



## **CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: 20 YEARS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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### **Abstract**

The first part of the article outlines the unique development path of Central and Eastern European countries after their market economic transition, and the changing geo-economic framework conditions referred to as “externally-driven capitalism” or “dependent market economy”. Central European countries form a part of the so-called Central European Manufacturing Core and are strongly integrated in regional production networks. However, the region’s reliance on FDI and lack of indigenous innovation capacities have increased its exposure to the vicissitudes of the world economy. The lack of development convergence is compounded by the unequal distribution of economic benefits: the failure of regional policy to promote the settlement of new industries and sectors is explained by the fact that most regions in the countries under study belong to the most disadvantaged and lagging regions of the EU.

The second part provides a brief summary of the articles included in the thematic issue. The studies review a wide range of approaches to addressing the socio-economic challenges, spatial problems and processes of the region.

The discussion chapter presents CEE regions in the context of polycrises. This is followed by a review of the specific problems of CEE peripheral regions that are lacking scale and visibility on the European level, caught up in the unfinished process of convergence promoted by pro-growth Cohesion Policy. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining possible future research directions.

**Keywords:** regions, cities, borders, disparities, development, integration

### **INTRODUCTION: CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is perhaps the most complicated formation of the European continent, based on geographical factors with historical and cultural attitudes. In a geopolitical and generally political sense the macro-region has always been historically fragmented and this feature persists even to this day. As Milan Kundera (1984, p. 6) puts it, the borders of Central Europe are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation. The history of the CEE countries over the past century has shown that border changes have mostly been driven by political and nation-state roles, while the human and economic relations of border regions are considered permanent (Scott & Wilson, 2025). The unfinished process of

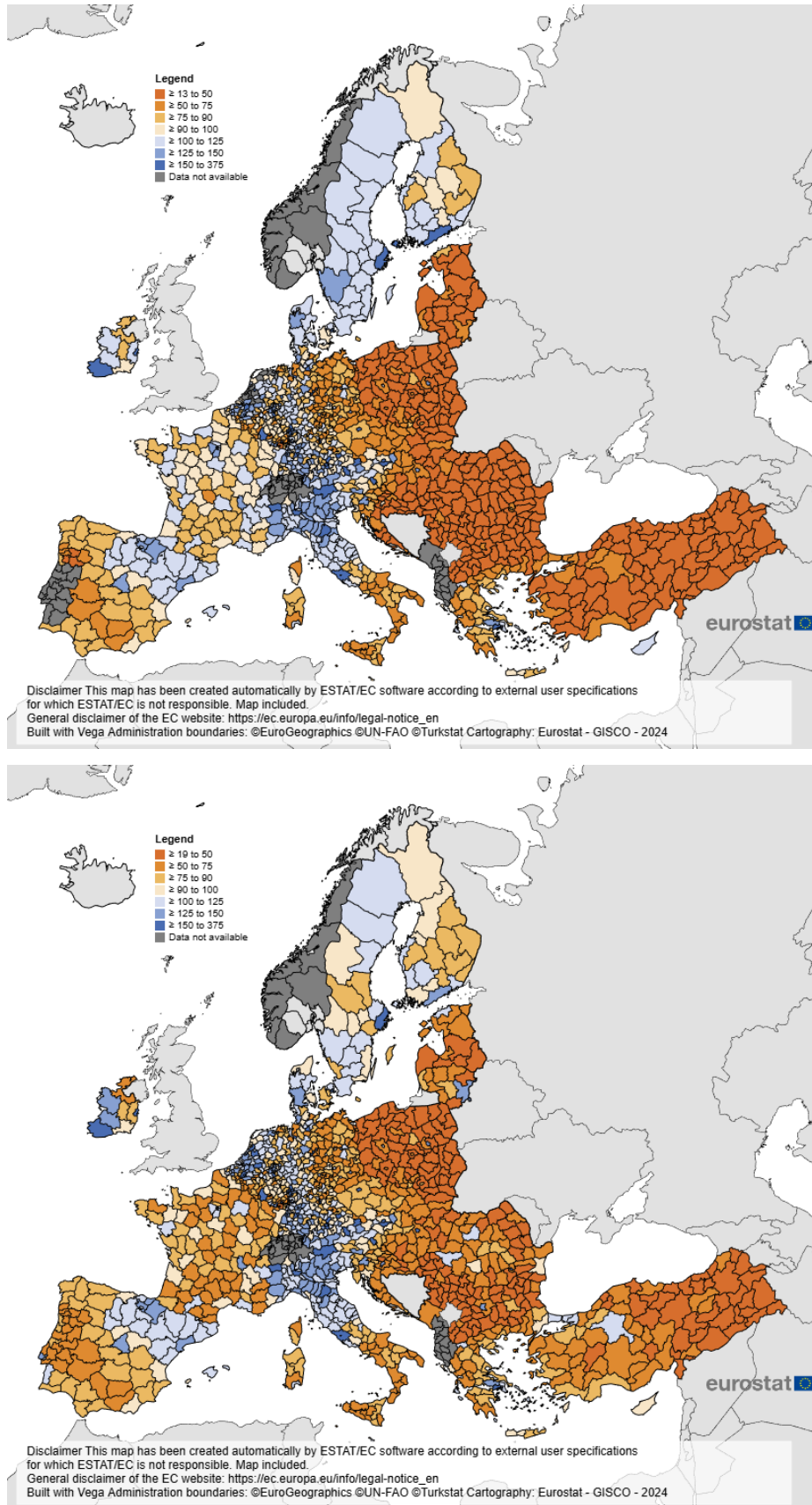
nation-building in the CEE space, has been a source of multiple tensions, often conflicting with the overarching goals of EU integration (Scott, 2021). The cultural capital of these areas is truly remarkable not only due to the plethora of co-existing nationalities and traditions but also the assimilating yet traditional inhabitants (Filep, 2018). For the entire region, the European Union (EU) has come to represent the dominant factor, the operator and financing agent of external and partially of internal integration. The regional initiatives and the different funding programmes directly convey the expectations and reactions of outsiders (European Commission, 2024; Finta, 2024). The EU's impact is not limited to material incentives, but comprises various ideational and institutional elements (Medve-Bálint & Scepanovic, 2020). The proper absorption of EU funds has been undermined in many places by inadequate government and institutional structures. A key priority for governance is therefore to identify and strengthen areas that reduce dependency on external support. Two studies in this special issue (Mayer & Mezei, 2025 and Péti, 2025) draw attention to spatial planning differences in such regional inequalities. Another major advantage, but also a factor causing dependency, is the presence of borders within the EU. Despite the numerous benefits of being a part of the Schengen area (for a more detailed account of factors promoting regional integration see Szilágyi et al., 2025), borders still represent a kind of administrative or mental barrier (European Commission, 2018). Svensson (2015) and Svensson and Balogh (2018) document that even processes of cross-border cooperation directly supported by the EU have in many instances fallen victim to persistent state administrative and legal barriers. Chilla and Evrard (2021) have also indicated that simultaneous processes of integration and disintegration are creating more complex policy environments for promoting socio-economic and territorial equality. The EU's attempts to mitigate the negative impacts of political, economic and social borders are in fact confronted with the continuous (re)emergence of these very same borders in contexts of crisis and political uncertainty, as the Covid pandemic has aptly demonstrated (Novotný, 2021).

The economic transition of CEE, and Central Europe in particular, was fuelled by neoliberal ideologies and political agendas of 'East-West convergence' that involved marketization, privatization and foreign direct investment (Appel & Orenstein, 2016; Smith, 2002; Krastev, 2016; Vida et al., 2025). All of these created a moral, legal and structural environment that conditioned EU integration trajectories as well as insertion of these countries into the global economic division of labour. As a consequence, the most advanced post-socialist countries – those of Central Europe – have become highly exposed to the global economy and have emerged as major manufacturing centres within Europe, joining the so-called Central European

Manufacturing Core (Stehrer & Stöllinger, 2015). This strong cross-border regional production network is led by Germany and constituted by highly advanced and high-income Swedish, Austrian regions as well as low-to-middle income regions in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia. Central and Eastern Europe is generally perceived by investors as a single entity although the capacity of individual countries to attract FDI is far from homogenous, not least due to differences in their institutional quality (Dorożyński et al., 2020). Nölke and Vliegenthart (2009) characterise CEE economies as “dependent market economies” that rely on external FDI and have comparative advantages in the assembly and production of relatively complex and durable consumer goods. This distinct variety of capitalism distances them from traditional core of the world economy. Capello and Dellisanti’s (2024) latest research highlights that this historical divide remains unchanged, with CEE countries still being considered a host nearshoring region, characterized by an absence of headquarter regions and dominated by factory and primary resource regions. Rigid functional specialisation patterns in the EU have led to CEE semi-peripheral economies’ (Artner, 2016) strengthening specialization in low value-added production as their main competitive advantage and persistent under-specialization in the most lucrative parts of the value chain (R&D, design, strategic decision-making).

Although economic productivity has increased in recent decades (Gál & Lux, 2022), it is still lagging far behind the EU average (Fig. 1) and R&D expenditures as a percentage of GDP in the region – as an indicator of innovation capacity – have been historically low. Their lower capacity of R&D generation indicates that in terms of pushing the knowledge frontier, CEE countries are still catching up due to a lack of indigenous innovation capacities and reliance on external technologies, experiencing constraints to advancing in innovation due to the so-called “Visegrad paradox”. According to a study by Żółtaszek and Olejnik (2021) measuring the regional effectiveness of innovation, the worst performing regions in terms of innovation efficiency are found in Central Europe and the Baltic States. One feasible option for the region would be to develop innovation ecosystems, encourage innovative thinking, and strengthen multi-level governance, which would provide opportunities for maintaining cooperation that reduces external dependencies.

**Figure 1** Gross domestic product in purchasing power standard (EU27 from 2020), per inhabitant in percentage of the EU27 average by NUTS 3 region, 2004 (above), 2023 (below)



Source: Eurostat nama\_10r\_2gdp table

An examination of regional GDP values confirms Györffy's (2022) findings that CEE countries are locked in a kind of development trap. Countries have responded differently to this development trap: some have been more successful in catching up, while others have shown a more mediocre performance. As van Houtum & Strüver (2002) provocatively argued, the EU represents a form of 'economic bordering' in which the fluidity of internal economic flows contrasts with the consolidation of national and regional assets in the form of territorial interests and the restrictiveness of the EU's external borders.

The EU's current geopolitical (and geoeconomic) approach also remains very closely linked to its "transnational production sites", which reproduce pre-existing core and periphery divisions and unequal power relations that reinforce long-standing economic borders within the European Union (Dalby & O'Tuathail, 1998). Our perspective on economic bordering within the EU involves the investigation of links between post-socialist transformation, problems of capital accumulation and conditions of economic and political integration. In order to do this, we apply a geoeconomics perspective assessing the role of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the transformation of CEE. The negative consequences of economic transformation are the main reasons for the discontent and the growing support of anti-EU and populist parties in CEE (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Hungary and Poland constitute a case in point with their economic policy underpinned by elements of economic nationalism and conservative ideology and protectionist industrial policies (Feldmann & Popa, 2022; Gagyí & Geröcs, 2025). Dependency on western FDI has been compounded by a high degree of energy dependency of CEE countries on Russian resources (Pawłuszko, 2018), further exacerbating their external vulnerability.

## ARTICLES OF THE THEMATIC ISSUE

The first original scientific paper of the thematic issue examines the structural drivers of regional productivity change across the NUTS-3 regions in six CEE countries (Czechia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania) from 2000 to the Covid-19 crisis. The paper by György Vida, Marianna Sávai and Gábor Bodnár underscores the existence of significant spatial disparities and temporal shifts in regional productivity dynamics. It shows that over the past three decades, CEE has undergone a profound metamorphosis, transitioning to market-oriented systems embedded within the institutional and regulatory framework of the EU. These processes have been characterized by robust, albeit uneven economic growth, extensive industrial restructuring, and significant sectoral realignments. These transformations, however,

have triggered new spatial asymmetries and worsened territorial inequalities. The study demonstrates that structural change did not occur uniformly across the region. During the pre-crisis period (2000-2007), rapid productivity growth across the area, especially in Romania, was largely driven by sectoral and labour reallocation. The post-crisis period (2012-2019), in turn, saw more spatially fragmented patterns, with competition-based productivity gains overwhelmingly concentrated in urban centres, capital regions and industrial hubs, or dynamic second-tier cities, particularly those linked to global automotive value chains. The findings underscore the importance of sectoral specialization and the differentiated impact of labour productivity. The study concludes that while structural convergence is evident in some lagging regions, spatial inequalities persist. The post-Covid geopolitical and economic realignments have further reinforced these concerns (Vida et al., 2025).

The second article by Gábor Mayer and Katalin Mezei presents old and new challenges in regional development through a comparative analysis of European regional development policy approaches to identifying beneficiary regions. EU cohesion policy aims to reduce territorial disparities and promote harmonious development between member states and regions. Its instruments and interventions contribute significantly to economic growth in the EU and its member states. Most European countries apply development policy recipes to help disadvantaged regions catch up and seek effective solutions for territorial cohesion. These endeavours have been strongly encouraged by the European Commission in the successive programming periods. EU countries have experimented with various approaches to obtain a more accurate mapping of disadvantaged areas. Based on international experiences, more and more countries are calling for a more accurate mapping and delimitation of territorial disadvantages and functional spatial processes, beyond the use of traditional administrative units, incorporating soft spaces in spatial planning practice. The paper presents three distinct methodologies for identifying regions that are lagging behind and constitute key target areas for territorial cohesion policy. The approaches of the three European countries (Italy, UK, Hungary) show notable differences but also provide useful experiences that can be transferred across countries. An important commonality of the models used in the three European countries is the criticism they attracted regarding both the applied methodology and their effects in terms of regional convergence. A more in-depth analysis of the various practices and an exchange of country-level experiences can contribute to taking EU Cohesion Policy to the next level (Mayer & Mezei, 2025).

The paper of Márton Péti presents the co-existing spatial concepts around the Carpathian or Pannonian Basin. In certain aspects of spatial organization, the Carpathian Basin constitutes a unity, which can be demonstrated in terms of topography, hydrography, and biogeography. This natural cohesion is universally acknowledged even by representatives of differing ethnic and national backgrounds, nevertheless, it appears that social, economic, and urban spatial processes spectacularly cross national borders in the region. However, in historical, cultural, political, social, and economic dimensions, this unquestionable unity no longer holds, and ethnic considerations come to the fore. (It is worth noting that the Carpathian Basin forms a unity only in the representation of Hungarians in the region.) Multilateral cooperation initiatives originating from CEE (e.g. Carpathian Convention, Carpathian Euroregion, EU Strategy for the Carpathian Region, EU Strategy for the Danube Region, Visegrad Group, Three Seas Initiative) do not seek to interpret the Carpathian Basin, instead, they deal with issues and areas that are related to the Carpathians and the Carpathian Region. The term “Carpathians” does not necessarily cover the lowland areas of the Carpathian Basin, only its mountainous parts. At the same time, within the settlement areas of neighbouring peoples that extend to and beyond the Carpathian Basin (Austrians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Serbs, Slovenians), there is evidence of a distinctive regional identity – one specifically linked to spaces of the Carpathian Basin. Although this identity is based on the individual historical development paths of regions outside the Carpathian Basin (not belonging to the Kingdom of Hungary), in all likelihood, it was not shaped by a conscious awareness of historical heritage, but rather by general regional characteristics that are not closely or directly related to the Carpathian Basin or the heritage of the Kingdom of Hungary. These phenomena are common macro-regional features that are not shaped by national and ethnic borders, and they reflect contemporary Central and Eastern European and general regional dynamics rather than a direct connection to the Carpathian Basin (Péti, 2025).

The second group of papers examines spatial problems and processes from the perspective of border studies. According to the 9th Cohesion Report, EU border regions account for more than 40% of the EU’s landmass, 30% of its GDP and 30% of its population. Almost 2 million people live in one country in the Schengen area and work in another, and some 3.5 million people cross one of the internal borders of the EU every day. Border studies is an “evolutionary” field of research. Borders, which can be interpreted in many ways, play a decisive role in the development of territorial structures and policies. Borders exert their essential influence as elements of the relationships between various active and passive actors. Border studies are currently experiencing a boom worldwide. The issue of borders as a political concern and

development opportunity remains a constant in the ever-changing European Union, both in terms of internal and external borders and border regions. From CCE's perspective, border issues are a traditionally researched topic that exists in many spatial dimensions. Although border regions have a high potential and contribute to cooperation (borders as resources) that benefits all, they often represent barriers to harmonious development, symbolizing a less unified Europe. Cross-border cooperation has become an integral part of EU Cohesion Policy, serving as a vital tool for developing border regions and fostering European territorial cohesion. While the recent years have seen a significant progress in cross-border interactions, border obstacles persist. The study by Zsuzsanna Fejes addresses two research questions. Firstly, it focuses on the increasing awareness of and recognition for cross-border cooperation within EU Cohesion Policy, particularly with regard to the future of Interreg. Secondly, it examines how legal and institutional barriers that hinder the everyday lives of people living in border regions can be eliminated, alongside EU efforts, such as Interreg (funding) and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (legal-institutional instrument). In addition, the study analyzes the recently adopted BRIDGEforEU Regulation, which could provide a new governance mechanism for eliminating border obstacles. It summarizes the Regulation's potential benefits and relevance for cross-border cooperation within the EU. European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) has emerged as the most effective tool for safeguarding the key values and achievements of European integration; however, its full potential has not been fully unlocked. Despite the EU's efforts to create financial programs and a legal-institutional framework, as well as tools for removing legal obstacles, administrative barriers continue to undermine the effectiveness of cross-border cooperation. Although cross-border regions can significantly promote EU territorial cohesion, their residents often encounter administrative obstacles when commuting, working or accessing public services across the border. BRIDGEforEU embodies a new generation of European cross-border governance, shifting away from project-based cooperation towards structural, legal facilitation. Its success, however, is determined by the willingness and capacity of Member States. Uncontestedly, the history of the European project has been defined by cohesion and solidarity. Its future is greatly shaped by EU border policy: how can funding (Interreg), institutionalised cooperation (EGTC) and the elimination of border obstacles (BRIDGEforEU) be ensured in parallel? (Fejes, 2025).

The following study by Ferenc Szilágyi, Szilárd RÁCZ and Réka Horeczki examines two specific border regions. It analyzes the potential effects of the 2023 and 2025 enlargement of the Schengen Area on the Croatian-Hungarian and Hungarian-Romanian borders. The Schengen Agreement is uncontestedly among the most significant achievements of the



European Union, having guaranteed – for over forty years – the free movement of persons, labour, goods, and businesses within the Schengen Zone for the member states of the European Union. For 29 European countries, this implies the removal of internal borders, 25 of which are EU member states, and a further four members of the European Free Trade Association. The study discusses the challenges of opening Schengen borders and the associated new opportunities on both sides of the border along five main dimensions (nature of border sections, spatial structure and gravitational relationships, ethnocultural dimension – minorities and role of institutional background, infrastructural dimension, border crossings and transport connections). The Schengen enlargement could catalyze social and economic processes promoting integration, with positive effects for Hungary. The novelty of the research is that it presents various dimensions of cross-border integration by comparing two Schengen accessions relatively close in time, while also offering a frame of reference serving as a guideline for studies of other European border regions (Szilágyi et al., 2025).

The journal's name and thematic focus are oriented toward tourism research. The tourism sector is evolving to be more inclusive and accessible, focusing on meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities. This reflects a broader cultural shift that recognizes the economic and social impact of this demographic group, alongside their right to dignified travel experiences. By adopting accessible tourism practices, the industry highlights its commitment to a market segment with significant economic potential while promoting sustainable and responsible tourism. Accessible tourism has historically been an under-researched area within tourism studies. However, over the past decade, a growing recognition of its importance and the diverse range of stakeholders involved has led to a significant shift in attitudes. The paper by Tibor Gonda, László Csóka and János Csapó seeks to offer a better understanding of the current state and development potential of accessible tourism. The research indicates that prejudice continues to be a substantial obstacle for those with disabilities, affecting both physical accessibility and societal attitudes as well as service delivery. Accessible tourism is not just a legal or ethical concern but also an economic and social need. Notwithstanding advancements, considerable obstacles – both tangible and perceptual – persist for those with impairments. This study argues for a comprehensive strategy for accessible tourism (Gonda et al., 2025).

The last original paper in the current issue presents a case study of measuring sustainable social innovation at meso level, prepared by Tamás Sikos T. and Dóra Szendi. In the study, the authors attempt to assess the economic and environmental sustainability of the cities in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County in Northern-Hungary (one of the most disadvantaged NUTS 3 regions

in the EU based on almost all the economic indicators) using the UN's SDG methodology and indicator set focusing on three main dimensions. The methodology developed for the analysis is suitable for measuring both sustainable development goals and social innovation through the analysis of goals 8, 9, and 11 (Decent Work and Economic Growth; Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure; Sustainable Cities and Communities). The biggest limitation of the applied methodology is that there is significantly less data available at the meso level compared to, for example, the analysis of cities with county rights. It limits the generalizability of the results and the specificity of indicators for measuring social innovation potential. Furthermore, according to the model's methodology, cities with extreme values may have differential effects on the composite indicator in each region, potentially distorting certain elements and causing autocorrelation between the indicators. These factors should definitely be monitored when applying the model. As a result, in international comparisons, only the methodology can be smoothly transferred to practical analyses. From a spatial development perspective, however, the relevance of sustainable social innovation is unquestionable as it can significantly contribute to the catching up of settlements in peripheral situations (Sikos T. & Szendi, 2025).

The thematic issue is concluded with a book review by Katalin Lipták which is linked to the 150th anniversary of the unification of the Hungarian capital. The volume *Budapest: Past and Future*, edited by Tamás Sikos T. and Dóra Molnár, was published in 2024 by Ludovika University Press and the University of Miskolc. The collection of studies outlines a 150-year historical arc that takes the reader from the medieval functions of Pest-Buda through 19th-century metropolitan development to 21st-century Budapest facing global challenges. The thematic structure of the book is built around three main dimensions: historical urban development, contemporary urbanistic and social challenges, and future-oriented development proposals. The volume's main message is that Budapest is not merely a city but a spatial-social system shaped at the intersection of historical endowments, economic cycles, social mobility, and political decisions. This volume both warns and inspires: it reminds us that Budapest's development is not self-evident, yet also shows what resources and knowledge exist to guide the city strategically. It is an important work from scientific, educational, and urban policy perspectives (Lipták, 2025).

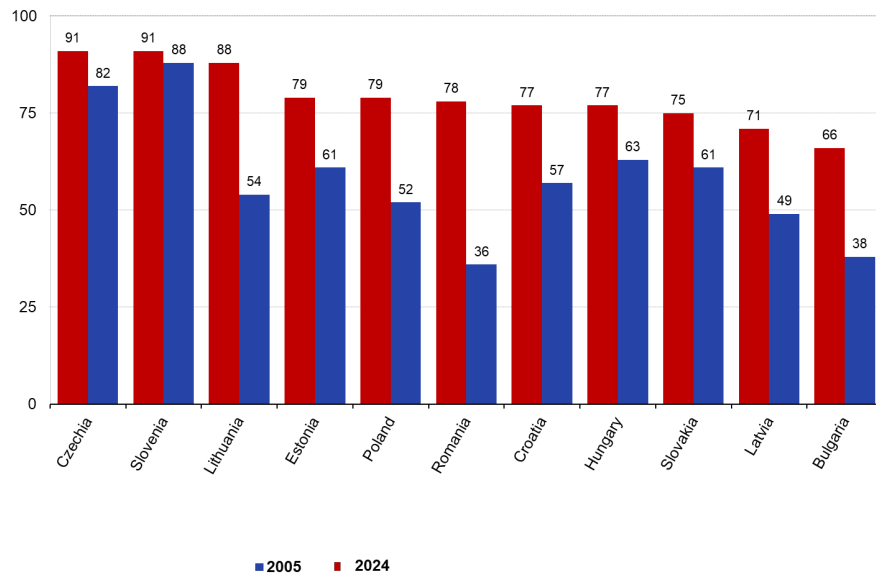
The studies review a wide range of approaches to addressing the socio-economic challenges of the region under review: at the macro-regional, national, and meso levels. In line with the scope of the journal, the thematic focus covered all major topics, from planning to border issues to tourism.

## **DISCUSSION: POLYCRISIS AND CEE-REGIONS**

The challenges facing the macro-region, in particular for local, regional and national authorities, are substantial at a time of severe and multiple crises. Now more than ever, there is a need to have a common mindset and to set joint strategies. For years, Europe has struggled to meet the challenges of an ageing society, labour migration and depopulation. The demographic crisis is particularly threatening for the region, with the phenomenon of depopulation affecting not only rural areas but also cities. The region's performance needs to improve not only demographically and economically, but also in terms of governance. Against the backdrop of the prevailing geopolitical climate and numerous atypical economic shocks, including the global financial and economic crisis, the European sovereign debt crisis, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU's economy demonstrated a collective resilience, expanding by 24.3% in real terms between 2008 and 2023. It is important to note that economic activity across the EU showed an increase, albeit at a modest pace, during 2023 (Eurostat, 2025).

In 2004, the European Union experienced its largest expansion, nevertheless, a significant number of the new member states have been unable to catch up, and to this day are only able to generate GDP below or barely attaining the EU average. Poland constitutes an outlier with its trillion-dollar economy making it eligible to join the elite club at the G20 summit of 2026. Egyed and RÁCZ (2023) described this type of development succinctly by arguing that the region under investigation has shifted its position from the east of the west to the west of the east. The convergence of Romania, Lithuania, and Bulgaria in terms of GDP per capita is spectacular; they are approaching the values of the Czech Republic at the time of EU-accession. The case of Hungary and Croatia shows an interesting duality, with values similar to the EU average over the past year, but with significantly lower starting values observed in the case of Croatia. The Baltic countries also show significant fragmentation; convergence is undeniable, although it has occurred at varying speeds and, taking into account the annual breakdown, with significant disruptions. The Czech Republic and Slovenia have managed to further increase their initially high values over the past twenty years, falling just a few percentage points short of the EU average (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2** GDP per inhabitant at current market prices, 2005 and 2024  
(EU27=100; based on PPS per inhabitant)



Source: own editing based on Eurostat, 2025 table: prc\_ppp\_ind

The application of core-periphery categories in understanding economic development is not without its pitfalls; it involves a general characterization of hierarchical divisions of labour as well as measurements of relative levels of productivity, technological prowess and economic diversification, but can often represent a ‘blunt instrument’ that suggests static rather than dynamic relationships. Liberalization of goods and financial markets first led to deindustrialization and high unemployment in the Eastern European semi-peripheries and then to the emergence of a low-wage sector that was integrated into European supply chains in the second phase.

Accession to the European Union supported convergence, but despite all its advantages, while at national level there has been a levelling up, regional differences have increased over the years. CEE’s integration took an average of ten to fifteen years (Table 1), but it still not be considered complete. Although the entire region under review is part of the Schengen area, only seven countries have joined the eurozone (including Bulgaria, which will be ready to adopt the euro in 2026).

**Table 1** The integration of CEE countries into the EU

State	Request for accession	Candidate status	Start of negotiations	Conclusion of negotiations	Accession to the EU	Implementation of the euro	Entry into the Schengen area
<b>Estonia</b>	1995	1997	1998	2002	2004	2011	2007
<b>Latvia</b>	1995	1997	2000	2002	2004	2014	2007
<b>Lithuania</b>	1995	1997	2000	2002	2004	2015	2007
<b>Poland</b>	1994	1997	1998	2002	2004	-	2007
<b>Czechia</b>	1996	1997	1998	2002	2004	-	2007
<b>Slovakia</b>	1995	1997	2000	2002	2004	2009	2007
<b>Hungary</b>	1994	1997	1998	2002	2004	-	2007
<b>Slovenia</b>	1996	1997	1998	2002	2004	2007	2007
<b>Romania</b>	1995	1999	2000	2004	2007	-	2025
<b>Bulgaria</b>	1995	1997	2000	2004	2007	2026	2025
<b>Croatia</b>	2003	2004	2005	2011	2013	2023	2023

Source: own editing

## CONCLUSIONS

The integration of Central and Eastern European countries into the European Union has brought opportunities for convergence, but it has also highlighted persistent inequalities. EU Cohesion Policy, which aims to reduce regional disparities, has promoted infrastructure development and cross-border cooperation. However, these initiatives have often prioritized growth, reinforcing urban-centered development patterns (Gál & Singh, 2024). Economic processes (relocation of industrial production, foreign direct investment-driven development) have further reinforced these trends. Peripheral regions, especially rural, mountainous, and border areas, have struggled to benefit from these processes due to their limited resources and institutional capacity.

The central objective of our future research is to understand how disruptive events since 2004 have impacted and continue to impact on Central Europe's identity and performance as a cooperation space within the European Union. Addressing these issues will serve to achieve further academic and policy-related objectives related to the future of Central European cooperation. On the one hand, we aim to gauge the resilience of CE cooperation throughout the different crisis situations. On the other hand, we intend to construct a robust evidence-based framework for the elaboration of potential scenarios of mutually beneficial common strategies. In terms of the conceptual development of the research on European cohesion, we aim to identify patterns of regional political cohesion, cooperation, unity, and fragmentation – “rebordering” in other words – that have characterized the positionality of the Visegrad Four states vis-à-vis the EU as well as with regard to their mutual relations.

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