland and Hungary, where there is always quite a tough competition among CSOs.

Nevertheless, Slovene CSOs readily explain what they expect from partnership as a way out of this standstill. It is exactly here where the meaning of their references to the format of partnership becomes clear. From their perspective, it is not the fact of communication but the way it is organized that matters the most. One respondent clearly explains this:

> For us it is *transparency of this partnership that matters, transparency of how these meetings are organized, in a sense that nothing is happening behind the closed doors.* Partnership is, basically, transparency and being able to participate, to be able to perform watchdogging function … the problem is, though, that *we are not formal partners, like trade unions, for instance.* This Group is *unofficial, there is no officials process established for our partnership. It is still a matter of good will but we surely would like it to be formalized … Formalization is about regularity of the process, continuous involvement.*[102]

Several important elements of the conceptualization of partnership come to the fore thanks to this quote. The first is *transparency* of partnership. In respondents' elaborations, this comes as existence of clear-cut system of selection of partners (issue, discussed in the

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[101]Interviewee CSO Sl, 5 Oct 2013.
[102]Interviewee CSO Sl, 12 Nov 2013.

next section). The second is *formalization of interactions*. These extracts depict how such formalization is approached:

> Normally I see it [partnership] like this: government forms a commission, let's say a committee for students question. Then *it depends how delegation to this committee is organized*, *whether the government puts people in it, or some are named by government* … Then these people speak and then. But *how they are selected is of crucial importance … I see it more or less as a social dialogue. It is only about different issues.*[103]

> I would say that *partnership is closer to social dialogue*, than to civil one. Civil dialogue and partnership are different things because with partnership you cannot really expect *continuous involvement*. Civil dialogue *is not regular*. We want to make partnership more *synchronized with social dialogue*.[104]

The concepts of civil and social dialogues proved to be the best entry points for making sense of how Slovene CSOs view the format of communication. Partnership is seen, thus, as a (re)modeling of civil dialogue, a wide, unregulated and spontaneous system of state/civil society relations, on the practice of social dialogue as a firmly-entrenched, highly formalized and regulated system of consultations in a specific format. This reveals how practice of partnership turned into a bone of contention between Slovene CSOs and Slovene state officials. Although the latter came up with public consultations, this was responding to CSOs' expectations only partially. These consultations lacked what acquires especial significance for CSOs – continuity and regularity as well as transparency in how they are organized so as to avoid nepotism and informality.

To clarify further, Slovene CSOs are fairly content with the format of public consultations suggested by the government and hugely favor such an initiative. An employee of CNVOS, the biggest national umbrella association, a CSO in the very limelight of contestation over partnership, provides a detailed summary of these expectations:

> *… it is a huge change that the government conducts several national and regional consultancy meetings and NGOs are also included in the regional ones through the bodies called Regional Development Council, tripartite bodies*. In the previous law these actions were conducted by mayors and municipalities only and now they have NGOs! […] Also about National Development Plan, in June, for instance, *we had regional consultancy*

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[103]Interviewee CSO Sl, 5 Apr 2012.
[104]Interviewee CSO Sl, 12 Nov 2013.

meetings in all regions in order to inform all stakeholders about this bottom up approach. We were forcing this approach and we were quite happy that the government could go for it.[105]

The quote reveals how comfortable Slovene CSOs are with the consultations format of partnership, so strongly rejected by their counterparts from the Visegrad countries as meaningless. Partnership in a format similar to tripartite bodies is seen as a right application of civil dialogue philosophy in practice. What is emphasized is the fact of conducting these consultations and hearings with *openness* as the core goal:

> What I am saying is that we really *should have participated in the consultations much earlier in the planning process. Are you familiar with the Arhus Convention*? Yes, so you know it suggests that *the process should be open* earlier when the options are still on the table *and this is what we should be asking from this partnership process*.[106]

For Slovene CSOs the fact that these consultations were not arranged in the first place, right after accession, when the process indeed was very exclusive, is an outrageous blow to the partnership principle and is seen as time lost which could have been spent in a better way, namely on establishing the habit of interactions.

It can be seen that interpretations of partnership as communication process differ for CSOs from Slovenia and the Visegrad countries. The former insist on a stricter institutionalization of public consultations as, mainly, a move from randomly and unsystematically organized events to more regular ones. The latter largely insist on a different aspect of communication. For them it is not the format but the communication dynamics, namely deliberation that matters. At the same time, CSOs from both Slovenia and the Visegrad countries strongly disagree with the version of partnership pushed for by state officials. It should be noted, though, that in no way does this observation imply any cultural homogeneity among the Visegrad countries. The case of communication has been used in order to illustrate how diffusion as a pattern of contestation works, that is how cultural backgrounds contribute to shaping meanings of partnership.

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[105]Interviewee CSO Sl, 9 Oct 2013.
[106]Interviewee CSO Sl, 29 Mar 2012.

6.2.2. Partnership, procedures and rules

Discussing communication, respondents devote much time to expressing their expectations about the rules of such communication. The previous section already touched upon this issue to depict the discrepancy between interpretations of partnership by Slovene and Visegrad CSOs. This section continues this in order to better illustrate meanings behind these keywords.

All respondents from CSOs, regardless of the country of origin, speak about inflating partnership with certain rules and procedures stating that the extant practice of partnership does not live up to imaginations of procedurally and rule-bound true partnership. A look at the meaning-in-use of those procedures and rules demonstrates there is some divergence in understandings, first of all, between CSOs and state officials, in general, and, secondly, among CSOs themselves. As in the previous case, cross-country divergence between Visegrad CSOs and Slovene ones can be detected.

6.2.2.1. The Visegrad countries: rules of meaningful participation

The issue of "proceduralization" of the process received much attention in interviews with interlocutors from the Visegrad countries. All of the respondents reacted on this theme while answering the questions about partnership. One example illustrates that the issue is being seriously contested. In all three countries coalitions of the biggest CSOs emerged that proclaimed improvement and deepening of partnership as their primary goal. Every now and again all three coalitions would come up with a list of demands (guidelines) as to how partnership practice should be reformed. Respondents themselves would refer to these demands as the rules according to which partnership is meant to function. The guidelines relate to the issue of rules only partially. In fact, they represent "catch-all" documents elaborated by CSOs that most frequently include almost all representations of partnership that CSOs ever discuss. For example, famous Polish "12 demands", a document elaborated by the biggest national umbrella association OFOP refers to such rules of partnership as 'project partnership', 'simplification of the procedures' (of project applications), 'strengthening of the potential of CSOs', 'ensuring subsidiarity' etc. However, during the interviews respondents from all three countries would most often discuss 'other' rules that turn, in their opinions, interactions into a true partnership.

An extract taken from an interview with a Hungarian interlocutor provides a first entry into the world of meanings behind the rules of partnership:

> … we were thinking *that something should be done about public participation for the Structural Funds…* we came to the idea that we need to set up something permanent to monitor the publicity, openness in the allocation of the Funds … But first we realized that the National Development Agency *had a very narrow idea of public participation.* The first stage, you understand was that *we literally taught the Agency what public participation means, that it should be inclusive, open… .*[107]

Apart from openly equating partnership with public participation and later associating public consultations with a 'narrow idea of participation', the respondent also clarified what bothered her so much in relation to the rules. Two major types of rules were mentioned: a) rules of access and b) rules that mediate interactions within set-up partnership arrangement such as the MCs.

When asked to elaborate more on what they mean by rules, respondents from the Visegrad countries would, first of all, thoroughly discuss the *rules of access.* They would organize their illustrations around the theme of failed selection of the right partners, a theme that provides access to a better understanding according to which rules they see partnership unfolding.

These interviewed commented numerous times on misperception by the government officials of which CSOs should be invited for cooperation. Government's choices are criticized as inadequate, for most frequently the selected CSOs are unknown to the core CSO community (if any) like in Slovakia or, for instance, due to explicit politicization of selection when organizations labeled as 'close to the government' get selected, like in Hungary. Slovak and Hungarian CSOs feel resentful of state officials' decisions with regards to selection of partners, as demonstrated by these quotes:

> … they [authorities – *A.D.*] *consult those who are ideologically close to them.* Or even people who are coming to the state administration they often have an NGO background and they can easily show to the EU: we have consulted 10 CSOs but *they are not representing … they are not truly representing that field.*[108]
>
> Ministries have no idea how NGOs function, how they are organized. But we also *have got an impression they are having a hard time to identify the partners: who represents the sector, who is representing the people, which topics and fields… .*[109]

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[107]Interviewee CSO Hu, 27 Apr 2011.
[108]Interviewee CSO Hu, 4 Apr 2013.
[109]Interviewee CSO Sk, 16 Nov 2012.

> Then we realized that one NGO was the one established by the directors of orphanages. It was an Association of the directors of orphanages. The orphanages are state institutions, at least, at that time they were. Now they belong under the regional administration. *So, even if formally it is a civil association, it is an association run by state employees, civil servants. So what sort of partnership is it?*[110]

At first, remarks of the respondents can be seen as quite controversial. CSOs from the Visegrad countries are firmly opposed to both the rule of partnership defended by the authorities – access for everyone – and, on the other hand, to any attempts of selective treatment of partners.

Respondents are quite opposed to the option of public consultations endorsed by state officials. In their critique of this practice, CSOs emphasize that despite the fact that these consultations can, at first sight, eliminate the problem of secrecy and corporate selectivity, as they are open to everybody, in reality the whole point of meaningful participation is missed. The consultations are described as unable to guarantee incorporation of the right and needed input, as, for instance, is always stressed by the Hungarian respondents, for whom the "direct democracy" experiment is the most hypocritical invention of state officials, leaving social problems unsolved, right of the minorities unprotected and OPs filled with policy content detached from the reality.

At the same time, respondents demonstrate their dissatisfaction with how selection of partners is handled. Stories about the government speaking to 'fake partners'[111] or organizations unknown to anyone but yet selected to become members of the MCs are frequently told as illustrations of poor partnership. These instances are compared to pre-1989 practices of cooptation of citizens' associations by the state apparatus, and are directly assessed as politicization. 'The crucial point is that many NGOs that *are there are not civil society organizations but just background companies for political parties*'.[112] Political affiliation of CSOs is seen as a blow to the major objective of cohesion policy – achieving efficiency of allocation of the Funds. When the true professionals are not recognized, these situations can in no way be seen as manifestations of partnership.

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[110]Interviewee CSO Sk, 24 Nov 2012.

[111]That CSOs feel uneasy about instances when "wrong" partners were selected was also found in the previous research on partnership in the new member states (Batory & Cartwright, 2011). It should be mentioned, though, that despite similarity of such claims for Slovene and Visegrad CSOs, the underlying meanings are different. CSOs from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia accuse state officials of inserting political divisions into civil society by interacting with political "others" whereas the emphasis of Slovene actors is on the secrecy and informality.

[112]Interviewee CSO Hu, 12 Mar 2012.

A remedy to that is adoption of clearly defined rules of selection of partners. 'There should *be rules that would define the nomination of NGOs into all those committees and groups*'[113], as summed up by one respondent. On the surface, such a demand sounds as an appeal to get away from both chaos of everyone having access and somewhat secretive or even corporatist way of election of partners.[114] Along these lines, CSOs expect the problem to be solved through application of the rules of selection which frame as and equate with 'equal opportunities'.

In reality, putting this rule to practice is described as the opposite to opening up partnership and involvement for everyone. The fundamental criterion of selection is believed to be strong professionalism and wide expertise in a field. Thus, to fix broken partnership a system of criteria should be elaborated in which *professionalism* and *endowment with expertise* are expected to be on top of the list. Such vision is justified in terms of equality of opportunities – the competition for access is free and equal for everyone yet if the most professional organizations, that enjoy this reputation in their circles, are given additional guarantees that they will not be deprived of their victory, should they truly win. A remark made by a Polish respondent whose organization has been given these special guarantees by simply being invited by state officials, exemplifies, in her view, a good partnership practiced in accordance with the above-described rule: '*we spent three hours thoroughly discussing the propositions with the regional administration. They invited us purposefully because they knew about our expertise*'.[115]

The importance of strategic framing should not be downgraded, though. References to unfairness of selection naturally come from CSOs who have been excluded from the onset or, if included, faced an open neglect or hostility on the part of state officials. Respondents representing these organizations naturally express bewilderment with the choice of partners meaning that their organizations should have been included. However, it is their justifications that deserve attention as they open the world of CSOs views on organization of partnership. Equal opportunity for everyone yet with an acknowledgement that the strongest, most professional and most experienced actors should be invited to partnership. Respondents devote very little time to explicating how they see this scheme to be working and present no concrete plan apart from the state officials directly contacting them. Yet what should be taken into account is the line of argumentation. Only such an

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[113]Interviewee CSO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.
[114]One Hungarian respondent put it quite bluntly: 'They can easily say: the way how we imagined this partnership consultancy is like this. *It is a corporate thing*' (Interviewee CSO Hu, 4 Apr 2013).
[115]Interviewee CSO Pl, 9 Oct 2013.

approach to selection of partners guarantees truly meaningful participation when citizens are given the opportunity to influence policy-making not by default, because of being citizens, but because of possessing necessary expertise and experience.

Basically, the interest of Visegrad CSOs towards procedural side of partnership ends here. Every now and again they speak about additional procedures like timely informing, for instance. Documents sent for commenting or reading too late or excessive volume of these documents pop up as common "irritants" and indicators of bad partnership too. Additionally, procedures directly related to access to the Funds or application, implementation and monitoring procedures occupy the minds of CSOs and are naturally presented as disruption of partnership.

Rules of interactions

As for the rules related to regulation of interactions, this quote, taken form the interview with a Slovak respondent summarizes the major concerns: 'The second part[116] of the partnership principle is that the MCs have to be balanced *in terms of voice distribution*'.[117] His colleague from Hungary echoes him by explaining what preoccupies the minds of people working for CSOs through a comparison with previously influential but nowadays abolished cooperation platforms, such as the national Gender Equality Council. Taking it as a benchmark for comparison with the present-day partnership, she mentions that 'all these councils *were set up in a way that they have about 50% government members but about 50% from broadly defined civil sector which, by default, was much fairer that these MCs*'.[118] These respondents put it in even more concrete terms:

> Overall the work of NGOs can be assessed as poor *because the decision system in the MCs based on majority voting and state institutions have majority in those MCs* which does not allow NGOs to get their ideas met.[119]

> … consensus was meant to be the procedure in the MCs yet it was not the case as if the man could not understand what consensus was and *initiated voting asking who was against, who abstain* ... If we really have *consensual decision-making then NGOs will have much bigger role* because but this never works. We, four NGO representatives have four votes … This way we do not have much power on what the MC decides and *therefore we consider that MC themselves do not have much of a say in terms of what happens within an OP, unfortunately*.[120]

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[116]The first was, correspondingly, the issue of absence of deliberation
[117]Interviewee CSO Sk, 22 Oct 2012.
[118]Interviewee CSO Hu, 6 Jan 2013.
[119]Interviewee CSO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.
[120]Interviewee CSO Hu, 29 Apr 2011.

A good partnership automatically means full formal equality between the partners where CSOs cannot be simply outvoted because of existing voting procedures. Stories of how the governments attempted to reshuffle the composition of the MCs in order to reduce the number of partners are often told to illustrate failures of partnership. It goes without saying that such a concern with voting rules is found due to the fact that it is the voting that eventually either obstructs or paves the ways for the policy content of CSOs to be incorporated. Apparently, for state officials in the Committees, for whom incorporation of policy content is not the major goal compared to 'providing the opportunity to say something', the fact that voting stalls partnership is not important.

Importance of these rules is not presented by respondents as standing out but is further linked to another important element in their narratives – elaborations about their involvement in scrutiny and oversight.

Scrutiny and oversight

When the respondents talk about the rules, incorporation of policy input does not appear as the ultimate goal. Here lies the source of diffusion in interpretations of partnership by Visegrad CSOs. While talking about the rules, some approach partnership not from the perspective of creating efficient policies as a goal for which voting procedures of decision-making and balanced representation of partners matter a lot. Instead, they see the meaning of balanced representation as related to democracy and the role of civil society in it. One Slovak respondent vividly illustrates this in an interview:

> Few years ago I was speaking with some people from Hungary and they told me that in the MC in Hungary *there is a principle that the state should not have a majority*. That's what I was told, that the majority should be NGOs, municipalities, universities etc. I think it is right *because the government is responsible for implementation*. So, around implementation there should be a clear power of the government however, *the monitoring should be like a controlling mechanism*. It should not be the government who controls himself, the ministries and civil servants will not very much control themselves. So, this control is formal. *So in this MC this partnership principle was only formal*.[121]

What this respondent refers to as practice in Hungary is not true, in fact. This reference indeed indicates a very noticeable trend – CSOs from the Visegrad countries

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[121]Interviewee CSO Sk, 24 Nov 2012.

actively learn from each other and are normally aware of all developments related to CSOs involvement in each other's countries.[122] Yet what this quote displays, and what is confirmed by other respondents, is that CSOs representatives frame their views on partnership in terms of democracy and democratic participation, and resort to imaginary examples from neighboring countries to add more strength to their arguments . '*Partnership should be a watchdogging function at all levels*', mentions one respondent.[123] Representatives of the biggest Polish association of CSOs, when asked about their vision of partnership, referred to a strategy of ensuring presence of CSOs in all the MCs across all the Polish regions, adopted by their organization with a purpose to '*deepen the democratic control over the process'*.[124] Looking at the MCs literally from the perspective of monitoring the same respondent jokingly exclaims: 'the MC which should be monitoring what the government is doing and most members are from the government!'.[125]

Partnership and involvement of CSOs are framed as serving a very specific goal – organization of scrutiny and oversight by CSOs over government's actions as a manifestation of true democracy. References to democracy are used to support the above-described claims about equal opportunities to participation and access and equal representation in the structures where voting is the mechanism of decision-making. However, the underlying meaning of keeping those procedures in accordance with some standards is not related to incorporation of content but has much to do with keeping up with the ideal of democracy and societal control as its major attribute. One can also see how these frameworks (democracy) organize respondents' interpretations with regards to partnership and how respondents link it to their belonging to a particular type of actors. It is exactly because 'it [partnership] *is a matter of democracy and public participation, NGOs are not just another interest group … it is our basic motivation to represent groups of citizens*'[126] that the discussed rules should be highly respected. Or, in another case:

> I think *civil society can and should be some sort of a link and intermediary between the general public, the citizens and the government*. It is very important that most of civil society groups *usually represent values instead*

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[122]The biggest CSOs form the Visegrad countries cooperate within the so-called SFTeam (www.sfteam.eu), a coalition of green organizations from the Visegrad countries, Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia that proclaimed sustainability of the Structural Funds as the primary goal of their collaboration. Yet gradually the coalition got involved into active promotion of partnership principle in CEE member states as well as in Brussels and now is considered as possessing the biggest expertise in the matter. The coalition regularly publishes reports on the state of implementation of partnership and organizes conferences on the issue, lately with active involvement and endorsement of CEE representatives in the EU institutions.
[123]Interviewee CSO Hu, 20 Apr 2011.
[124]Interviewee CSO Pl, 13 Sep 2012.
[125]Interviewee CSO Pl, 13 Sep 2012.
[126]Interviewee CSO Sk, 16 Nov 2011.

of interests which means that those values are much deeper rooted and valid in the long term than, for example, interests of the business sector. *This is one factor why NGOs should be considered as partners*.[127]

This quote clearly shows how respondents from CSOs both position themselves and link such positionality to partnership. Thus, for Visegrad CSOs the rules that partnership is equated with bear certain and very clearly articulated meanings: they are meant to ensure proper involvement of CSOs as true experts in citizens' pressing problems and equal standing of CSOs as compared to other actors and watchdogs over state officials' actions.

6.2.2.2. Slovenia: rules and procedures with a national twist

With regards to procedures and rules of partnership Slovene respondents stressed most of all *rules of access*. Discussions of voting procedures or balanced representation within the partnership structures were practically absent. Given that the concern of the majority of Slovene CSOs lies with introduction of the proper format of consultations, the issue of institutionalization of those consultations acquires particular importance. The following comments offers a good example of this: 'there *is not any institutional framework* that would say yes, you come through this channel and now provide the input'.[128] In this light, a meticulous description of how interactions should be organized institutionally, provided by an employee in the national umbrella association that promotes partnership, seems to capture the essence of concerns of Slovene CSOs:

> From 2003 *we have in place a special procedure for selecting the NGOs into different working groups or consultative bodies of the government* … So, each time when the opportunity arrives, when there is a special working group for a law, a council or something with the members of NGOs, *we select the members of NGOs on the basis of this procedure, which is open and transparent, all NGOs can participate* … In this concrete case, *since they are representatives they are obliged to communicate with the sector. So they cannot speak on behalf of their own organization, they speak on behalf of the sector*.[129]

What makes Slovene understanding of institutionalized procedures unique is that they insist on quite a corporatist format of selection of partners as the major procedure. The same respondent explains how it is supposed to work in practice:

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[127]Interviewee CSO Hu, 29 Apr 2011.
[128]Interviewee CSO Sl, 3 Apr 2012.
[129]Interviewee CSO Sl, 10 Oct 2013.

> The ministry, for example, who is responsible for a working group (in this case the Managing Authority) *sends a request to CNVOS "listen, we need 17 NGO representatives" (it was agreed before how many) and then CNVOS implements the procedure.*[130]

For Slovenes existence of clear-cut rules of access and especially a particular format of access and compliance with these rules are seen as a manifestation of partnership. These rules quite straightforwardly resemble the corporatist practices of interest intermediation, namely consensus among members of the CSO community that selection into cohesion policy-related working groups is done through the above-described procedure or, for instance, that there are clear lines of accountability of the 'representatives' to other members. Interestingly there is actually wide consensus among Slovene CSOs that this is how partnership shall work in terms of selection of partners, as explained by this respondent: 'No, we never had any problems with this [selection] procedure. *Everyone understands this is the better way for these things to work*'.[131]

Slovene actors openly justify such focus on institutionalization and their remarks seem to converge with those of Visegrad CSOs who oppose "secret" solutions of privileging some to the detriment of others. Informality, perhaps, is the biggest concern for them and one of the most vivid examples of disrupted partnership, as expressed by this respondent:

> What concerns me … You know, we *have had the doors open*, we have worked with the Ministry and the cooperation was very good *and doors were always opened*. But, *it was not structured*. I mean, I could call and ask what was new, if I could come over and talk and if we could do all those things. And, of course, I was always told yes, I could come. But it was … *all the developments were on this informal level, not structured.*[132]

Yet where for Visegrad CSOs equal opportunities (and, consequently, reach the ideals of democratic participation, in the end) for all partners can be ensured through breaking away with corporatism-like selections, Slovene CSOs, in contrast, see a way out of inequality of access through exactly the opposite exercise – through institutionalization of interactions and selection. They also link that to democracy:

> A good thing here is that there was a special procedure prepared by the NGOs side how those elections of NGOs should be run, you know *you*

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[130]Interviewee CSO Sl, 10 Oct 2013.
[131]Interviewee CSO Sl, 8 Oct 2013.
[132]Interviewee CSO Sl, 29 Sept 2011.

> *cannot just say you would like to be in those structures because everyone knows you and you should be elected. It [*the procedure*] is the form of democracy.*[133]

Moreover, respondents from Slovenia provide even deeper justifications, as was also discussed above:

> Relations between civil society and the state are quite tense at the moment and *we are trying to ensure that they are free from any personal connections*. If you have it solved at the procedural level then the room for corruption is narrow.[134]

Reactions about partnership very often touch upon the issue of nepotism and dark side of informality, as was described in the previous section. The major concern raised is that partnership as an interactive process can easily turn into a process that legitimizes allegedly existing practices of clientelism and personal connections. That is why a certain formalization of interactions like the one presupposed by the above-described selection procedure is needed to make partnership work. Voting procedures, in their turn, as leading to unbalanced voice distribution seem to concern respondents less than clear rules and formalized procedures of access.

The latter vividly illustrates how peculiarities of domestic context find their way into interpretations of partnership. Issues of corruption and clientelism, so widely discussed in the Slovene society, are almost never mentioned by respondents from the Visegrad countries. Although their narratives are full of references to "politicization" which is defined as special relations of the government with certain NGOs, but this concern with politicization is informed by different contemplations – disagreement over open privileging of some CSOs over the others. Yet for Slovene CSOs the secrecy of privileged relations to which partnership is equated with ultimate failure of partnership.

6.2.3 Multiplicity of CSOs and policy areas - multiplicity of "partnerships": nuances in interpretations

Previous sections have highlighted distinct character of interpretations of partnership shared by CSOs. It showed, first of all, how CSOs' interpretations of communication and rules and procedures are visibly different from the ones shared by state officials. If the

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[133]Interviewee CSO Sl, 6 Sept 2012.
[134]Interviewee CSO Sl, 8 Oct 2013.

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latter view it predominantly in the format of public consultations arranged to give civil society an opportunity to voice their concerns and represent plurality of interests and values, the former refuse to see partnership as this kind of communication and stand for infusing it with different rules. Moreover, CSOs approach partnership from a variety of different perspectives closely linked to perceptions by them of their roles - scrutiny and oversight, meaningful participation, elaboration of policy content etc. The section also showed where and how peculiarities of cultural contexts shape interpretations of partnership.

The main argument of the present section is that besides cross-country variation of interpretations of partnership by CSOs and clear divergence between their views and the views of the state officials, one can detect noticeable intra-group variation, the one within the CSOs as a group of actors.. This section aims to analyze sources of divergence within CSOs. Although it has been found that all CSOs approach partnership in similar terms, bracketing the finding that there are certain nuances in how they interpret it would amount to utmost simplification of the picture and omission of important dynamics of contestation that are especially visible in the case of CSOs. CSOs represent an extremely diverse group of actors, and the meanings they assign to partnership inevitably reflect on this diversity. This section pays attention to two localizations of such diversity: a) CSOs' institutional identities and b) policy areas or domains within which they work.

6.2.3.1. Big vs. grass-roots organizations

Divergence within CSOs as a group of actors, first and foremost, comes about as a result of diversity of the sector and especially its division into nation-wide umbrella associations and smaller organizations. In the literature this phenomenon is often described as quite an "Eastern European" characteristic of civil society development which emerged as a result of uneven distribution of resources (donors' aid, first of all) and patchy and somewhat erratic policies towards civil society in some countries (Bruszt & Vedres, 2013). To some extent, umbrella associations shape and frame the whole discussion of partnership for the rest of the members of the CSO community in their countries. This happens both due to the fact that it is umbrella associations that attract the attention of state authorities as potential partners in their quest for a proper way of compliance with the requirement and because these CSOs are natural knowledge and expertise "hubs" for smaller counterparts.

One remark by a respondent coming from a big umbrella association in Poland, for instance, illustrates how a particular understanding of partnership is being spread across

the country and how these understandings reflect on organization's self-positioning and identity.

> Our job was *to activate NGOs to have their own opinion about Structural Funds* and the way it is being spent in Poland. … It was not like only technical job but also, let's say, *we were persuading them to have an opinion about something and we were thinking which NGOs should know about something* … we were… maybe not the biggest but one of the most important NGOs and our job was to … *I think we were activating other NGOs to become partners for consultations*. We were also sometimes … *sometimes we were the voice of other NGOs.*[135]

Another example comes from Slovenia where CNVOS assumed the role of fixing broken involvement of CSOs into cohesion policy-making.

> Actually *CNVOS was the only one* among all partners, including trade unions and employers, *sincerely interested in partnership principle*. But, in this sense *we sort of fought for general horizontal involvement of NGOs, in terms of procedures, openness and clarity of rules*. We are just an umbrella network and we cannot cover all other areas. When it comes to NGOs producing comments and feedback, *it is their task.*[136]

These interventions demonstrate how both organizations defined their primary focus in the process of contestation and how these emphases converge – focus on general involvement of CSOs in consultations as an imperative of policy-making (although with a bit of a specific Slovene accent on institutions, in the last case). Being quite powerful actors and, in a sense, "policy entrepreneurs" able to influence spread of particular discourses and understandings, big associations contribute to entrenchment of specific understandings.

However, despite the fact that actions and discourses of big associations find their way to perceptions of smaller organizations, one rather finds diffusion in how they, in turn, view partnership than convergence due to socialization. Remarks by respondents from Hungary and Poland, representing local organizations involved in the process of cohesion policy-making through their respective umbrella associations demonstrate how partnership acquires completely different meanings:

> I became a member of the regional MC *with the help of OFOP*, of course. They organized a lot of meetings for us and *explained why partnership is*

135Interviewee CSO Pl, 20 Jul 2013.
136Interviewee CSO Sl, 10 Oct 2013.

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important and why NGOs should be there and we fully support that because we, as representatives of the sector should be asked, of course [...] we want to influence how the regional authorities allocate the money *because they forgot about subsidiarity principle, they focus on something else like partnership but not the priority of subsidiarity which means that it is not authorities that organize our lives but we, as citizens themselves.*[137]

This whole partnership is about what this all [cohesion policy] *means to the citizens, to the people in every village, so that at the policy level they could have valid action plans relevant for those who apply for these projects and valid for the people whom these policies address* [...] and one of the reasons why I see these structures [MC] important is that *they can apply this principle of subsidiarity* of which I am a great fun of [...] *Partnership is absolutely about this, to take subsidiarity more seriously,* Instead of making decisions for someone else let the control go. *Everyone is taking decisions for people and therefore there cannot be any partnership.*[138]

It can be seen from the quotes above that respondents from smaller organizations raise completely different concerns in relation to partnership by stressing *subsidiarity*. Such split itself was in full captured by the Polish respondent: 'for OFOP, their focus is on NGOs but we are not sure about the role of NGOs in the public participation process ... for *other NGOs citizens are much more important, individual citizens'*.[139]

Admitting that they endorse readings of partnership spread around by big umbrella associations, respondents from smaller CSOs, at the same time, drastically reinterpret them. These reinterpretations directly reflect on their profiles – activities at the local levels connected to grass-root implementation of policies and monitoring over their effects. While elaborating on their visions of partnership, respondents from these CSOs naturally raise questions about efficiency of carried out policies commenting on how existing practice of partnership is, in fact, not geared towards the issue of efficiency at all. Respondent from Hungary, for instance, provided several detailed accounts of how some projects supported through the Structural Funds were decided upon and eventually implemented without incorporating perspectives of local voices like, for instance, women or village settler. Neither a variety of side effects negative on the most vulnerable groups such as recipients suddenly being deprived of the resources they had access before project, were taken into consideration. Partnership is understood as provision of policy input directly from policy recipients. This understanding is radically different from what has

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[137]Interviewee CSO Pl, 12 Sep 2013.
[138]Interviewee CSO Hu, 15 Feb 2013.
[139]Interviewee CSO Pl, 20 Jul 2012.

been described as the product of umbrella associations. These interviewed openly equate partnership with subsidiarity (and remain stuck to the term itself) as participation of those affected by the policies in elaboration and implementation of measures, thus ascribing a completely different meaning, having little in common with the democracy, representation and public participation talk of their umbrella counterparts.

It should be noted, however, that it is hard identify visible cross-country differences in this respect, unlike in the case of bigger CSOs interpreting partnership. Rather the opposite, associations of representatives of these CSOs across countries display cross-country convergence. Although the term "subsidiarity" is never directly used by Slovene respondents who remain faithful to the local concept of "civil dialogue", the meaning attached to partnership (defined through terminology of civil dialogue) almost totally coincides with the ones illustrated in the quotes above. As this statement demonstrates, Slovene actors echo their Visegrad colleagues:

> At the local level *civil dialogue is pretty clear*. You would not discuss with people from Ljubljana why villages here need investment in sewage systems, that's obvious. *It is their decision which reflects their needs and it is them who have to make the system of management of Funds work, so these decisions come true. Certainly, we, as organization, are both hands up for this*.[140]

6.2.3.2. Divergence across policy areas

Interpretations of partnership also seem to be affected (if not shaped directly) by peculiarities of policy areas and policy issues with which CSOs work. Here CSO respondents tend to equate partnership with achievement of their goals in relation to their "profile" policies and, as a result, some accents in visions of partnership become more pronounced and prominent. Differences between policy areas add to diffusion of meanings within CSOs as a group of actors. A clear example of how it works can be found when interventions of respondents working for environmental and social CSOs are compared.

It so happened that in the new member states CSOs working for environment ("green NGOs") and the so-called social NGOs (mainly dealing with service delivery) proved to become the "usual suspects" when it came to implementation of partnership. Normally it was these associations that were always contacted among the first ones by the authorities. Moreover, and again as a particular characteristic of development of these actors in CEE, it is these two policy areas where these organizations proliferated. It is hard

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[140]Interviewee CSO Sl, 4 Sept 2012.

to deny that the roles that CSOs assume in relation to these policy areas are also divergent. For environmental organizations these are mainly monitoring over compliance with (most frequently) internationally defined goals and assessment and evaluation of policy measures whereas for social CSOs service delivery, elaboration of innovative methods and techniques of social care as well as advocacy become the primary areas of interest. The way respondents from both groups of organizations interpret partnership seems to reflect these differences.

> For us *the key goal of partnership now is climate policies, securing that there will be a certain percentage of SF available for energy efficiency projects, renewable projects, new technologies, mitigation and adoption to climate change …* We'd like tom see that climate and environment *criteria are included in awarding applications with approval*, that only projects that are within certain CO2 emissions can be eligible for the cohesion funds not the ones that are producing more problems than solutions.[141]

> We have expertise in environment issues, energy … but, for example, regarding transport we have little capacity. We have earned *the reputation of problem-makers because we are fighting in those Committees against huge projects which are politically very desirable but have very negative impact.*[142]

When describing imaginary examples of good partnership respondents representing environmental CSOs clearly stressed that they would imagine themselves as expertise providers who are consulted by state authorities working on the elaboration of environmental OPs and asked to provide something like environmental impact assessment. In contrast, social CSOs describe partnership as involvement in problem-solving and policy implementation.

> I know that there is the national project on de-institutionalization of social services and I also know that *the project had partnership principle. We could have become one of the leaders of the project and we would be selecting the projects together with the people from the ministry* because for half a year we were preparing the strategy together. But then they did not announce any public procurement or tender and NGOs did not participate in the tender… *so this partnership is so problematic*, you know.[143]

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[141]Interviewee CSO Sl, 3 Apr 2012.
[142]Interviewee CSO Sk, 14 Nov 2011.
[143]Interviewee CSO Sk, 25 Nov 2012.

This representation of partnership is very visible across all four cases. CSOs position themselves as holders of necessary expert knowledge that allows them to take upon themselves certain functions of the state. Such vigor and enthusiasm are emphasized slightly more prominently and, in fact, more systematically justified by Slovene CSOs. They consider this as the core element of the system of state/civil society relations and justify by referring to the state as "too big" in terms of provision of services. The idea that most of the state's functions in implementation of policies should be transferred to CSOs, better-equipped and more knowledgeable actors through the system of contracting out and outsourcing. CSOs form the Visegrad countries provide less sophisticated justifications yet link this to overall efficiency of allocation of the Funds. Furthermore, CSOs from the Visegrad countries still insist on working together with state authorities for implementation, at least, at some stages of this process and, thus, emphasize 'cooperative problem-solving'.[144] What brings interpretations of CSOs form all countries together is that in the context of the Structural Funds this argument is operationalized as 'being given access to money' as a manifestation of partnership.

It is important to note how the meanings around the theme of implementation diverge for state officials and CSOs. The former associate this with partnership very weakly. Outsourcing to CSOs is a matter of exception rather than the system because the value added of these actors involvement is found in provision of expertise at the stage of policy design. Moreover, CSOs are seen as mere assistants as opposed to full withdrawal of the state from policy implementation and CSOs becoming the only actors. On the contrary, CSOs, as can be seen form the interviews, oppose such a marginalization and put implementation in the center of their narratives, thus, linking it to issues of silencing and lack of recognition of their role as policy actors.

The described conceptualizations of partnership prove that the reality of how CSOs encounter partnership principle requirement and what sense they make out of it is even more complicated. Additional layers of understandings sustained through peculiarities of policy contexts within which CSOs work and nuances of their identities and backgrounds, come to the front. Equally, notions of democracy, participation or civil society's role in policy-making also acquire nuanced interpretation.

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[144]Interviewee CSO Hu, 12 Mar 2012.

6.3. Conclusions

The case of CSOs' interpretations of partnership shows the imprint of both logics of contestation, described in chapter 3. It illustrates the diffusion pattern when both cultural and professional backgrounds influence the way CSOs interpret the partnership principle. At the same time, it shows limited explanatory potential of each of them if applied as ultimate designations to determine the map of interpretations of partnership. This contrasts the case of state officials whose understandings of partnership are informed and shaped by their professional backgrounds with no cross-country divergence.

The chapter's findings reinforce both assumptions about cross-country convergence and divergence, and the case of CSOs clearly represents a diffused case. The meanings of partnership shared by CSOs are indeed largely different from the ones advanced by civil servants. Both groups of actors view implementation of partnership in different formats and both state officials and CSOs represent quite homogenous groups with visible intra-group convergence of interpretations. State officials emphasize such attributes of partnership as collection of opinions and ideas from partners, properly institutionalized formats of public consultations, equal representation and treatment of CSOs within those formats. CSOs, in contrast are quite opposed to the regime of public consultations as the format of partnership and insist on partnership as interaction not solely confined to exchange of opinions and information but sustainable and non-disrupted through time collaborative working on problem-solving (meaningful participation). In these terms, partnership would include timely exchange of professional information provided by CSOs as experts and relevant for problems at hand. Such exchange of professional input (not to be conflated with raising hands and making themselves vocal at consultancy fora) is supposed to be followed by deliberation on possible policy solutions and content. The matter of equal representation of societal interests through CSOs loses significance in CSOs' terms. Instead, the proficiency and expertise become criteria for 'getting into the partnership', and all mechanisms of selection are by default taken with suspicion as breaching this principle.

This dichotomy is not fully sustained though, as the findings demonstrate. First of all, notable differences between the way Slovene CSOs and their Visegrad counterparts interpret partnership have been discovered. This finding is not sufficient to support the claim that national backgrounds determine how CSOs approach partnership. After all, Visegrad CSOs' interpretations of partnership seem to be quite coherent across borders of all three countries and establishing whether there is further cross-Visegrad difference

requires additional empirical proof. It only gives evidence that the case of CSOs represents a diffused case where both national and professional backgrounds shape the meanings.

The major difference between Slovenia and the Visegrad countries is that Slovene CSOs do not fully reject the regime of public consultations as manifestation of partnership yet with strict formalization of this process. This reflects on nationally entrenched traditions of state-civil society relations. Slovene CSOs also contest how these consultations are conducted in the country. Their input into conceptualization of partnership lies in juxtaposing the claims that Visegrad CSOs view as contradictory: proper representation of societal interests by CSOs yet through specific selection procedures. Another example of exclusively Slovene input is insistence on CSOs singlehandedly being involved in implementation aka third sector organizations without accentuating long-lasting close working together with authorities like it is done by CSOs from Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

In sum, the pattern that was identified is the diffusion. There is a clear division between meanings of partnership advanced by CSOs and civil servants and one can still contend that representatives of these two groups of actors insist on different partnerships. On a larger scale, this can be seen as an indication of contestation over two different participatory frameworks advanced and defended by actors with different professional backgrounds. However, homogeneity of the group of CSOs as actors sharing the same professional background without interference of cultural backgrounds is disrupted. Interpretations of partnership by CSOs coming from different countries are naturally "enriched" by specificities of national contexts. Divergence between interpretations of partnership advanced by Slovene and Visegrad CSOs speaks in support of this finding.

Secondly, and just like in the case of state officials when intra-group divergence was identified, CSOs are no exception. Divergence of meanings within the group of CSOs is not only produced by coming from either Slovenia or the Visegrad countries. Important layers of validation are introduced by institutional identities and policy orientation as in which policy areas CSOs' work. Findings demonstrate that there are differences between big umbrella nation-wide associations and smaller local groups with the latter ones nuancing meanings of partnership even further or between the so-called "green" and social NGOs.

The next chapter scrutinizes the findings about the logic of contestation for first two groups of actors with reference to the last one – economic and social partners.

Chapter 7. Partnership and economic and social partners: contesting procedures of involvement

The present chapter continues to explore the logic and patters of contestation around the partnership principle in the new member states. Two previous chapters completed this exercise with reference to two main groups of actors involved in implementation of partnership, namely state officials and CSOs. This chapter looks at how representatives of the third major group of actors contest and interpret the partnership principle – economic and social partners.

According to the EU Regulations on Structural Funds, in their part on the partnership principle, economic and social partners are the third major "pillar" of the cohesion policy collaborative endeavor towards 'the common good' (Official Journal L 161:1 26 June 1999). Moreover, these actors have for a long time been exceptionally privileged actors of EU policy-making. The European Commission have always insisted on their deeper involvement in policy design and implementation (Falkner, 1998; Smismans, 2008). Heavy accent on involvement of these actors was also made in relation to the partnership principle (European Commission, 2012).

Empirical observations show that representatives of this group of actors also actively contest existing practice of partnership for Structural Funds and come up with a variety of interpretations. A closer look at what structures their expectations and understandings of partnership is necessary to answer the central question of this study about the logic and patterns of contestation over partnership. The findings discussed in the previous two chapters show the decisive role of professional backgrounds in structuring interpretations of state officials yet interference of cultural backgrounds for CSOs. Reconstruction of the meanings-in-use of partnership for state officials demonstrates that they represent a coherent group with similar understandings across four countries.

The findings for CSOs draw a more complex picture. Although CSOs enact meanings of partnership which are clearly distinct from the ones shared by state officials, as a result of highly divergent professional backgrounds, one can identify divergence of interpretations across cultural contexts. In concrete terms, CSOs from Slovenia and the Visegrad countries resort to different meanings of partnership. Those shared by Slovene actors reflect on national traditions of structured and institutionalised state-society relations. They interpret partnership as strictly institutionalized interactions with a special

emphasis on transparency, representativity of partners and their highly instrumental role in policy implementation. Their counterparts from the Visegrad countries insist more vigorously on such issues as control, oversight and scrutiny, meaningful participation and balanced and equal representation within partnership arrangements. Moreover, the complexity of the case of CSOs is complemented by visible intra-group divergence or, in other worlds, diversity of types of organizations: nation-wide umbrella associations vis-a-vis smaller groups (local or grass-root etc.) or organizations working in different policy areas. These dissimilarities have been found to nuance peculiarities of professional backgrounds.

This chapter investigates which of the three discussed outcomes – convergence, divergence or diffusion can be found for understandings of partnership shared by economic and social partners. By having an in-depth look into meanings-in-use shared by representatives of these actors it, similarly, seeks to answer the same empirical question: *where* does the basis for shared understandings between economic and social partners lie?

The outcome of convergence will corroborate the assumption that a clear harmonization of understandings of partnership, shared by economic and social partners, exists regardless of socio-historical peculiarities of their countries of origin. It will endorse the argument that professional backgrounds are the reservoirs of the meanings of partnership and, consequently, inform the input that actors bring into discussion of partnership while contesting it. This finding is important for the discussion found in the literature on economic and social partners in CEE member states. The literature views these countries as more or less homogenous space of actors of the same kind (Kutter & Trappmann, 2010; Turner, 1996). A deeper examination into actors' understandings can help to test this expectation.

The outcome of clearly visible cross-country divergence will, on the other hand, speak in support of empirical findings of political economy literature. This literature tends to treat CEE member states as a heterogeneous space of countries (the Visegrad countries, the Baltic states and Slovenia) with different trajectories of development, including different degrees of development of economic and social actors, social dialogue structures and industrial relations (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007a). The third outcome can demonstrate diffusion akin to the one found in case of CSOs.

To arrive at empirical findings, representatives of economic and social partners in four countries were interviewed. In order to identify the relevant actors, first of all, a definition widely used by the EU institutions to refer to of social partners served as a

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guide. The definition was based on a number of official documents published by the European Commission.[145] Social partners are defined there as 'representatives of management and labor (employer's organizations and trade unions)' (European Commission, 2002, 2004). However, given that partnership in practice is never limited to economic and social partners in the strict sense promoted by the European Commission, other actors have been included and interviewed. These actors who, in the European Commission jargon, are economic and social players, normally represent chambers, unions and professional associations etc. outside the practice of industrial relations, for instance, chambers and associations of farmers and producers of agricultural goods or medical professional associations. Thus, a broader notion "economic and social partners" was used for the purposes of the research to better capture the reality of partnership implementation.

The chapter is structured as following. The first part delineates a complex context of transition and enlargement and their influence on everyday functioning of economic and social partners in the new member states. This is done to articulate the operative context that contributes to meaning making around partnership. The second part provides a deeper look into the realm of interpretations of partnership shared by this group of actors and attempts to identify convergence, divergence or diffusion.

7.1. Economic and social partners in the new member states: the burden of legacies and Europeanization

The years of transition have been an extremely turbulent time for economic and social partners. During this time these actors have faced a number of serious challenges that have shaped their identities and perceptions of their positions and roles in policy-making, including the EU partnership principle. The purpose of this section is to briefly outline the historical context within which interpretations of economic and social partnership are grounded and crystallized. Due to impossibility to delve into all the details of an interesting and complex context of functioning of economic and social partners in the CEE members states, only several themes will be touched upon which are believed to have constituted the core of the context for economic and social partners and affected perceptions of partnership. These themes are, first of all, well-researched a) history of economic and

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[145] The Communication of 2002 "The European social dialogue, a force for innovation and change", the Communication "Towards reinforced culture of consultation and dialogue – general principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission" (European Commission, 2002).

social partners in the period of transition and the b) impact of the pre-accession and Europeanization on both actors and their roles in domestic policy-making.

7.1.1. The burden of legacies

Research attention to economic and social partners has intensified together with popularity of transition studies. In explaining what drives the process of transition to democracy, what are its forces and, most importantly, where does it stall, scholars have turned to analysis of the role and contribution of societal actors. Economic and social partners have naturally been in the limelight of research due to their being very pertinent to the process of triple economic, political and social transition. The central question has been whether they would be able, as important societal actors, to contribute to absorption of inevitable transition shock in terms of falling social standards and rocketing social anomie or channeling of citizens' demands (Kubicek, 2004)

These questions have been more relevant for only a fraction of economic and social partners, namely labor. Associations of capital was as much a new phenomenon as the market economy itself whereas trade unions have had a long history of, as almost universally argued in existing literature, being exclusively "transmission belts" of socialist rulers (Crowley, 2004; Ekiert, 1996). Thus, academic research on both actors turned into investigation on whether labor can assume new roles under new conditions, free from various legacies of the past and, second, whether associations of capital can actually serve the function that they were established for.

As mentioned above, almost all accounts of trade unionism in the CEE countries stick to the path dependency argument that centers upon the inherent weakness of labor in the region (Heery et al., 2012; Kutter & Trappmann, 2010). The argument essentially repeats that of civil society literature that counts trade unions among civil society organizations. The weakness of trade unions was not only pre-conditioned by low trust in them as satellites of the former regimes, fully coopted into political structures, but also by natural economic conditions such as industrial restructuring, reductions and reorganization of labor force (Frege, 2002). Furthermore, trade unions had to go through the harsh process of redefining themselves and departing from the identity of massive organizations with compulsory membership to voluntary associations who have to attract the members through new strategies (Kubicek, 2004). These trends went hand in hand with deliberate weakening of labor on the part of the state that saw trade unions as a potential opponents to the neo-liberal reforms. Some argue that even the introduction of tripartite dialogue

structures at the national levels was, in fact, a clever strategy of the state meant to distract actors from organizing at the company level (Grosse, 2010).

Scholars argue that all these problems remained largely unsolved. David Ost (2011) claims that although having gone through the stage of dismantling old monolithic unions, 'hiving off' of new, most frequently called 'independent unions', and massive restructuring of old ones, trade unions have never become weighty actors of domestic politics. Emerged pluralism and fragmentation led, in its turn, to extremely harsh competition between new and old organizations for resources which, just like with CSOs, led trade unions away from building stronger ties with their constituents at the working place, for instance, and made them focus on processes at the national level (Kubicek, 2004). Trade unions were consistently failing to not only preserve social peace, as data on social protests confirms, but to also sustain themselves organizationally, let alone to invest in entrenchment of traditions of social partnership or social dialogue (Crowley, 2004; Mansfeldova, 2008).

The CEE countries are not the same in this respect though. Moreover, economic and social partners did not go through this turbulent period at the same pace throughout the region. Political economy literature stresses that there is internal divergence within former socialist countries in terms of strength of labor as a policy actor. This divergence came about as a result of various choices made by elites at the onset of transition period (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007a, 2012a). Labor was either almost fully insulated from economic governance, like in the highly neoliberal Baltic states, or fully incorporated like in neo-corporatist Slovenia. The Visegrad countries remained somewhere in the middle.

Yet the literature on industrial relations pushes for acknowledgement of even greater diversity brought about by very different historical circumstances (Crowley & Stanojevic, 2011; Duman & Kurekova, 2012; Knell & Srholec, 2007). Polish trade unions and business associations, for instance, started their journey through the transition period as the strongest in the region. The legal basis for social dialogue (tripartite dialogue) in Poland was also one of the most-developed among all post-socialist countries (Grosse, 2010; Iankova, 2002; Meardi, 2002). Poland is known for strong trade unions (traditions of Solidarity) and quite stable practice of organization of social dialogue albeit more at the national level than in the regions or enterprises. Slovenia, in turn, has been the country where the practice of economic and social partners' involvement in policy-making has always been the most developed, not only at the national level but very much at the level of companies (Meardi, 2007).

In Hungary and Slovakia, all actors have known both good and bad times. Although in Hungary involvement of partners started to take its shape as far back as in 1988 with the adoption of certain legislative acts, by the mid-2000s the situation drastically deteriorated and all structures of social dialogue were dismantled (Pasynkova, 2010). In Slovakia the situation was similarly bumpy when there was no visible involvement of the economic and social partners until the late 90s whilst Meciar was in power. Reestablishment of social dialogue structures was a matter of agreement between the new post-Meciar government and the actors in exchange for their support. However, in both countries it seems that no decisions about stronger involvement of economic and social partners in socio-economic governance have been made. Existing literature also leads to a conclusion that in Hungary and Slovakia economic and social partners (trade unions, in this case) are still struggling with the problem of self-identification, redefinitions of their roles and positioning themselves as social agents, problems still far from being solved (Pasynkova, 2010). In Hungary, for instance, unions keep trying to find the optimal format of functioning and even turned back to merging when in May 2013 the biggest coalitions of trade unions announced future merger plans.

In each country, therefore, trade unions have faced different challenges against the background of a range of very common problems – low levels of membership, structural weakness, lack of resources, social disembededdness etc.

As for organizations of capital, most of scholars agree that they still remain the weakest in terms of their overall influence, despite having more resources than labor. Perez-Solorzano Borragan (2004), for instance, argues that having been created in the CEE countries, business associations serve the same functions as their counterparts in the West - informing members about legislative changes, representing their interests, providing services etc. . Yet, she also shows that these groups were facing the same challenges as the trade unions, related to their identity, for instance, or inability to secure a stable support base for themselves. In some countries with turbulent political developments and frequent government change in the 90s, like in Hungary, business actors could not overcome excessive fragmentation and respond to government's attempts to modify the legislation that regulates their activities. This, in the end, significantly weakened them (Perez-Solorzano Borragan, 2004).

Business associations in the CEE countries have also failed (and fell victims of existing conditions) to replicate the success of their Western counterparts in terms of securing a stronger role in policy-making. Instead, a particular model where exchange of

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information matters more than actual impact, emerged (Perez-Solorzano Borragan, 2004). Terry Cox and Bob Manson (2000) argue that the problems that employers faced in the CEE countries were even greater that the ones encountered by labor: 'whilst union organization has at least developed independently of government intervention, to a large extent employers' organizations have only taken shape under stimulus form governments' (p. 327). In the Visegrad countries, for example, formation of employers' the organizations was occurring through, and was hugely affected by, the state regulations on chambers of commerce and business associations. These regulations prescribed them to define their missions, affiliate themselves with a particular type and even enumerated their functions. Later, in the midst of economic crisis of 2000s, the governments did completely the opposite that hugely affected viability of these actors – eliminated compulsory membership of firms in these associations.[146] All these developments led scholars to evaluate the evolution of employers' organizations in the CEE countries in terms of excessive dependency on the state, a reality very well felt by actors themselves.

This described rich and eventful period noticeably contributed to, first of all, the way economic and social partners perceive and assess the environment in which they have to work as a range of problems they have to deal with. They also naturally structured a range of expectations they have regarding improvements in their work. Issues of weak organizational capacities, lack of support on the part of the state or concerns regarding their status as policy actors became an integral part of overall parlance related to economic and social partners and, consequently, their self-perception.

7.1.2. Social partners, social dialogue and the process of Europeanization

In the transition period, economic and social partners, as was shown above, started to function in a world of certain problems and challenges which not only shaped identities and self-perceptions of actors but naturally became peculiar lenses through which actors conceived of the surrounding reality. This section looks into peculiarities of development of another big concern for actors, namely social dialogue as practice of actors' involvement in policy-making process.

Social dialogue or, more precisely, the 'real social dialogue', as opposed to the practice entrenched during the communist time, was among the first institutions to be fixed in the transition to democracy (Hethy, 1994; Iankova & Turner, 2004; Iankova, 2007). As Ost (2000) mentions, all new democracies invested heavily in establishment of practices,

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[146] In Hungary, it was done already in 1998. In Slovenia, the practice existed longer than anywhere – until 2006.

that mainly became known and referred to as "tripartism", already in late 80s. Such an explicit adherence to enhanced coordination between the state, capital and labor surely was not only a mimicry inspired by the fall of the communism. Establishment of tripartite bodies also sought to prevent highly likely social unrest as a result of harsh economic measures (Cox & Mason, 2000; Ost, 2000). Thus, well-established legislative bases and seemingly serious commitment of the states to stick to the practice were very promising signals to economic and social partners.

In reality, to the great disillusionment of economic and social partners, the development of social dialogue and tripartism was far from smooth. Some scholars attribute the reason to the fact that the states assumed greater role in directing neoliberal economic reforms and prioritizing attraction of foreign investment and corresponding compliance with conditionality imposed by international institutions (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007b, 2012b). In this context, governments frequently turned a blind eye on any tripartite arrangements which could prevent them from carrying out the reforms. This happened not only in Hungary and Slovakia, countries with a transition led by the elites and, thus, lacking wider social consensus around the reforms. Even in Poland, where Solidarity union literally embraced the transition through forming the government, soon there was a clear break between workers' Solidarity and Solidarity governments that remained faithful to harsh neoliberal economic measures (Ost, 2000).

Such a strong role of the state, as argued by Ost, led to 'general tripartite impotence' (2000, p. 515). This impotence was characterized by mere symbolism of tripartite meetings, shallow and weak role of economic and social partners who were in advance faced with non-negotiable deals, excessive formalism of the practice and prevalence of informal deal-making. On the part of partners, this led to especial irritation with procedural hollowing out of social dialogue and, as a result, of growing apathy to this exercise, an attitude which also fully presented itself in the interventions about partnership for Structural Funds. Tomasz Grosse (2010) also notes that the practice of social dialogue took in the CEE countries is characterized by a culture of negative dialogue as in reluctance against any kind of compromise. Elaborating further, he mentions that social dialogue was reduced to firefighting as in searching for emergency solutions to the detriment of systematic cooperation and instrumentalization of social dialogue as in dominance of *ad hoc* use of these practices by the governments (most often for election-related goals) (Grosse, 2010).

The state was not the only reason of failing social dialogue. Economic and social partners also succumbed to the neoliberal ideology behind the reforms and failed to challenge it. Elena Iankova (2007) claims that under conditions of truly difficult economic restructuring 'social partners often did not negotiate real wage and income increases but mutually acceptable, reasonable drops in living standards' (p. 300). The failure of social dialogue, thus, seemed to be arriving from both sides.

Another challenge for social dialogue came from the EU when strengthening of social partners and social dialogue arrived as a requirement in the pre-accession period. In essence, the EU conditionality was not a challenge but a way to fix what did not start working in the years of transition. First of all, proper involvement of partners in policy-making became a requirement in which the Commission invested a great deal of oversight and scrutiny. Although there were no specific requirements related to social dialogue in the chapters that were negotiated with the candidate members, the Commission strongly prescribed involvement of social partners in consultations over the harmonization of the *acquis*. Social partners were also included into negotiations working groups and special joint committees on economic and social issues (Borzel & Buzogany, 2010; Iankova, 2007). The latter was especially stressed in relation to particular directives and policy areas, such as, for instance, occupational health and safety (Smismans, 2008). Secondly, social partners themselves gained access to a practice of social dialogue at the European level which brought additional resources and opportunities to learn (Blavoukos & Pagoulatos, 2008; Pleines, 2010, 2011; Turner, 1996).

These were not the only changes that enlargement brought to the new member states. Iankova draws a complex picture of deeper transformation of social dialogue as a result of accession to the EU (Iankova & Turner, 2004; Iankova, 2007). She argues that the Commission insisted on a drastically different meaning of social dialogue and its widening to inclusion of other groups and interests, not exclusively labor and capital. Such a shift is reminiscent of how the Commission transformed the idea of partnership by extending it to CSOs, discussed in the previous chapter. In reality, this transpired through establishment of Economic and Social Councils throughout the new member states, modelled on the ECOSOC in Brussels. These structures were meant to replace old tripartite commissions. For economic and social partners such a move came with serious strings attached as it was interpreted as undermining their special status. Despite the fact that in most of the countries these structures remained explicitly formal and more of facades than real

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decision-making bodies, the overall effect was quite devastating for economic and social partners. Their influence was further undermined.

Scholars of industrial relations in the new member states such as Gold et al. argue that enlargement weakened social dialogue, even though the Commission emphasized the importance of bipartite social dialogue (sectoral one) instead and strengthening of dialogue at the regional levels (Gold et al., 2007). There is still little research done on the consequences of enlargement for economic and social partners and on what reactions these developments caused in their strategies. Yet it is obvious that enlargement brought about quite unexpected novelties in their everyday functioning.

In the post-enlargement context, Gold et al. (2007) show, economic and social partners encountered the reality when they 'merely share responsibility for the implementation of a whole series of targets set elsewhere' in Brussels (p. 20). Trying to capture this reality, scholars discuss the idea that Europeanization, in general, led to managerialization of social dialogue or, in other words, to co-opting of social partners into implementing policies over which they have very little influence (Vos, 2006).

The last two and a half decades have been a time of constant similar challenges for economic and social partners in the new member states. Arriving as a result of shaking changes related to transition and EU enlargement, these challenges naturally shaped the agenda of problems and issues that take precedence over all others for economic and social partners in all new member states. The next sections explore how interpretations of partnership shared by economic and social partners, indeed, deeply reflect on this complex and turbulent context within which partners found themselves and whether these interpretations differ from the ones shared by other groups of actors involved in partnership.

7.2. Contesting partnership, contesting procedures

Representatives of economic and social partners also express a range of strong opinions about what they dislike in the way the partnership principle is being implemented. These two excerpts from the interviews with representatives of this groups of actors, perhaps, most accurately, sum up expectations of economic and social partners from partnership.

> The administration's approach exhibits a *lack of balance between the partnership and the consultation procedure*. Despite a roughly defined consultation mechanism, every institution *conducts consultations*

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independently and in a manner they choose. They are often little more than a façade anyway.[147]

I can go on for ages about what we disagree in relation to this partnership! *No system whatsoever, they do it whenever they want, but this is not the right approach. We need to have some certainty as to when and where and how we are consulted, some basic rules*. Plus, what do we do there, in those Committees? *It is not about specific tasks*.[148]

Although normally these actors contest partnership to a lesser degree, and would not take any concrete actions such as street protests or boycotts, they are also noticeably disagreeable to how partnership is being practiced. As can be seen from the quotes, though, their dissatisfaction touches upon very specific issues. Actors begrudge the irritating lack of system in organizing relations with partners, complain about the fluid character of rules and uncertain procedures as well as wonder if they will ever be given any tasks in cohesion policy. All this gives away that economic and social partners possess very clear agenda in relation to partnership which they advance in the course of contestation over it.

Table 5 summarizes associative connotations for six major keywords extracted from the interviews with representatives of the third and last group of actors – economic and social partners.

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[147] Interviewee ESP Pl, 17 Sep 2013.
[148] Interviewee ESP Sl, 29 Nov 2013.

Table 5. Keywords: economic and social partners

Keywords/concepts	Associative connotations
procedures	Formalized interactions, legally binding practices, institutional platforms, working groups, systematic consultations (no *ad hoc*), consultations as negotiations/bargaining, modelling on and preservation of social dialogue, importance of the MCs
rules	Balanced representation, selection of partners (representation), balanced voice distribution, timely informing, voting rules
capacity building	Material support, financial benefits for partners, compliance with the EU decisions/policies
communication	Listening, being heard, reaction to propositions, incorporation of input
recognition	Delegating tasks (jobs), being taken seriously, respect, acknowledgement of professionalism and importance; preservation of special (though dissolving) status
implementation	Securing funds for members, access to money for members, granting the status of applicants, involvement in project implementation, project selection,

Source: 21 interviews with economic and social partners

As in case of state officials and CSOs, the same six themes have been identified in the responses of economic and social partners. It also should be noted that the order of the keywords is also slightly different in case of economic and social partners. Where for state officials it is rules and procedures and where for CSOs it is communication, for economic and social partners capacity building moves to the center of their elaborations. The sections below pursue the goal analogous to the one achieved in the previous chapters – detailed reconstruction of meaning-in-use of partnership and analysis of the findings.

7.2.1. Communication and procedures

A first glance at Table 5 that summarizes keywords and associative connotations, derived from the responses of economic and social partners to similar questions about partnership,

reveals striking similarity of their responses to the ones of CSOs. Indeed, partnership is discussed in similar terms and similar themes crop up in descriptions and explanations of pitfalls or, conversely, good sides of partnership. Taken from here, this finding suggests that both groups of actors might interpret partnership almost identically. These quotes, taken from the interviews illustrate the point:

> … you know, when I say 'influence', I mean that when the documents for the next programming period are prepared by different ministries or departments, it is prepared without the participation of social partners, we are involved in this process but after few months *when the document is already prepared*. We have only special influence to *make some cosmetic changes*.[149]

> If we say that on a certain matter they have to consult with the social partners, they put this on the web site, they open a forum and they tell: 'you can write this opinion on this forum'. And that is enough, *they fulfil criteria of the consultation. But that is not a real consultation*, you know. It can be formal if you sit in a room *and formally we are speaking and after this the government can do what they want*.[150]

> … as partnership ... I do not mean that *all our suggestions are taken into account but we should, at least, be consulted or involved in the process of setting the priorities* or, *at least, should be informed*. We are *cut off from the information*, on the one hand, we do not receive the information about what is going on and *we are not invited for cooperation or to give suggestions or ... whatever*.[151]

Representatives of both groups of actors contest partnership along the same lines. From the point of view of economic and social partners the way partnership is practiced is also not satisfactory due to systematic failures in communication, for instance. It should also be noted that complaints about failures to establish dialogue around cohesion policy are heard from partners even from such corporatist polities like Slovenia where one could expect dialogue to be a natural practice (Crowley & Stanojevic, 2011). As stressed by an interviewee from the biggest association of employers in Slovenia, for instance, the permanent participant of social dialogue process in the country, the Managing Authority officials were sincerely surprised when asked about the reasons of neglecting the Association as a partner. References to 'not being talked to' in responses of economic and social partners are, perhaps, as frequent as in the ones by CSOs. Respondents from the Hungarian trade unions just like respondents from Hungarian CSOs, expressed utter rejection of the practice of web-based commenting and consultations and underlined that

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[149] Interviewee ESP Pl, 19 Nov 2013.
[150] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Nov 2013.
[151] Interviewee ESP Sl, 8 Nov 2012.

this can in no way be considered as communication worth to be called partnership. In this sense, the reactions of Hungarian non-state actors, involved in partnership, almost totally converge.

Partners across all four countries point to a well-known range of problems with partnership, namely excessive formalism, lack of communication as non-existent or, at best, disrupted flows of information about developments in cohesion policy, continuous neglect of any attempt by the partners to communicate and discuss these problems. The accent on the latter might even be called a specific way of contesting partnership by social partners – structured communication through jointly signed letters, petitions and position papers, as opposed to voice strategies of boycotts and even street protests applied by CSOs, is what gives contestation on the part of economic and social partners a special twist.

Another theme common for both groups of actors is disagreements about procedures relied on for implementation of partnership. Just like CSOs, respondents from economic and social partners refer to faulty rules and procedures such as imbalanced representation in the MCs, majority voting as the decision-making mode, lack of time to prepare feedback on policy documents etc. Speaking about the MCs, a respondent from the Slovak Association of Employers mentions: ' … one has to be aware of the functional shortcomings of these entities [the MCs – *A.D.*]: *meeting agendas are far too extensive, the thematic variety of discussed issues is too wide, and the domination of the administrative side among members is obvious*'.[152] Although reference to 'far too extensive agenda' itself reveals a peculiarity of understandings of economic and social partners accustomed to a certain number of issues on the agenda and thus very often 'getting lost' in the diversity of cohesion policy topics, the remark points to general dissatisfaction with existing procedures. One respondent from the Slovene chamber for crafts and small businesses echoes the previous informant:

> Of course *everything has been decided before* and the members of the MCs who are not involved in the daily process, they can only say 'yes, we agree or we don't'. *The majority of the members are people, from the Ministry* who are responsible for running the programmes, *so they have more detailed information than people from other stakeholders*.[153]

All in all, there is a great degree of convergence in how economic and social partners and CSOs contest partnership as in what themes organize their understandings of this interactive exercise. In this light, there is more in common between these two groups

[152] Interviewee ESP Sk, 12 Nov 2013.
[153] Interviewee ESP Sl, 4 Apr 2012.

and more clear divergence between their visions of partnership and the ones promulgated by their opponents – state officials.

Yet, upon closer examination, important reservations to this conclusion come to the front. First and foremost, the degree of contestation is considerably lower in case of the economic and social partners. One can frequently hear quite reserved and somewhat lukewarm evaluations of existing failures of partnership devoid of the quite high emotional pitch with which CSOs approach partnership. Many partners, in contrast, point to the fact that '*we actually have some influence*, compared to some member states, *but not as big as we would like to*'.[154] The reason is quite obvious. As explained by another Polish respondent representing the second biggest association of employers: 'this partnership principle is in the regulations, and *it was quite obvious that we should be involved*. We are a representative organization, *so, we have this formal position, let's say, within our Polish legal system*'.[155]

The last quotation uncovers an important distinction between two groups and already flags up that understandings of partnership, although converging on some aspects, are structured differently for the two groups and the same keywords indicate divergence between deeper seated meanings. For starters, if CSOs largely contest partnership around the issue of being included/excluded and, additionally, partnership sparked off intensive debates about who belongs to civil society, and thus possesses a necessary "pass" to partnership arrangements and structures, such sensitivity to recognition is practically absent in discursive interventions of economic and social partners. Recognition as partners, followed by almost totally automatic invitations to take part in cohesion policy-making, is, obviously, guaranteed by their privileged position as participants of social dialogue within tripartite commissions at all levels (in Poland), Economic and Social Councils in Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary. The latter is not disrupted even in Hungary where the government of the day abolished the Council after winning the elections in 2010 and replaced it with a much weaker replica that works far on the sidelines of real political process. Involvement of economic and social partners is required and guaranteed by the national legislations and no serious breaches of that can be found anywhere in four countries. As a result, all participants of social dialogues (and most of the so-called economic and social players) are automatically included.

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[154] Interviewee ESP Pl, 19 Nov 2013.
[155] Interviewee ESP Pl, 1 Oct 2013.

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It is exactly this special status, traditions of inclusion in social dialogue and practices of those interactions that form the core of specific professional background of economic and social partners. It is also through a careful reconstruction of the meaning behind this theme that specificity of how these actors relate to partnership as communication and as certain procedures becomes clear. Analysis in the next section also reveals where the differences between interpretations of partnership by different groups of actors reside.

7.2.2. Partnership as a strictly institutionalized interaction: extension of social dialogue practice

Analysis of how respondents representing economic and social partners describe the most desirable formats of partnership reveals the first distinct feature of their understandings. What is noticeable from the onset is strict insistence on clearly established institutional formats. Reflecting on what does not work in partnership, respondents normally start with expressing bewilderment and even annoyance with the *ad hoc* character of involvement. One interlocutor from the Polish Association of Employers was especially vocal and informative about that:

> Social partners are not *systematically engaged* … However, it cannot be said that they are not being engaged at all – their participation *mostly takes the form of ad hoc consultation and meetings, without clearly outlined schedules and objectives … those entities* [partners – A.D.] *are involved on an ad hoc basis.*[156]

This reaction describes sharply where dissatisfaction of economic and social partners with partnership lies. Existing practice of cohesion policy-making when consultations on policy content can indeed take place in an *ad hoc* manner due to either changes of the government or internal restructuring within managing ministries, or even caused by the Commission which can protract the process for a very long time, are seen by partners as disappointing and, sometimes, even with distrust. Complaints about highly unstructured interaction, both time-wise and in terms of institutions and platforms are normally the first of contestation claims.

In this regard, when asked about what would satisfy them as a proper partnership, respondents would immediately emphasize institutionalization of dialogue. Slovene actors, for instance, frequently use the metaphor of 'open doors' to indicate the desirable

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[156] Interviewee ESP Pl, 17 Sept 2013.

institutionalization of interactions. Open door implies, first, instalment of platforms, fora or working groups and, second, permanence of functioning of those structures. The respondents from the Association of SMEs and Association of Employers summarize these concerns: '*there is no road map of partnership* … as I said they do not want to open doors to other stakeholders to be part of working groups'.[157] 'What I would expect is *that we form a regular working group for different OPs whish gets to decide on priorities*, we represent the industry and there also will be other social partners, especially when it goes for the ESF'.[158] Slovak and Hungarian respondents argue in the same spirit: 'There should be *something like a zone where we move*, let's say, *a playground which is legally and formally structured* and provides opportunities for exchange of opinions'.[159] 'This needs *effective social dialogue* because without it and *effective forum* we have no way to reach this'.[160]

The concerns of Hungarian partners are especially tied to the institutions as a result of abolition of social dialogue structures at the national level. Just like CSOs, they expressed discontent with the procedure of on-line commenting on the drafts of cohesion policy document, the tool used by the Hungarian government to implement partnership. Yet unlike CSOs who only demand interactions as a fact without going much into details on their institutional attributes, they straightforwardly linked true partnership to institutionalization of interactions. Social partners across all four countries resorted to the concept of social dialogue when describing their preferred formats of partnership. As one Slovene respondent stressed while replying to the question about where and how real partnership is disrupted: 'Unfortunately, public servants *do not have a clue about what a real social dialogue is*'.[161] Later he elaborated by drawing parallels between the practice of social dialogue at the EU level and resemblance of the Slovene model to that yet stressing that partnership does not live up to it:

> Talking about social dialogue … If you take it very wide, social dialogue is practically a dialogue between NGOs and the government, but if we look at the EU model, there *is a pure three party social dialogue and the Slovene system is very similar to the EU social dialogue system*. But for some reason these officials forget about this in cohesion policy.[162]

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[157] Interviewee ESP Sl, 5 Apr 2012.
[158] Interviewee ESP Sl, 8 Nov 2012.
[159] Interviewee ESP Sk, 23 Nov 2012.
[160] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Nov 2013.
[161] Interviewee ESP Sl, 2 Apr 2012.
[162] Interviewee ESP Sl, 5 Apr 2012.

Representative of the Slovak confederation of trade unions even suggested that partnership has nothing to do with the cohesion policy but is solely about national planning, and again equated it with social dialogue: 'At the national level it is not cohesion policy, it is national planning, in which case *we do it according to the Slovak traditions of social dialogue, I mean through the Economic and Social Council*'.[163]

In Poland, respondents constantly referred to provisions of the Polish legislation that established the practice of tripartite dialogue (the term they preferred to use). True partnership, in their opinion, is, first and foremost, equated with this practice, especially its institutional side – numerous and regularly-functioning well-developed platforms, commissions and committees. Explaining why she disagrees with existing practice of partnership, one Polish respondent explicitly said:

> There is this clearly unused or, maybe, ignored potential for partnership - *our existing tripartite instruments such as employment councils at the regional and local levels, regional tripartite commissions*. All these instruments work for finding common solutions but *they are not used.*[164]

For Polish partners these institutional platforms are believed to be the locus of partnership interactions. Their underuse is a sore point for them and is seen as an attempt to bypass existing practices. The position paper, prepared by all major Polish economic and social partners together explicitly speaks about avoiding duplication in terms of institutional structures and platforms of cooperation for cohesion policy and calls for practicing partnership within existing ones.

This focus on structures and institutions also explains why economic and social partners very frequently placed the MCs in the center of their interventions about partnership. If for CSOs the MCs are structures that pose some threat to their independence and even co-optation and capture or, conversely, the epitome of unnecessary formalism and window-dressing, for economic and social partners they are the primary battlegrounds for policy content. Social partners naturally feel "at home" in the MCs and view them not only as a solution to suspicious and disliked "ad hoc*ism*" but as the primary space for future reforms of partnership. Hungarian partners especially underlined their importance, exactly due to the fact that the MCs were, in essence, the only formal structures available after dissolution of others.

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[163] Interviewee ESP Sk, 23 Nov 2012.
[164] Interviewee ESP Pl, 9 Sept 2012.

We have been the members of the MC from the very beginning and *these are very important structures, the platforms for letting them know our view*. When the government wanted to reduce the number of members, there was a big protest! So, a better partnership should start there, for sure.[165]

Their Polish counterparts agree: 'Partnership principle, first of all, is that social partners are members of different bodies composed by our government; *the most important are the MCs*'.[166]

Equating partnership with communication, elimination of *ad hoc* character of interactions and insisting on strict formalization of partnership structures, especially the MCs, economic and social partners uncover how partnership means for them. It also becomes clear how this view differs from interpretations of both state officials and CSOs. The former, as was shown in chapter 5 insist on the regime of public consultations, quite a provisional and temporary template of partnership, normally suitable for the programming period only and hardly ever practiced afterwards. As for other interactions, state officials, especially the ones from the line ministers, feel themselves much more comfortable exactly with *ad hoc* encounters, organized and held when needed.[167] Formalization of these encounters up to the point when their time, format and agendas are prescribed in the Regulations is seen by state officials as unnecessary complication and, surprisingly, excessive bureaucratization.[168] However, economic and social partners are very sympathetic of it. The MCs, in their turn, are perceived by state officials as convenient platforms for practicing transparency and reporting for the EU rather than discussion fora.

As for CSOs, these actors are very comfortable with *ad hoc* character of communication, given than, as was shown before, they normally face with zero desire for communication on the part of state officials. Appeals for formalization of interactions have been found only in remarks of Slovene CSOs. For the majority of these actors, strict

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[165] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Sept 2012.

[166] Interviewee ESP Pl, 19 Nov 2013.

[167] A former official of the Ministry of Environment in Slovenia gave a very detailed account of "internal" attitudes towards partnership: 'It is hard to say something certain about partnership. But, of course, I need to defend bureaucrats a little bit, not only because I was working for them and now I am an NGO person. But you need to know that it is not always possible to have this partnership. I remember *this constant mess when we need to do so much, prepare so many documents, we have the Commission, on the one side, plus the Ministry of Economy, on the other*. Then it turns out that *the deadline for something is the next week. You come to your table and there is an email from the boss that we need to prepare the documents and somehow show partnership*. And you understand that *if you go and organize this consultation it will last for several months and so on*. It is not something that is easy to do when you are loaded with other work.' (Interviewee CSO Sl, 7 Sep 2012).

[168] 'Let' talk about simplification of partnership then if we brought up this theme. We need to find flexibility in everything but trade unions insist on discussing every month!', was a remark by an employee in the Polish ministry (Interviewee SO PL, 14 June 2013).

formalization is, on the contrary, an attribute of failed partnership and rubber-stamping. The MCs are not seen as a solution either (Cartwright & Batory, 2012).

To conclude, economic and social partners associate partnership with thorough proceduralisation of interactions, preferably modelled on practices of social dialogue. They also insist on revitalization of existing institutions such as the MCs most of which indeed turned into platforms for reporting performance by state officials. These strong opinions on the procedural side of partnership confirm that understandings of economic and social partners are indeed different from those by CSOs and state officials and are built around their unique experiences.

7.2.3 Partnership and capacity building

Peculiarities of interpretations of partnership by social partners also transpire through another theme − equation of partnership with capacity building. Direct equations of successful partnership with capacity building could also be found in utterances made by representatives of CSOs. The link between access to money for strengthening the organizational capacities and partnership is, thus, another common theme that organizes interventions of partnership for both groups of actors. However, if this issues is of great relevance for only a small segment of CSOs, mostly for social ones for whom ensuring the flow of funds is essential to continue other activities, it is economic and social partners who placed capacity building in the center of all interventions about partnership.

References to capacity building are found in every interview. The quote below illustrates how capacity building is situated in the narratives:

> I am a member of the ESF[169] advisory Committee in Brussels. So, *this situation with the money allocated for capacity building of partners and development of social dialogue is a very good example of how they* [civil servants − A.D.] *think of partnership.* Together with colleagues from the Chamber of Commerce we were talking to other colleagues from other member states, and they asked us: did you use the money for capacity building for social partners? … So, we had to hear that in Brussels and not in Slovenia, that we did not have an opportunity to use this money. When we came back we, *we went to the government and asked if we can propose what our needs are.*[170]

Respondent from the Hungarian confederation of trade unions discussed at length the right way that partnership shall be implemented linking it to capacity building. After

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[169] European Social Fund.
[170] Interviewee ESP Sl, 4 Apr 2012.

having specified that the first step in the right way direction should be 'restoration of the abolished Interest Reconciliation Council', she goes on:

> And *in connection to that*, another thing. During the latest programming period, *there was a special money fund for social partners from the ESF, for capacity building for social partners*. This is because the European Commission thinks that social partners … there is the accepted document of the Commission *that social partners have a distinguished role in developing the economy and filling the criteria of the European principles, like partnership, for example*.[171]

Respondent form the Polish association of employers succinctly echoes her counterparts: '*Strengthening the partners' potential is a necessary condition for the development and strengthening of the partnership principle* in Poland'.[172]

There are clear reasons for such unanimity and emphasis. Close communication within such structures as the ESF advisory Committee is one of these. This platform brings together economic and social partners form all member states and, it can be assumed, contributes to emergence of shared understandings on a range of problems. That such interactions matter is confirmed by one observation. Social partners from the new member states especially underline how unanimous they are with their counterparts from other member states in stressing importance of the issue of capacity building for partnership. They emphasize that is not a uniquely Eastern European pitfall of partnership but that 'things are the same in all member states' and explain that they found out about it in the course of interactions within the above-mentioned platform.[173]

Partnership came across as an opportunity to draw attention to a very pressing issue, namely the traditional organizational weakness of social partners in the CEE countries. Discussion around partnership, thus, is a window of opportunity that allows social partners to raise this issue once again. Unlike CSOs, who are by far more flexible and better equipped to ensure flows of additional funding, social partners, undoubtedly, lag behind. At the same time, such a moneyless state of affairs does not go well with the proclaimed importance of social partners in sustaining European social model or implementation of the EU social policy, a very deeply entrenched aspect of self-identification and self-perceptions shared by social partners. This fundamental collision drove social partners (assumingly, in older member states too) to frame debates around partnership in terms of timely and systematic allocation of money for their needs.

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[171] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Nov 2013.
[172] Interviewee ESP Pl, 17 Sept 2013.
[173] Interviewee ESP Hu 27 Nov 2013.

Moreover, interventions about failures of the governments to allocate capacity building money are almost always accompanied by remarks about the necessity to distinguish between CSOs and social partners. The quotes below demonstrate how this link works:

> There will be the meeting of Economic and Social Council and we will warn the government again that the Managing Authority *is not responding to our appeals about partnership*. For *the priority on capacity building* there have already been several calls for proposals for NGOs and none for social partners. We see *that our government is more inclined to the civil dialogue with NGOs than to social dialogue*.[174]

Talking about the Regulations for the ESF Fund, which were actively negotiated with social partners at the EU level and which contain the provision about the money for capacity building, a Hungarian respondent stresses why she feels uneasy about the whole exercise of partnership:

> This document was accepted by the Commission. It is on the role of social partners and it explains *why this money should be taken separately*. Yet the practice in most countries is that not only social partners but also NGOs use a part of this money! … This is the practice of other countries too. *They want to dissolve social partners and weaken them, weaken social dialogue, to mix us with NGOs*.[175]

This remark clearly demonstrated that for economic and social partners contesting partnership along the lines of allocation of money for capacity building is not only a reflection of quite a down-to-earth intention to secure some funding. Debates around partnership, in their turn, are not only utilized to attract more attention to this issue. The practice of partnership brings some noticeable threats or magnifies existing ones to identity of social partners. Coming together with CSOs within consultative bodies, platforms and fora already upholds habitual picture of being the privileged partner. In partnership arrangements, social partners suddenly found themselves equal in status, rights and opportunities to NGOs which was a serious blow on their institutional identities and caused a wave of negative reactions. This attitude is very visible in the interviews. Securing special money for social dialogue appears to be a tool that can stop the 'dissolving' and weakening of partners.

Sharing capacity building resources with NGOs only aggravates this feeling of dissolving and sharpens the stance of economic and social partners on partnership as being

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[174] Interviewee ESP Sl, 5 Sept 2012.
[175] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Nov 2013.

about social dialogue, highly structured interactions of the most representative partners, namely themselves. An intervention of the Slovak respondent uncovers additional peculiarity of understanding of partnership by social partners:

> Well, we have to be with NGOs in this partnership but the question *is whether they are representative*. If they represent 10 people, why do we have to take them into account? Are they going to talk about their interest only or about? Will they follow any agreement that we have? Will they put it into practice? *We are just having them without representation for hearing about their position but that is not partnership. Partnership is when I have an agreement and obligations to follow it, some power to enforce it*.[176]

The reconstruction of the meanings behind omnipresent references to capacity building helps to better nuance how social partners contest partnership and how they see it, for example, as extending over the most representative partners or built into existing structures and platforms for interactions. Equating partnership with proper allocation of these funds for strengthening of their potential, social partners draw their own map of partnership in which they argue for retaining of their special status, recognition of their importance as bodies representing wide societal interests and retaining of existing practices of social dialogue as the main manifestations of partnership.

7.3. Variety of social partners, variety of partnerships

Economic and social partners indeed constitute quite a coherent group when it comes to understanding of partnership. Their insistence on partnership as a continuation of highly institutionalized practice of social dialogue with its systematicity, regularity and proceduralization indeed distinguishes them from both state officials who advocate periodic and wide public consultations, and from some CSOs for whom institutionalization is just one way of practicing partnership. Such unanimity is also very concrete at the level of action – in Poland and Slovenia, social partners work a lot cooperatively in order to exert influence on national authorities and produce appeals, position papers and joint statements.[177] Yet internal heterogeneity within economic and social partners should not be overlooked as it reveals additional important dimensions of their interpretations of partnership.

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[176] Interviewee ESP Sk, 23 Nov 2012.
[177] In Hungary and Slovakia such cooperative spirit is lacking while in Poland and Slovenia respondents from trade unions, for instance, even mention that they work in alliance with the employers against the government although this is hard to imagine in social dialogue.

Clearly, the major inner division lies between organizations of capital and labor or, precisely, between trade unions and associations of employers. The two groups represent different segments of society, function according to different organizational logics and have clearly divergent interests in cohesion policy. Despite widespread skepticism about the strength of both groups in the CEE member states, no matter what causes that, one should not ignore the differences in terms of resources available to them and, consequently, overall political weight, although the latter varies across countries.[178] These distinctions clearly shape understandings and interpretations of partnership which can be seen from informants' remarks. This section details such divergence of meanings.

7.3.1. Chambers of commerce and associations of employments: pragmatic take on partnership

Interpretations of partnership by actors representing capital in social dialogue formula, strike as revealing a lot of pragmatism. As one Polish respondent vividly verbalized it, they can be summarized as 'give us job!'.[179] Later this employee of the second biggest Association of Employers in the country clarified:

> *I would like to have a goal for the partnership, I would like to have a point at which we agree among partners and all other parties why this partnership should be implemented, why are we doing* that. And, actually, I do not remember at any point such a definition of the goal. This is the thing that is missing. For many … it sounds quite theoretical but because of that many public institutions *do not feel why they should be talking to us and why they should involve us …* you have to understand there is a lot of meetings and discussions within the process, a lot of seminars etc. *but sometimes in the end we do not really know why we are doing that. We cannot see the clear goal for all this hassle,* for all this…. Yeah the term "hassle" describes it.[180]

Later, elaborating more on these statements, the respondent added:

> My *organization really seeks a new task within the system because we do not want to be only informed or consulted with no clear results, we want to be responsible for some tasks* and we also feel we can be responsible for them within the system.[181]

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[178] Regardless of how much more resourceful Hungarian chamber of commerce is in comparison with the Hungarian confederation of trade unions, both are equal in terms of exclusion from decision-making.
[179] Interviewee ESP Pl, 1 Oct 2013.
[180] Interviewee ESP Pl, 1 Oct 2013.
[181] Interviewee ESP Pl 1 Oct 2013.

This informant summed up the expectations of this group of social partners best of all. Structural Funds and cohesion policy are viewed quite pragmatically by associations of employers, chambers of crafts and commerce. They are approached as an opportunity to have 'new tasks', much more concrete and tangible than negotiations within social dialogue. The latter has never been a strong practice in the CEE member states, and has even further diminished in its importance and weight in times of economic crisis. That is why the same respondent, while comparing partnership and social dialogue, stresses that their role is more visible and simply real with the former. Her Hungarian colleague speaks along the same lines:

> We should not get carried away. Structural Funds *are of particular interest for us, I mean for our members*, in this case. They open funding for them to apply for in order to restructure, reform or go in a new direction, start new production maybe. *This is not negotiations about wages or Labor Code, these are real things*.[182]

The same message can be found in utterances of representatives of these organizations across four countries. Clearly defining their major role as defenders and representatives of interests of their members, chambers of commerce and associations of employers approach their role in cohesion policy, first of all, from the perspective of ensuring access to money of their members. Speaking about partnership, for instance, a respondent from the Slovene chamber of crafts openly speak about her organization's primary intention in relation to Structural Funds:

> … nobody thinks, when they are preparing applications or tenders, *they don't think that the small* [enterprises − A.D.] *will have much more work to do if they want to apply*. And we want to stress *that we think how the tenders should be prepared, what the interests are and what the capacities of the smallest are*.[183]

The representative of the Hungarian chamber for farmers devoted much time to explaining what cohesion policy is for his association and, while discussing partnership, also stressed:

> I said, gentlemen, *let the farmers have access to this money*, we have a real chance to improve the situation during these seven years. *In spirit of partnership, there should be various measures that support producers'*

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[182] Interviewee ESP Hu, 16 Oct 2013.
[183] Interviewee ESP S,l 4 Apr 2012.

groups! We should have this priority. So, *we are doing our best to make it easier for farmers to apply for that money.*[184]

Finally, the Polish respondent effectively sums up:

> I mean they [state authorities] should look at the problems *with the procedures, different procedures of applications to the SFs for SMEs*, different ways of procedures, different requirements, in some cases they are horrible, this causes the trouble that a lot of firms are not interested in use of the Funds; different requirements connected with financial guarantees, evaluation process. *We would like to have concrete influence on these issues, this is what I mean by a good partnership.*[185]

Thus, partnership acquires a very pragmatic meaning for them. Partnership is essentially a successful work on fulfilling their major task, namely ensuring access to the money for their members. It should be noted, though, that such understanding is also linked to other concerns related to waning of importance of social dialogue. As confirmed by practically all respondents, partnership principle provided them with a chance to 'do the real things' instead of senseless consultations within social dialogue structures, especially recently when, regardless of intensity of negotiations on austerity measures, social partners ubiquitously failed to exert much influence. It is exactly for this reason that representatives of these actors are normally of a very skeptical opinion of consultations for cohesion policy, straightforwardly saying that they '*are treated as consultants only, and that is a clear facade*'.[186]

This claim is reminiscent of the one put forward by CSOs who also opposed consultations. However, the deeper meaning is radically different. While CSOs vehemently oppose consultations and, for instance, refer to participation in elaboration of policy content and evaluation and monitoring, representatives of social partners are more *realistic* in their arguments. They do not operate with normative appeals to civic control, scrutiny, democracy or justice. For example, they openly, although not without disappointment, admit that it is unlikely that they can have much influence on policy content which emerges largely as a result of negotiations between state officials and the Commission. That is why, as they confess, they are not very interested in having a mere say, a problem most pressing for silenced CSOs. Yet what they would like to have is involvement in project selection, a greater influence on technical requirements for projects and even, as

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[184] Interviewee ESP Hu, 5 Oct 2011.
[185] Interviewee ESP Pl, 19 Nov 2013. Respondent from the Slovak association of employers also straightforwardly underlined that the whole ERDF should be spent on competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises.
[186] Interviewee ESP Pl, 10 Sept 2012.

expressed by one Slovak respondent 'participation *in co-rotating the management* of the MCs'.[187] The latter is presented as the demand from their members who would like to have a better access to the money, and social partners, established to serve the interests of their members, take this task very seriously.

Furthermore, as noted by one respondent, against the background of social dialogue that has been withering away in recent years, this gives them a feeling that '*we are much stronger within partnership than within social dialogue because we can see some results*'.[188] Partnership for them becomes a concrete task in a range of other goals such as providing '*trainings for their members, informing them about existing legislative changes and financial opportunities*', a set of functions that distinguish employers and business associations and constitute the core of their specific professional background.[189]

7.3.2. Trade unions: partnership as bargaining and implementation of own projects

Trade unions are organizations that function according to quite a distinct logic. They also claim to be representing interests of their constituents, like associations of employers, yet they undoubtedly perform this and any functions in their unique way which also transpires through how they interpret partnership. First of all, the scope of their interests is naturally limited to employment and labor policy, a segment of policies most vital for them. In practical terms, this naturally narrows down thematic priorities of cohesion policy to several issues, mainly, fighting unemployment as in getting citizens back to the labor market. Secondly, their logic of action is also limited to only a small bunch of instruments such as participation in bargaining or, in case of failure, mobilization of workers for protests. Trade unions do not provide services like NGOs, neither do they organize, or have possibility and resources to do so, trainings, conferences and workshops for their constituents like organizations representing the capital. And just like for their counterparts from chambers and associations of employers, a complex interplay of their political interests, their organizational structures and identities shape their understandings of partnership.

First of all, representatives of trade unions openly equate partnership with consultations, a format of interactions strongly rejected by both associations of employers and many CSOs. Unlike these actors, representatives of trade unions especially underline importance of consultations. That is not hugely surprising, given that consultations is the

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[187] Interviewee ESP Sk, 12 Nov 2013.
[188] Interviewee ESP Pl, 1 Oct 2013.
[189] Interviewee ESP Pl, 11 Sept 2012.

backbone of their activities. It is important to note that 'telling our opinions, exchanging views' in the process of consultations constitutes the core of understandings of partnership shared by representatives of trade unions. As one Hungarian respondent put it: 'partnership means that I, as the government, *know that I have to consult my partners in order to know their opinions on the issues, I am interested to know the opinion of my partners*'.[190] A respondent from the Slovak union of steel industry workers echoes this sentiment: 'partnership would be, first of all, faith to the practice when we sit around the table and exchange our opinions … *we want to voice them, put them on the table, have this round of exchange*'.[191] For another Slovak respondent partnership is 'when we are getting some reports from the government, *discuss them in the Economic and Social Council and deliver our positions*'.[192]

At first sight, this may seem similar to CSOs' claims about being heard and having a say but the underlying meaning as dynamics behind these consultations turns out to be completely different for trade unions. For CSOs, having a say represents an extraordinary situation of actually having an opportunity to express their opinions against the background of being almost totally silenced. For trade unions this problem is not relevant due to their being compulsory partners in social dialogue anyway. For them disruption of partnership occurs, first of all, when the routine of opinion exchange gets disrupted.

A remark by the Hungarian respondent further clarifies the meaning: 'what I mean … it is very simple: we are sitting in the room and reach the agreement and *this is what differentiates formalistic consultations from negotiations*'.[193] This short comment reveals the deeper meaning of consultations for trade unions. The exchange of opinions that they insist on essentially means bargaining and negotiations as a ping-pong game of exchanging policy proposals which ends up with reaching some agreement. Unlike for CSOs, for trade unions consultations, first of all, unfold according to a certain logic of bargaining and, secondly, lead to a particular outcome in the format of agreement. In contrast, respondents from CSOs insist on deliberation as arguing, emphasize deliberation as the dynamics of partnership that interests them the most. From interviews with CSOs, it becomes clear that deliberation occupies the center of the map of partnership with outcome being in the margins. Respondents from trade unions take a different position – partnership becomes equated with harsh practice of negotiations as bargaining, and the outcome has a particular

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[190] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Nov 2013.
[191] Interviewee ESP Sk, 24 Nov 2012.
[192] Interviewee ESP Sk, 23 Nov 2012.
[193] Interviewee ESP Hu, 27 Nov 2013.

significance. It is against it that trade unions evaluate how far they gave away or retreated. Emphasis on agreement comes to the front in almost all interventions. As one Slovene respondent illustrates: 'We see *partnership as* more cooperation, especially *about concluding certain agreements, concluding about certain solutions* … cohesion policy-making does not have it and we stress this everywhere'.[194]

In this sense, interpretation of partnership by trade unions is also devoid of lofty expectations intrinsic to the views of many CSOs. Partnership is viewed as keeping up with the existing practice of negotiations which are meant to end with a certain agreement, although this may be a zero sum game with losses and wins. Partnership is not having a talk for the sake of talk between highly unequal partners who never communicate, an aspect that carries special importance for CSOs. Trade unions are quite aware of their power in this respect. A Slovene respondent, when commenting on the question why she thinks partnership does not apply to CSOs, assertively stressed: 'because they have no negotiating power. We are independent, *we have a function of forming the legislation*'.[195] Interpretations of partnership reflect experience of trade unions linked to negotiations, bargaining and reaching agreements. Another related angle of deeper meaning is keeping obligations reached as a result of these negotiations. As one Polish respondent spells it out: '*agreements must be respected*, otherwise why would I speak about partnership'.[196] Partnership, consequently, acquires a particular meaning of keeping the promises of the agreements, whichever form they take in the process of cohesion policy-making.

Interpreting partnership in terms of wide agreements between major societal actors also sheds light at why respondents from trade unions so frequently speak about common visions, a keyword that could only be found in utterances of state officials. A Slovak respondent, while elaborating at length about his understandings of disrupted partnership, directly states:

> The main disruption is that *the whole atmosphere around the Funds* from the cohesion policy *is just very dispersed*. I think there is no real cooperation, there is no real cohesion, vision what to do with that money … I think *there is no unity and vision and real knowledge about what these funds actually mean for the country, what we cud really positively do with this money*.[197]

[194] Interviewee ESP Sl, 29 Nov 2013.
[195] Interviewee ESP Sl, 5 Sept 2012.
[196] Interviewee ESP Pl, 10 Sept 2012.
[197] Interviewee ESP Sk, 24 Nov 2013.

The second big theme that comes up in interventions about partnership made by representatives of trade unions is also similar to the one found in utterances by CSOs. Cohesion policy also brought new opportunities for trade unions to try themselves in areas where they traditionally were never active. Just like for actors representing capital who discovered new tasks for themselves with the arrival of Structural Funds money, cohesion policy made real for trade unions to go beyond consultative policy-making and policy design of social dialogue an try themselves as implementers of projects. These expectations naturally found their ways into utterances about partnership and even acquired a stronger pitch as trade unions remain the only actors who are actually excluded from the list of project applicants, according to the Regulations, unlike associations of employers and CSOs. Such an unfairness is depicted as a blow on partnership by respondents. Comparing her organization with CSOs, for instance, the representative of the Slovene biggest confederation of trade unions remarks:

> We don't have anything against NGOs, *we just think that not even that we should have the same opportunities as NGOs regarding finance from the ESF, we should also have some priorities and advantages*. At that area we are totally lacking behind because all the finances, *all the money that comes from the ESF is kind of going around us, we are not considered as beneficiaries in any of those calls for proposals*.[198]

In another interview, the respondent from Slovenia puts it very bluntly: '*we want to implement our own policies*! *Why would not we want our projects*'.[199] Her colleague from Poland echoes this remark: 'in our MC, where I am a member, *we strongly opposed the decision that trade unions cannot be applicants because they replaced us*'.[200] Partnership is repeatedly evaluated by trade unions as disrupted because of lack of access to money. This naturally signals about strategic goal of such framing of partnership. Indeed, against the background of a widespread attitude that Structural Funds monies are largely the source of financial stability for financially highly vulnerable actors in CEE member states, the presence of other considerations in such an interpretation of partnership should not be downgraded. Being project beneficiaries not only brings bold financial support for trade unions, it also serves a function of sustaining themselves as important policy actors, and this is where interpreting partnership as involvement in policy implementation differs for CSOs and trade unions. This time CSOs reveal quite pragmatic reading of partnership. Implementing projects implies solving real-world problems of disadvantaged groups,

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[198] Interviewee ESP Sl, 5 Sept 2012.
[199] Interviewee ESP Sl, 29 Nov 2013.
[200] Interviewee ESP Pl, 10 Sept 2012.

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activity that CSOs have traditionally been involved and are largely known for. Access to the Funds for them, framed in terms of partnership, rather means ensuring that this practice is unbreakable.

For trade unions, the stakes are much higher, especially in the context when their influence and roles are dramatically declining. In utterances about partnership, this transpires through numerous justifications why trade unions need to become project applicants. Slovene and Polish respondents, for example, consistently mentioned that the area of a particular interest for them as project implementers was education. As one Polish respondent stressed, '*education is the primary zone for us. We need to reach the people and help them to learn more about their rights and also that we help them to fight for their rights*'.[201] As is seen from the intervention, partnership as implementation of the projects brings another tangible benefit for trade unions, namely an opportunity to strengthen their positions as actors, an aspiration very different to at first sight similar interpretations of partnership by associations of capital and CSOs. The difference from CSOs' visions of partnership is that if in utterances by respondents from CSOs references to 'project partnership' can frequently be found, trade unions almost never view it in these terms. Stressing that they possess enough resources and enjoy greater embededdness in their constituencies, they view only themselves as project implementers.

7.4. Conclusions

The findings for economic and social partners indicate that there is clear cross-country convergence with regards to how these actors interpret partnership. The case of the third group of actors involved in implementation of the partnership principle is, in this sense, identical to the case of state officials. Just like state officials, representatives of economic and social partners approach partnership in similar terms across the national borders. This indicates that professional backgrounds rather than cultural ones shape actors' understandings of partnership.

Analysis of associative connotations for the keywords with reference to economic and social partners also demonstrates that they interpret partnership in quite distinct manner. The meanings that they attach to partnership reflect a number of specificities of their belonging to the group of economic and social partners, a group of actors with highly specific problems, identities and expectations. Issues of stricter institutionalization and

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[201] Interviewee ESP Pl, 13 Sept 2012.

intolerance to *ad hoc* and irregular character of interactions coupled with strong concerns about dissolving identities and overall loss of distinctiveness as policy actors constitute the core of concerns for economic and social partners. These concerns are closely intertwined with their projections of partnership and directly find the way into expectations from it. It is important to note that this finding, in turn, disconfirms the assumptions found in some strands of the research literature. CEE member states are often classified into, in relation to economic and social partners, uniquely neocorporatist Slovenia and the Visegrad countries with weak economic and social partners.

There is some intra-group divergence, like cases of other groups of actors. Yet in case of economic and social partners, this divergence only nuances and highlights their overall distinctiveness form other groups of actors. Representatives of the organized labor and the capital emphasize different aspects of partnership and thus draw quite a dichotomous picture. For the former partnership becomes equated with proper performing their duties towards their own members and is also linked to acquiring new tasks within policy-making. As for trade unions, partnership is firmly linked to issues of bargaining, keeping the agreements and, to a lesser extent, acquiring a new function of implementing the projects.

The data presented in this chapter very straightforwardly suggests that there is the pattern of cross-actors rather than cross-country divergence in how actors from all three groups contest partnership. Actors do not converge on a single keyword when the deeper meanings of partnership are reconstructed. The latter is extremely important in light of one aspect related to the puzzling contestation over partnership – actors may be speaking about partnership in similar terms but hugely disagree at the same time. Analysis of associative connotations demonstrates that similarity of language does not presuppose convergence of understandings. Moreover, what the findings also illuminate is how meanings of partnership are produced and shaped by professional backgrounds, with the exception of CSOs.

What do these findings bring generally to the discussion about implementation of the partnership principle in the CEE member states, and how the process of contestation unfolds? Most importantly, what are the wider implications of the study, namely what do the findings add to wider discussions about implementation of the EU requirements in the new member states, development of civil society actors there and, most importantly, for the discussion of possibility and pitfalls of European idea of partnership in the region. The following chapter synthesizes the empirical findings for all three groups of actors and

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formulates the main arguments of the thesis. It also once again juxtaposes them against wider research literature and by doing this summarizes the major contributions of the study.

Chapter 8. Summary of the empirical findings: understanding contestation over partnership

Contestation over policies ideas and policy requirements is at the core of any policy-making process and is present at any stage of the policy cycle. This is even more relevant for policies and requirements that are designed elsewhere as in the case with the EU policies and rules which later have to become integral part of domestic policy landscapes. What drives contestation and according to what logic it unfolds, thus, become questions of primary importance for a better understanding of inner mechanisms of policy-making. This is becoming increasingly important to explore in the context of deepening European integration when more and more policies emerge at the supranational level.

Partnership principle for Structural Funds is one of the EU requirements highly contested on the grounds. Actors persistently point to continuous failures of this policy requirement and point out that partnership does not live up to any of their expectations. Whilst criticizing partnership practice, actors come up with highly diverse opinions on what a true partnership is and how it is meant to be implemented. They equate partnership with efficiency, rules and procedures, communication, self-empowerment or measure it against highly normative ideals of democracy and political participation. Interestingly, the new EU member states come across as the space of an especially intensive contestation over partnership. Existing research literature provides valuable yet limited in their explanatory potential tools for the study of contestation. As a result, existing accounts of partnership are inconclusive and partial, at best, and miss out on very important dynamics of partnership practice.

The thesis addressed these gaps in the literature and sought to answer the question how it is being contested in four new member states. The thesis investigated whether any patterns of this process can be identified and, if yes, what are they. Capturing the logic of contestation over partnership provides a gateway for a better understanding of a number of highly important problems. Among them are logic and driving mechanisms of implementation of the EU policies, functioning of partnership as an increasingly popular arrangement in public policy-making across the globe and peculiarities of interactions between state and non-state actors. Moreover, through partnership principle the European Commission advances a particular solution to the growing democratic deficit in the EU.

Involvement of civil society actors in EU policy-making is believed to bring the EU closer to citizens. How this idea is met on the grounds and, moreover, in the new member states, and how all involved actors relate to it add even more relevance to studying contestation over partnership.

The project has sought to conceptually and empirically account for contestation over partnership in the new member states. The thesis built on conceptual and analytical potential of the literature on contestation of norms in IR. The elaborated analytical framework that approaches contestation as enactment by actors of meanings-in-use of partnership, suggests focusing on reconstruction of meanings-in-use through interpretive methodology and distinguishes between two logics of such enactment.

According to the first one, actors' *cultural backgrounds* serve as reservoirs of meanings. In empirical terms, cross-country divergence of meaning-in-use of partnership is expected to be found. The elaborated analytical framework incorporates the second assumption about what structures actors' understandings. According to it, *professional backgrounds* structure actors' interpretations of partnership and provide basis for shared understandings. Empirically, a divergence of meanings of partnership across groups of actors rather countries, is to be found if this assumption holds. Additionally, it was assumed that a pattern of diffusion can be detected with both logics at play.

This chapter aims to synthesize and evaluate the empirical findings one more time. It sums up the data on reconstructed structure of meaning-in-use of partnership with reference to each group of actors to better illustrate two major findings – a) divergence of meanings across groups of actors yet b) diffusion pattern for CSOs. In conceptual terms, the chapter illustrates better how professional backgrounds as social practices contribute to meaning-making and how they structure domestic contestation over partnership. Additionally a more in-depth comparison of identified meanings is done.

This chapter also places the results of the empirical inquiry, namely knowledge of how actors actually interpret partnership, in a wider context and problematic discussed in the existing literature on Europeanization and implementation of the EU policies, European civil society and political economy. It aims to discuss how the obtained findings relate to existing literature and, from this perspective, highlights the contribution of the thesis to the academic literature.

8.1 Summary and evaluation of the empirical findings

Empirically the project reconstructed meanings of partnership shared by actors. 90 conversational interviews with representatives of all three groups of actors across four countries have been conducted in order to access meanings and identify the logic of meaning-making. An interpretive analysis of the texts of interviews has been conducted during which the emphasis was placed on a complex interplay of language and emotive dynamics of responses that the interview setting was producing in order to go beyond discourse about partnership and reach deeper layer of meanings. The interview data was also triangulated with interpretive analysis of policy documents.

Six keywords and associative connotations identified for them provided an entry into how actors interpret partnership. These keywords were partially taken from the literature (rules, procedures, communication and recognition) and partially extracted inductively from the interviews (implementation and empowerment). The exercise of keywords selection was carried out in order to compare reconstructed meanings-in-use of partnership and to identify which logic of contestation prevails: the one when actors' interpretations of partnership are structured by a) their cultural backgrounds or b) professional backgrounds.

Comparative analysis of meanings of partnership led to the major finding of this thesis – meanings of partnership converge across countries under scrutiny yet diverge across groups of actors.

Tables 6 and 7 illustrate the main empirical findings. Table 6 displays associative connotations for six keywords in reference to three groups of actors. It is presented in order to better illustrate the first outcome, namely divergence across groups of actors. Table 7 displays the outcome of the diffusion pattern found for one group of actors – civil society organizations. No Table that would illustrate outcome of divergence across countries is presented. Such table would inevitably be a replica of Table 6 structured in a way that it would show the country dimension (additional country column) yet identical in content.

Table 6. Pattern of divergence across groups of actors

Keyword(s)	State officials	CSOs	Economic and social partners
rules	Compliance with the EU rules Representation Equality of treatment	Voice distribution Balanced representation Rules of access Selection of partners Voting rules	Voice distribution Voting rules Rules of maintenance
procedures	Public consultations Mediation (facilitation) of consultations	Transparency procedures Timely informing	Institutionalized systematic dialogue within existing structures
communication	Providing a platform for having a say Collection of ideas, expertise and input Addressing all claims	Arguing and deliberation Non-silencing Listening	Communication of the right format Bargaining Reaching agreement
empowerment (capacity building)	Providing resources Obligation to satisfy the needs	Being entitled for resources Material benefits Capacity building	Support and material benefits Organizational development
recognition	Strategic vision No particularism Real partner requirements: constructive criticism, structured partners, pro-active,	Recognition of professionalism Expertise Ability to implement policies Respect Attention	Delegating tasks (jobs) Preservation of current status as privileged partners in policy-making
implementation	Policy implementation fire-fighting	Project implementation as 'doing the job' Involving the affected Project partnership	Access to money for members Having own policies

Source: Tables 3, 4, 5 (Ch 5, 6, 7).

A look at Table 6 helps to better understand how three groups of actors interpret partnership. Most importantly, the Table displays divergence of meanings of partnership across groups of actors rather than countries or, in other words, crucial importance of

professional backgrounds as structuring actors' interpretations of partnership. Regardless of country of origin, individuals representing each group of actors interpret partnership similarly. These interpretations are inextricably linked to peculiarities of their activities and practices associated with them, self-perceptions as representatives of specific groups of actors and institutional identities rather than embededdness in specific cultural contexts. At the same time, associative connotations identified for each keyword indicate that even when interlocutors discussed partnership in strikingly similar terms and even using the same keywords, the underlying meanings are different for three groups.

It should be noted, however, that divergence of interpretations of partnership continues far beyond divergence identified for the six selected keywords. Responses to questions about practice of partnership touched upon numerous themes important and relevant for actors, not exclusively limited to the ones captured by six keywords. During the interviews respondents from each group of actors referred to many themes. These constitute narratives that embrace and cohere topics relevant for their life experiences as representatives of a particular group of actors as well as experiences of dealing with partnership.

For instance, a recurring theme for representatives of many CSOs was a theme of politicization. Respondents would express their discontent with, allegedly, political appointment of some organizations into the partnership structures. As it turned out later, apart from picking up on partnership as a set of certain rules, most often, rules of access, respondents, while mentioning politicization, expressed their general views on ethics of public administration. Another example could be numerous references to dissatisfaction on the part of state officials with how the EU institutions functions. Talking about partnership, representatives of bureaucratic structures would every now and again equate partnership with honesty and consistency of the European Commission, probably, by means of that, reflecting on previous experiences of hectic and not always smooth pre-accession process. Equation of partnership with efficient intra-ministerial cooperation also characterizes representations of partnership shared by state officials.

Existence of other themes, commonly found in responses of interlocutors from particular groups, rather corroborates than rebuts the assumption about divergence of understandings of partnership across groups of actors. Those themes even further nuance differences in how actors approach partnership by revealing unique character of their understandings as composed of various elements (themes). The fact that state officials discuss partnership as proper relations with the European Commission or that

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representatives of trade unions suddenly talk about partnership as a novel for them format of cooperating with employers' associations only emphasizes that understandings of partnership encompass many elements of actors' unique universes of experiences, relevant problems, identity considerations, expectations of the day, interests etc. Additional empirical research on how actors link partnership to these themes could provide an even more in-depth account of interpretations of partnership for each group of actors.

8.1.1. Intra-group divergence

The Table does not display the finding about intra-group divergence. Such intra-group divergence is relevant for all three groups: between central coordination Managing Authorities and line ministries in case of state officials, between bigger (umbrella associations) and smaller (grass-root organizations) in case of CSOs and, finally, between associations representing labor and capital, in the last case. In each case, such divergence takes certain forms. For instance, in case of state officials identified differences in how representatives of two sub-groups relate to partnership do not indicate divergent interpretation but rather signal about different emphases. Employees of different ministries rather stress different aspects of partnership. Communication and implementation would be good examples of such divergence. This does not imply that responses of interlocutors from two different sub-groups either contain or exclude references to these two themes. Conversely, these themes are emphasized yet to a different extent, and are either made central or pushed to the margins of maps of understandings depending on position of these type of state officials in the system of cohesion policy-making.

The cases of CSOs and economic and social partners are more interesting, though. In the latter case, the dividing line runs between representatives of capital and labor. Representatives of trade unions, for example, insist on a particular vision of partnership as communication. Partnership is equated, in their responses, with proper communication as bargaining whereas associations of employers view partnership as communication of a different kind, the one when these actors provide expertise and informed opinions on various policy measures, and this practice is sustained in a systematic and formalized manner. Chapters 5 and 6 provide a more in-depth look into these micro shades and nuances of intra-group divergence. What should be clearly emphasized is that this detected divergence is visibly less significant than larger divergence across three groups of actors. Nuances of understandings of partnerships, identified for *sub-groups* within a group of actors, to the contrary, further disclose and reveal details, specificities and uniqueness of

interpretations shared by representatives of *one* group of actors rather than suggest that divergence is actually not across three but across six groups of actors. These findings send a message that there is a more complex picture behind *professional backgrounds* and that additional layers of interpretations and reservoirs of meanings can be found once one moves down the ladder of backgrounds.

8.1.2. CSOs: fine-graining the argument

As for intra-group divergence in the case of CSOs, that two other divisions come to the front, namely the one between, tentatively, small and big associations and the one across policy areas (social vs. environmental CSOs). Again, just as in the state officials' case, different accents in interpretations of partnership reveal themselves in discussions of respondents working for nation-wide umbrella associations and grass-root or local organizations or the ones working within social or environmental policy domains. For umbrella associations partnership appears as actual access to dialogue with authorities, contrary to 'no dialogue' state, a fact of talking between partners who never talk. For their smaller counterparts partnership is more about subsidiarity meaning some actual walk rather than a mere talk which is, as proved by interviews, is not really a big concern. The same goes for social and environmental CSOs. Implementation of policies, elaborated by the ministries, is the major indication of partnership for social CSOs whereas for the environmental ones partnership is rather participation in elaboration and monitoring. All these little nuances, again, do not refute but rather illuminate *how* professional backgrounds actually shape the meanings of partnership.

However, the most important finding for the case of CSOs is the outcome of diffusion in relation to the main empirical question that structures the dissertation's inquiry. What has been found is that not only professional backgrounds structure how CSOs interpret partnership. The empirical data provides evidence of the role of *cultural backgrounds*. Table 7, in the same manner as Table 6, illustrates this argument.

Table 7. Pattern of diffusion (CSOs)

Keywords	Slovenia	The Visegrad countries
rules	Selection of partners Rules of access: representativeness	Voice distribution Voting Rules of access: equality of opportunities
procedures	Institutionalized platforms Public consultations Transparency	Transparency Procedures of incorporation of input and informing
communication	Openness/transparency Formalized communication Regularity/continuity Incorporation of input	Arguing Deliberation Being listened
recognition	Professionalism	Professionalism
empowerment	Outsourcing Contracting out	Being entitled to benefits and support Access to the Funds
implementation	Policy implementation function	Cooperative problem-solving

Sources: Table 4 (Ch 6)

As can be seen from Table 7 meanings of partnership shared by CSOs differ across countries under scrutiny, and difference lies between Slovenia and the Visegrad countries - Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. The majority of Slovene CSOs interpret partnership in terms divergent to how Visegrad CSOs see it. Comparison of associative connotations for the keyword 'rules' exemplifies this. If for Slovene CSOs certain rules of access make partnership a true partnership, CSOs in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary make a stronger emphasis on rules of decision-making such as voting and equal distribution of partners in institutional settings. On the other side, Slovene actors emphasize importance of representativeness of selected partners, linking this to the issue of accountability whereas for Visegrad CSOs these issues are almost completely out of the partnership map. It does not necessarily matter that such references to rules of access are absent in responses of

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interlocutor from the Visegrad countries. It is rather their minimal weight in the overall picture of utterances about the rules. At the same time, all Slovene CSOs demonstrate adherence to this aspect. Such a focus is simultaneously different from the one of Slovene state officials who seem to be rarely concerned about representativeness and insist on openness of public consultations. In this light, the finding that meanings of partnership differ due to professional backgrounds of actors still holds. Chapter 6 in details describes the differences in meanings and attempts to identify the reasons behind that.

All in all, this data shows that in case of CSOs both cultural and professional backgrounds are at play, a diffusion pattern of contestation rather than effect of professional backgrounds only. The conclusions shall be read with caution though. Although it was possible to identify domestically shaped understandings of partnership shared exclusively by Slovene CSOs as proof of the role of cultural backgrounds, no such trend has been found for CSOs separately from Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, the countries that were eventually labeled together as "Visegrad".

Partially, this is due to the fact that the comparison involved only a limited sample of CSOs from four countries. This allowed only a snapshot of undoubtedly more complex and multidimensional world of CSOs' and their understandings of partnership. In no way could such results lead to conclusions about any cultural homogeneity of the Visegrad countries as exemplified by CSOs' interpretations of partnership, let alone to the conclusion about homogeneity of civil societies in those countries. To prove or, conversely, disprove such an assumption one would need to engage in a more careful and in-depth study of meaning-making in these countries. The Table presents only differences that have been registered using the available resources, methodology and empirical material. Nonetheless, the data does provide a valuable basis for generating conclusions about actors' understandings of partnership as shaped by their belonging to particular (national) contexts and reflecting existing and entrenched traditions of and practice of policy-making.

8.2 Discussion of contributions

This section pursues two major goals. It, first, synthesizes the contribution that this thesis makes to research literature. The major empirical findings, namely the argument that professional backgrounds rather than cultural ones structure actors' understandings of partnership, is juxtaposed against a number of claims developed by scholars of Europeanization, political economy and European civil society. The major contribution of this study relevant for these bodies of literature is revision of the culturalist argument in

understanding how actors relate to a whole range of important policy problems. The argument works through sustaining cross-country variation. Additionally, the findings on how CSOs contest partnership and view involvement in the EU policy-making are discussed in more details in relation to propositions found in the literature on European civil society, namely the one about civil society's role in reconstitution of democracy in the EU. Second, the section discusses research limitations and directions for further research.

The section is divided into three parts. The first juxtaposes the findings against the literature on Europeanization and political economy. The second one does the same in relation to European civil society research. The last one discusses research limitations and directions for future research.

8.2.1. Fixing methodological pitfalls and challenging the culturalist argument

The major findings of this study bring attention to the fact that interpretations of partnership do not differ across countries and, thus, reflect on differences across cultural contexts. Taken form here this finding brings to light problematic character of a whole range of the so-called culturalist arguments and claims that sustain cross-country variation as the major analytical short-cut. The literature on Europeanization, transposition, compliance, political economy and, partially, on civil society operate with an argument about unique combinations of domestic factors that determine a particular outcome, be it policy implementation as in Europeanization or political economy accounts or entrenchment of specific discourses or practices of state/civil society relations as in civil society literature. Investigating phenomena of their interest, all these bodies of literature attempt to contextualize them as historically and culturally embedded within specific contexts. Explanatory factors or variables that are construed in the course of research within these traditions are seen as inherent to specificities of the contexts. Institutional, administrative traditions, historical forms of civil society, capacities of bureaucrats or civil society actors or interests and preferences of various actors are considered as applicable to a country case, and, consequently, cross-country variation is celebrated as the major empirical finding.

The present case study pushed this argument forward and discovered there is more to that. Contestation over partnership was found to be unfolding according to a different logic – the one of professional rather than cultural backgrounds. In constructing partnership for themselves, actors were found to rely on their professional dispositions. Interpretations of partnership, in this light, reflect on unique positionality of different groups of actors within

their domestic contexts. What is more important, is that these positionalities converge across countries rather than diverge as is suggested by the culturalist argument.

The notion of "professional background" adopted for the analytical purposes of this research helped, first and foremost, to address several important methodological problems in existing research in the above-mentioned bodies of literature. Such a conceptual move also revealed new empirical data that was omitted due to specific methodological choices.

First of all, the elaborated analytical framework helped to tackle the problem of numerous competing and sometimes mutually exclusive explanations and variables, frequently located at different levels. The literature on Europeanization, political economy or transposition and compliance operate with a whole bunch of competing variables: certain institutional traditions such as traditions of state/civil society cooperation or entrenched modes of interest intermediation or interests, capacities or identities of state officials in a particular country etc. Actors can be seen as acting upon rationally realized interests or, conversely, as enacting deeply seated and historically crystalized beliefs and attitudes. Application of either of them to the study of partnership inevitably leads to partiality in explanations when only certain factors are accepted as directly related to partnership practice.

Yet, reconstruction of meanings-in-use of partnership challenges this view. The argument about actors' interests is particularly illustrative. For state officials, for instance, interpretations of partnership are shaped by their unique positionality within the system of cohesion policy-making in which they have to deal with numerous external (EU rules) and internal (politics of intra-bureaucratic coordination) constraints. At the same time, the empirical data demonstrates that constructing state officials as rationally calculating their way out of the burden of numerous requirements would be misleading. Interpretations of partnership also reflect certain firmly entrenched beliefs of state officials, the ones related to procedural formats of democracy and political participation. As expressed by one official, implementation of partnership as organized public discussion of cohesion policy documents for him bears a meaning of 'a mandate from people'.[202]

Another related example would be presence of references to partnership as an *obligation* towards partners, mainly of financial character, on the part of state officials. This representation of partnership is a result of the spread of certain discourses of civil society according to which the state is expected to support civil society actors. To an

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[202] Interview SO Sk, Nov 14 2011.

extent, this discourse was enhanced by the European Commission during pre-accession. Yet existing literature confirms that adherence to this idea has for a very long time been an integral part of overall discourse about state/civil society relation rather than a product of state officials' rational reasoning (Fagan, 2007).

On the other hand, economic and social partners interpret capacity building in completely different terms. For them it acquires identity-related meaning. The case of CSOs is even more illustrative. Partnership is naturally perceived as a new opportunity for CSOs to increase political influence and reach for resources. At the same time, interpretations of partnership include certain perceptions regarding bigger issues such as procedural format of involvement in policy-making or aspirations related to forms of political participation.

The study shows that actors navigate between rational calculations, ideational expectations, country traditions and external constraints when interpreting partnership. Their interpretations arise as representations of partnership which are unique and coherent within their specific professional context. To dismiss that all factors might be working across levels at the same time and shape interpretations would significantly impoverish explanations and lead to a one-sided view of implementation of partnership. Additionally, it would inevitably lead to a loss of data. Perhaps, the conceptualization of identity variable for economic and social partners, for instance, would not even happen, in the first place, as it only popped up in the interviews. It is also questionable how this variable would be analytically linked together with other factors into one framework. However, the study proves that departure from partial and contesting explanations to a more holistic yet, at the same time, richer and nuanced view on partnership is possible. The notion of professional backgrounds allows for bringing competing explanations together and revealing new empirical data, not accounted for in previous conceptualizations.

Another problem of existing research that the present study reveals is, actually, that some of the claims are quite problematic empirically (Steunenberg & Toshkov, 2009). That is relevant, for instance, for the claims in the Europeanization and compliance research about state officials as a homogenous group of carriers of the same interests or national traditions. Another example is the contention in the political economy literature that Slovenia or Visegrad countries drastically differ from each other in terms of strength of corporatist traditions.

As for the former, the study finds visible intra-group divergence within the group of state officials in terms of how they relate to partnership. Interpretations of officials

working for different ministries or state departments naturally differ due to differences in professional contexts. Implementation of partnership turns out to be as much about resources and capacities as it is about the need to reconcile contradictory interests and aspirations of various groups within bureaucratic apparatus. What is more interesting is that such complexity transcends national borders and is not limited to particular cultural contexts. Existing research on implementation avoids acknowledging such dynamism of implementation process and circumvents a whole number of empirical facts. State bureaucracies are viewed as entirely conflict-proof group of actors sharing the same aspirations and interests within a particular domestic context whereas intrinsic complexity within domestic contexts is not acknowledged as interfering the process of implementation. The same goes for two other groups of actors as was shown in chapters 6 and 7.

Regarding the propositions in the literature on political economy, the reconstruction of meanings-in-use of partnership demonstrates that Visegrad countries are no less corporatist than Slovenia, at least, in terms of how actors understand partnership as a form of interactions. Despite the fact that different practices of state/society collaboration are entrenched in both cases, actors still interpret partnership similarly. Economic and social partners across four countries raise the same concerns about partnership and speak about the same things when discussing any of the six identified themes/keywords. Expectations from partnership of employers' associations or trade unions from, for instance, Slovenia or Hungary are almost identical: stricter institutionalization of collaboration, better access to money for their members, increased financial support for capacity building etc. The meanings that they attach to partnership reflect similar problems and concerns. There is more in common between the countries.

These findings, firstly, challenge quite a wide-spread-view in political economy accounts about weakness of economic and social partnership in the CEE member states, at worst, or, at best, diversity across countries in degrees of this weakness (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012b; Duman & Kurekova, 2012). On the contrary, the study calls for a more careful attention towards this claim - economic and social partners contest partnership, apply various actions to support their opinions and even achieve some results in both strongly corporatist Slovenia and, for instance, in Slovakia where social dialogue is considered to have withered away.

Secondly, this finding questions the analytical and empirical adequacy of the concept of corporatism. Does it capture only a surface difference yet is hardly applicable to the study of deeper dynamics of policy-making? Indeed, partnership perfectly falls under the

label of a corporatist practice: it invites certain actors, within certain institutional settings for a discussion of certain policy issues. In the corporatist literature, having stakes in policies is believed to be a sufficient condition for actors coming together. Yet, the case study shows that such a conceptualization of corporatism might also be misleading, let alone adequacy of conclusions about causal relationship between corporatist practices and certain policy outcomes. Actors involved in partnership do have certain stakes in cohesion policy. However, the findings show that they discuss a variety of issues which are not captured in conceptualizations of corporatism: procedures and rules of interactions, identities, obligations etc. The question arises whether it is even possible to claim existence of strict cross-country differences as related to existence or, conversely, absence or corporatist practices if such conceptualizations of actors' interactions are so limited and omit wider important dynamics of these interactions? It is through these nuances that the findings discussed in the thesis illuminate problematic sustainability of the culturalist argument also in political economy research.

8.2.2. Contested democracy: partnership and European civil society

Civil society literature is not exempt from the same critique of being too nation state-centered. Studies of civil society in the CEE countries also step on the same rack of pursuing the culturalist argument of cross-country variation in explaining logic of contestation. Most frequently, though, such research is even more insensitive to historical and cultural differences and contextual nature of civil society development and approaches CEE member states as a space of nonexistent civil society (Ost, 2011; Sissenich, 2010). CEE countries are still frequently assessed in terms of rapprochement to a specific vision or model of civil society derived from the experience of their Western neighbors (Fagan, 2005). It is this conventional and somewhat monist view that civil society needs in any country needs to reach a liberal-democratic ideal/model of it that the present research on contestation of partnership challenges, in the first place.

The empirical findings point to widespread contestation of this model on the grounds. Reconstructed meanings-in-use of partnership for all three groups of actors provide a wide entry into the realm of actual meanings of civil society and their cultural specificity. Comparison of interpretations of partnership illustrates that actors' views on it differ across country contexts. The case of divergence between Slovenia and Visegrad countries is the most telling in this sense.

In Slovenia, for instance, some cultural convergence was observed. All groups of actors partially converge in viewing partnership as a civil dialogue – a system of state/civil society relations in which CSOs are assigned the role of providers of expertise, an interpretation that corresponds to the neoliberal understanding of civil society (Fagan, 2006; J. Howell, 2001). However, the Slovene twist comes in with a view that such a system of relations is expected to be built on strictly defined procedural format so reminiscent of corporatist approach with its focus on representativity of big nation-wide organizations and strict lines of their accountability to lower level members.

In the Visegrad countries, though, there is less divergence around interpretations of partnership across groups of actors who are strictly divided in how they approach it. Nevertheless, some common representation of partnership as involvement of citizens in holding the state authorities to account can be found as bringing understandings of some actors together, although not on a large scale. This interpretation, on the one hand, is quite fitting into the imaginary of civil society as a counterbalance to the state so widespread in the region (Arato & Cohen, 1992). On the other hand, though, actors add another dimension to that by mentioning that such scrutiny and oversight should be carried out only by some organisations who proved their high professionalism as problem-solvers, a view that somewhat corrects a neoliberal universalist interpretation of civil society as a sphere not limited to a number of players.

A look at these differences from the perspective of existing conceptualizations of ethics, discourses and the imaginary of civil society shows two important things. Firstly, it demonstrates how cultural specific understandings of civil society are. Actors on the ground advance visions that reflect on unique historical conditions of development of representations of civil society. The case of Slovenia, for instance, demonstrates how interpretations of partnership are rooted in domestic traditions of policy-making with their heavy focus on institutionalization of interactions. In the Visegrad countries, where civil society development encountered its own troubles, completely different representations constitute understandings of partnership, the ones that link true partnership to extensive financial assistance of the state to civil society actors. In no way is any homogeneity in case of Visegrad countries implied, though. The present research made only the first step in capturing convergence/divergence and it is believed that further cultural specificity across Visegrad countries can be found.

However, the major contribution of the present research is a move further beyond acknowledgement of cultural diversity in contestation over partnership and, to this point,

contestation over such ideas as civil society or forms of its involvement in policy-making. Divergence across groups of actors illustrate that empirical reality is even more variegated than assumed within the culturalist tradition. Comparative analysis of associative connotations across six keywords strongly proves this. Moreover, the findings contribute even more to the on-going discussion on the role of civil society in tackling democratic deficit of the EU, both in conceptual and empirical terms.

The literature on European civil society poses highly important questions of how civil society actors could contribute to reconstitution of democracy in the EU and, if they are involved in this process, how is it going on (Kohler-Koch, 2009; Liebert & Trenz, 2009; Liebert, 2009; Smismans, 2003). A look into the contestation of partnership, thus, was an excellent opportunity to test some of the assumptions of this literature yet from a different methodological position, namely through the strategy of discovering how actors themselves relate to this issues rather that pre-conceiving their reactions in advance. Such a research programme brought to light new empirical data to the scholarly discussion about civil society and democracy in the EU.

Empirical findings convincingly show that civil society actors take a huge variety of stances regarding their contribution to the EU policy-making in the context of cohesion policy, not necessarily identical to the EU own solutions (Kohler-Koch, 2010). For instance, while discussing partnership, CSOs find themselves opposed to other actors in understanding of rules and procedures of partnership, a theme that can serve as a link to a larger representation of participation in the EU policy-making. Most CSOs actively reject the idea of massive public consultations and their role as representatives of the voice of the marginalized. Instead, the dominant interpretation of partnership is linked to the idea of meaningful participation and, additionally, to the idea of subsidiarity and self-rule. Even in Slovenia, where CSOs are quite receptive to consultations as a format of policy-making, they still insist on adjusting them to experience on the ground.

A clash between understandings of civil society involvement of state elites, represented by bureaucrats, on the one hand, and economic and social partners, on the other, was also detected. If the former insist on issues of representation and equality of access and the latter, in their turn, on restriction of access to some privileged players, CSOs take a different stance – partnership is a channel for participation rather than representation or institutionalized bargaining. Moreover, many CSOs adhere to the idea of partnership as a deliberative practice which link their interpretations to a completely different tradition of theorizing about civil society (Deidre Curtin, 2003; G. Smith, 2001). Moreover, the reality

is complicated further by visible divisions within the group of CSOs: big vis-à-vis grass roots organizations or across policy areas.

These empirical findings bring attention to problematic character of the on-going discussion about how civil society actors relate to the EU policy-making. Existing literature, just like the above-mentioned bodies of literature on Europeanization or political economy, is still conceptually-driven and looks at pre-constituted notions of civil society and democracy in the EU context. However, the reality on the ground seems to rebut many of its claims. Contestation over partnership, for instance, demonstrates that civil society actors hardly ever consider themselves as contributing to emergence of the EU public sphere. Partnership is hardly ever discussed in terms of deliberation over the EU policies when civil society actors would initiate political debate over the EU decisions, thus, contributing to emergence of the European public sphere (Fossum & Trenz, 2006; Kohler-Koch, 2009). On the contrary, when it comes to the EU policy-making issues of deliberation and involvement of CSOs into implementation of policies through provision of expertise matter the most. A large group of CSOs also insist on partnership as functional representation (Smismans, 2003).

At the same time, registered interpretation of partnership as a system of state/civil society relations built on financial obligations of the former to growth and development of the latter, brings to light quite a specific twist in conceptualization of civil society by actors themselves, a twist that has not been fully discussed in the literature. All these findings, first of all, critique the critique or challenge the research that talks about little input of civil society into EU policy-making (Borzel & Buzogany, 2010; Borzel, 2010; Gąsior-Niemiec, 2010; Kutter & Trappmann, 2010; Sissenich, 2010). Input of civil society actors is extremely variegated and the new empirical data revealed by the case study convincingly demonstrates this.

Most importantly, the findings show that it is quite difficult to assume, first and foremost, in theoretical terms, how the above-mentioned link between democracy and civil society works in the EU. Existing literature identifies several discourses of how civil society and democracy come together in EU policy equations and formulas, yet, the findings show that these theoretical illustrations may not fully coincide with how CSOs view democratization of the European polity. One can clearly see that interpretations of partnership reveal a lot more about how CSOs modify and reinterpret well-known models of, for example, representative and participatory democracies, mix their elements and interlink them in new combinations. CSOs navigate around various theoretical

expectations about their involvement in the EU policy-making content-wise (*whats*), seeing themselves as representatives of values and interests of specific groups or as actual implementers of policies, to mention the few. Even more, in practical terms, the findings show there is huge contestation around *hows* of such involvement as different CSOs advance different understandings. If none of the EU models of civil society involvement can fully embrace this variety, is it justified to speak about European civil society and its role in reconstitution of democracy in the EU in any theoretical or practical sense, and whether all research findings, in this vein, are inevitably badly grounded?

The thesis sends, in light of the above-said, quite a straightforward message to research on European civil society. Perhaps, shifting the analysis from attempts to establish how European civil society contributes to democratization of the EU onto understanding what both highly complex concepts mean for groups of actors, and how those meanings are produced, may reveal a lot more about the empirical reality out there. This focus can move the whole debate up to a qualitatively different and higher level of understanding the core of the problem at hand.

8.3. Limitations of the study and directions for further research

Surely, one might say that partnership clearly stands out as a case, and it is preposterous to expect that conceptualizations from all these bodies of literature apply to it. Indeed, partnership can be seen as quite a unique policy, different from conventional Directives, the primary empirical material for scholars of Europeanization and transposition and compliance. Partnership principle is not a strictly worded legal requirement, an aspect which can provide a benchmark for gauging extent of compliance with it. Additionally, partnership principle is largely about *how* of policy-making rather than *what*. This all makes it completely different from what normally is studied by scholars.

However, the present study rather calls for a careful reconsideration of the argument about such differences between to-be-implemented policies. Can one still pursue a line of argumentation about strict division between legal and social components of the EU policies? In other words, are even strictly-worded Directives and other EU legal acts as *contestation-proof* as they are viewed in the above-mentioned bodies of literatures? The existing mainstream research still operates with this assumption. Yet the case of partnership shows that policies might be hugely contested. Conclusions obtained through analysis of partnership can be extrapolated on other problematic ideas such as social inclusion, gender equality or, cohesion.

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Surely, these conclusions should be taken with caution. After all, the study looked into one particular context of the EU cohesion policy. Whether discovered convergence of understandings of state bureaucrats across the borders can actually be found elsewhere beyond cohesion policy context, for instance, within contexts of other EU policies, is a matter of new empirical research. Likewise, the questions whether the context and, most importantly, the practice of EU policies brings perceptions and understandings of state bureaucrats to some proximity and whether this proximity disappears once state officials step beyond EU contexts require empirical corroboration through comparative analysis.

Additional empirical proof is also desirable in relation to the claim that cross-country variation does not matter in case of CEE member states. Indeed, the study might be seen as actually sustaining rather than rebutting the argument about cross-country variation since no old member states have been selected for analysis. In this light, cross-country homogeneity can be explained through post-communist legacy argument – CEE member states are indeed a zone of homogeneity, and reconstructed interpretations of partnership confirm it.

There are several reasons to assume these concerns should, in their turn, be taken with caution. Firstly, references of actors themselves who very often appealed to similarity of their concerns regarding partnership with the ones of their counterparts from other member states, suggest that that dynamics of contestation over partnership is, indeed, similar across the member states. This is relevant for all groups of actors. Actors might be coming up with various understandings of partnership but it is more likely their professional backgrounds rather than national belonging shape these understandings. It can be assumed, and needs additional empirical proof, that the whole cohesion policy context has contributed to some harmonization of understandings of partnership across the member states.

Secondly, it should be stressed that the major message of the thesis is that in reality even stricter division, dichotomy cultural vs. professional backgrounds is, in fact, more subtle, and the relation between both is more complicated than simply either one or another. The case of CSOs vividly illuminates this complexity when both backgrounds are found to be at play. Whether above-mentioned harmonization has affected state officials only yet has not reached civil societies is the question that also needs additional empirical data to be answered. Inclusion of other member states into comparative analysis would truly discover more on this matter.

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On a larger scale, all this discussion is of vital importance for scholars who try to identify where the effect of the EU lies in domestic contexts of member states. It is here that the contribution of this study lies. Operationalization of Europeanization as harmonization of understandings and interpretations and analysis of how this harmonization manifests itself across policy contexts, as expressed through above-formulated questions, might contribute to resolution of a whole number of unsolved problems in Europeanization research. It is in elaboration and approbation of the analytical framework that allows for addressing all these questions from a new fuller perspective and, as a result, obtaining new insights about the process of implementation, that the present study contributes to these scholarly debates.

8.4. Conclusions

Partnership between various actors in policy-making is, perhaps, one of the most attractive policy ideas. The great appeal of partnership is because it brings together and unites in a promise two most desirable ideals and overarching goals of policy-making – efficiency and democracy. Despite numerous critical voices in the literature who point out deficiencies of partnership or its side effects, it is extremely hard to find a theorist or practitioner who would fundamentally disagree that partnership is an extremely attractive ideal. As noted by Bauer (2002), 'one should not underestimate how using a notion like "partnership", which resonates with "doing things together" and communicates the image of consensual action, commands great appeal in our societies and thus makes it relatively hard for critics to oppose it' (p. 773-4).

It is obvious that in the context of European integration these appeals acquire even greater relevance. Interlocking different tiers of governance and policy actors in the process of collaborative policy-making is expected to lead to something more than modest formula 'in pursuit of common good' that can be found in the Regulations on Structural Funds. In the EU context, the idea of partnership is directly linked to goals of societal integration, democracy, equality, inclusion and consensus that transcends national borders and layers of governance. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the existing research on partnership still develops along the lines of investigation what makes partnership work or fail. The expected outcomes of partnership are so coveted and valuable that these expectations naturally set researchers on a quest to find out why practice of partnership does not lead to their emergence. It goes without saying that in times when there are more and more critical evaluations of the purpose and current state of the European integration

project exploration of why partnership did not work or worked in an unexpected manner acquire especial importance.

The present study emerged out of puzzlement with inconsistency between strong normative appeals of partnership and radically different empirical reality of never-ending contestation of partnership practice by the involved actors. If partnership is such an attractive ideal, then why do actors never come to an agreement around it even though they speak about the imaginary of partnership in the same terms, and why can one observe all sorts of accusations of partnership practice as not living up to any expectations? Is this a distinct feature of the context of the new member states, or is it brought about by other factors such as diverse actors' interests or identities? The latter was an especially challenging question as the above-mentioned contestation can be observed across several countries which raises a question of whether it is deeply entrenched cultural understandings that go against the idea of partnership? In the context of the new member states, departing from this question was tantamount to stepping on the same rack of traditional essentialising actors in these countries as incapable of reaching any consensus. The thesis also departed from a purely academic puzzle – easily noticeable inability of existing literature to explicate the process without bracketing off a great part of empirical data and, consequently, reality. In other word, existing literature offers bits and pieces for understanding the logic of contestation yet can never draw a complex picture.

The thesis set an ambitious goal of drawing such a picture. In order to answer the question about the logic and pattern of the contestation process it turned towards rich scholarship on contestation of norms in international relation. Contestation in this perspective is viewed as the struggle for meanings when actors, despite common parlance and jargon, assign multiple meanings to partnership. How do these meanings emerge, what produces them and how are they structured in relation to the partnership principle were the major questions that structured the empirical inquiry.

It was found that the meanings that actors attach to partnership are not the functions of their belonging to a particular cultural context or realized interests or preferences. It was also assumed that the notion of 'professional background' can be an overarching concept that explains how meanings of partnership come about. The empirical findings picture a more complex reality. What became clear is that actors do not advance particular understandings of partnership because they come from Slovenia or Hungary or because they have particular stakes at implementation of partnership. The role of cultural backgrounds turned out to be far less significant than is assumed in the literature. There are

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no visible cultural differences between how actors interpret partnership, aside from some impact found for CSOs. In contrast, the role of professional backgrounds as reservoirs of meanings was found to be much stronger than is even discussed. Not only were professional backgrounds found to be the localizations of actors' interests but also as actually bringing together such complex drivers of meaning-making as identities, perceptions or beliefs.

This finding opens up many questions and challenges many conventional claims for both theorists of European studies, Europeanization, European civil society and, generally, public policy or collaborative policy-making. The EU partnership is a very attractive ideal. However, perhaps, the change of perspective of how one looks at it and theorizes about it, the one that the present study attempted to highlight, can in the end lead to a change in policy practice in relation to it, from imposing and searching for any rigid and operationalizable standards towards taking into account and embracing high complexity of partnership.

Appendix A - List of interviews

Group A: Members of civil society organisations

A1. Andras Lukacs, Levego, Budapest, Hungary, 20/04/2011

A2. Tamas Fleischer, Budapest, Hungary, 23/04/2011

A3. Veronika Mora, Okotars, Budapest, Hungary, 27/04/2011

A4. Teodora Donsz-Kovacs, MTSZV, Budapest, Hungary, 29/04/2011

A5. Ales Kuslan, EKVILIB, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 29/09/2011

A6. Lidija Zivcic, FOCUS, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 29/09/2011

A7. Tina Divjak, CNVOS, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 30/09/2011

A8. Boris Strecansky, Center for philanthropy, Bratislava, Slovakia, 14/11/2011

A9. Stanislava Benicka, Civil Society Development Foundation, Bratislava, Slovakia, 15/11/2011

A10. Milan Istvan, Partnerstvo pre prosperitu, Bratislava, Slovakia, 15/11/2011

A11. Miroslav Mojzis, Friends of Earth, Bratislava, Slovakia, 16/11/2011

A12. Lucia Filpatova, Slovak Donors Forum, Bratislava, Slovakia, 16/11/2011

A13. Izabella Marton, Hungarian Anto-Poverty Network, Budapest, Hungary, 05/03/2012

A14. Istvan Dande, Budapest, Hungary, 12/03/2012

A15. Vida Ogorelec, Umanotera, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 29/03/2012

A16. Nina Stros, Umanotera, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 03/04/2012

A17. Matej Cepin, Socialna Academia, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 5/04/2012

A18. Mateja Kramberger, Ozara, Maribor, Slovenia, 4/09/2012

A19. Igor Krasovec, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 6/09/2012

A20. Marko Peterlink, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 7/09/2012

A21. Roma Aziewich, Eureka, Gdansk, Poland, 12/09/2012

A22. Michal Dymkowski, OFOP, Warsaw, Poland, 13/09/2012

A23. Andras Nun, Autonomia, Budapest, Hungary, 4/04/2013

A24. Joze Gornik, Youth Council, CNVOS, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 6/09/2012

A25. Tadej Kurent, Zavod, Maribor, Slovenia, 04/09/2012

A26. Ctibor Kostal, Govenance Institute, Bratislava, Slovakia, 20/11/2012

A27. Helena Wolekova, Socia foundation, Bratislava, Slovakia, 22/11/2012

A28. Ivan Kuhn, Slovakia 23/11/2012

A29. Michal Vasecka, Center for the research of ethnicity and culture, Bratislava, Slovakia, 23/12/2013

A30. Herta Toth, Open Society institute, Budapest, Hungary, 15/12/2012

A31. Judit Wirth, Budapest, Hungary, 13/12/2012

A32. Joanna Kuczarska, OPOLE Institute for Local Democracy, Poland, 12/02/2013 (over skype)

A33. Kinga Milankovics, Budapest, Hungary 3/11/2013

A34. Geza Nagy, Ashoka, Budaest, Hungary 14/02/2013

A35. Daniel Lesinsky, Center for sustainable alternatives, Slovakia, 6/11/2012 (over skype)

A36. Barbara Eros, Demnet, Budapest, Hungary, 26/02/2013

A37. Alexander Wozniak, Rural Forum, Warsaw, Poland, 13/06/2013

A38. Roman Haken, Center for local democracy Slovakia, 22/06/2012 (over skype)

A39. Agata Wisniewska, OFOP, Poland, 12/09/2013 (over skype)

A40. Kamila Plowec, WRZOS, Poland 14/10/2013 (over skype)

A41. Patricyja Romaniuk, Polish Green Network, Poland, 7/10/2013 (over skype)

A42. Tina Divjak, CNVOS, Slovenia (2d interview, over skype)

A42. Andrej Sparkar, Slovenia, 5/10/2013 (over skype)

A43. Zofia Komorowska, Stocznia, Poland 18/06/2013 (over skype)

A44. Renata Karba, Umanotera, Slovenia 12/11/2013 (over skype)

Group B: Members of Economic and Social Partners

B1. Miklos Weisz, AGRYA, Budapest, Hungary, 27/09/2011

B2. Zoltan Szabo, HANGYA, Budapest, Hungary, 5/10/2011

B3. Igor Antauer, Association of SME's Employers, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 4/04/2012

B4. Janja Meglic, Larisa Vodeb, Association of Crafts and Small Businesses, Ljubljana, Slovenia 4/04/2012

B5. Stasa Pernat, Association of Trade Unions, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 5/09/2012

B6. Marek Choromanski, Chamber of Enterpreneurship, Gdansk, Poland, 10/09/2012

B7. Anna Szpiganowicz, Chamber of Commerce, Gdansk, Poland, 11/09/2012

B8. Bogdan Olszewski, Solidarity, Gdansk, Poland, 10/09/2012

B9. Grit Ackerman, Chamber of Commerce, Slovenia, 8/11/2012 (over skype)

B10. Erik, Macak, Confederation of Trade Unions, Bratislava, Slovakia, 23/11/2012

B11. Monika Hrusecka, Confederation of trade unions of steel enterprises, Bratislava, Slovakia, 24/11/2012

B12. Zsolyt Belanszky-Demko, Economic and Social Council, Budapest, Hungary, 6/06/2013

B13. Joo Kinga, ECOSOC, Budapest, Hungary, 21/06/2013

B14. Malgorzata, Chmeliewska, Lewiatan, Poland, 01/10/2013 (over skype)

B15. Norbert Pruszanowski, Izba Rziemiesla, Poland, 19/11/2013 (over skype)

B16. Erzsebet Hanti, Confederation of Trade Unions, Budapest, Hungary, 27/11/2013

B17. Jakob Pocivavsek, PERGAM, Slovenia, 29/11/2013 (over skype)

B18. Martina Sirhalova, Association of Employers, Slovakia, 12/11/2013 (over skype)

B19. Katarzyna Rozicka, Polish Association of Employers, Poland, 17/09/2013 (over skype)

B20. Izabella Panusz, OPZZ, Poland, 13/11/2012 (over skype)

B21. Emilia Kompaktor, Hungarian Chamber of Commerce, Hungary, 16/10/2013 (over skype)

Group C: State officials

C1. Irena Brcko-Kogoj, Tanja Kurnik, Ministry of Local government and development, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 30/09/2011

C2. Edmund Skorvaga, Ministry of Health, Bratislava, Slovakia, 14/11/2011

C3. Marek Hojsik, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Bratislava, Slovakia, 16/11/2011

C4. Sandra Salomonova, Ministry of Development, Bratislava, Slovakia, 15/11/2011

C5. Malopolska Observatory for social policy, Marshall's Office, Krakow, Poland, 15/03/2012

C6. Bartosz , Unit for Strategic Development, Marshall's Office, Krakow, Poland, 15/03/2012

C7. Gregorz First, Unit for Territorial Cooperation, Marshall's Office, Krakow, Poland, 15/03/2012

C8. Joanna Oberbek, Regional Labor Office, Krakow, Poland, 16/03/2012

C9. Gyorgy Nagyhazi, Ministry of Development, Budapest, Hungary, 28/03/2012

C10. Polonca Sega, Ministry of Justice, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 3/04/2012

C11. Tanja Vertejl, Ministry of Justice, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 3/04/2012

C12. Jasminka Dedic, Office for local government, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 5/04/2012

C13. Emese Visoczky, National Development Agency, Budapest, Hungary, 13/06/2012

C14. Zuzanna Polackova, Ministry of Labor, Bratislava, Slovakia, 12/07/2012

C15. Vladimir Rudl, Maribor Development Agency, Maribor, Slovenia, 04/09/2012

C16. Monika Kirbis, Ministry of Economic Development and Infrastructure, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 7/09/2012

C17. Monika Cholewkoska, Gdansk Marshall's Office, Gdansk, Poland, 11/09/2012

C18. Michal Bruski, Gdansk Labour Office, Gdansk, Poland, 12/09/2012

C19. Tadej Kurent, Municipality of Maribor, Maribor, Slovenia, 12/10/2012

C20. Gabor Balas, Budapest, Hungary, 26/03/2013

C21. Peter Heil, Budapest, Hungary, 29/04/2013

C22. Adam Kullman, Budapest, Hungary, 19/03/2013

C23. Magdalena Dziubek-Grudzinska, Ministry for Regional Development, Warsaw, Poland, 14/06/2013

C24. Katarina Kukuckova, Ministry for Regional Development, Slovakia, 24/07/2013

C25. Michal Rynkiewicz, Ministry of Health, Warsaw, Poland, 11/09/2012

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