



## THEORISING THE EFFECT OF TRANSITION ON FEMALE LABOUR FORCE IN THE EUROPEAN SEMI-PERIPHERY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY<sup>2</sup>

### Teoretizovanje efekata tranzicije na žensku radnu snagu na evropskoj poluperiferiji: interdisciplinarna metodologija

**ABSTRACT:** *This article presents an interdisciplinary methodological framework that I developed to theorise and empirically test the drivers of female labour force participation in post-socialist Eastern Europe. As I attempted to apply existing theories from consolidated capitalist economies onto the Eastern European cases, I faced the dilemma of either having to label the Eastern European cases as ‘deviant’, because they were not fitting into the pre-existing Western-centric theoretical categories, or having to build a more useful theoretical abstraction which would reflect the Eastern European post-socialist reality. Being interested in the on-the-ground socioeconomic development of Eastern Europe rather than validation of Western-centric theories in the East, I chose the latter option. My aim was to open the black box of transition and address this theoretical gap between Western theory and Eastern reality of gender and labour markets, while providing an answer to a specific research question. To achieve that, I embarked on a study of the history of explanations in the social sciences, an elaboration of a theory-oriented mode of explanation, and the development of a mixed methods empirical strategy which combined statistical analysis with qualitative case studies.*

**KEYWORDS:** semi-periphery, theory building, interdisciplinarity, mixed methods, female labour force, Eastern Europe

**APSTRAKT:** *Ovaj članak predstavlja interdisciplinarni metodološki okvir koji sam razvila da bih mogla da teoretizujem, a potom i empirijski testiram pokretače ženske radne snage u post-socijalističkoj istočnoj Evropi. Pokušavajući da primenim postojeće teorije nastale u kontekstu konsolidovanih kapitalističkih ekonomija na*

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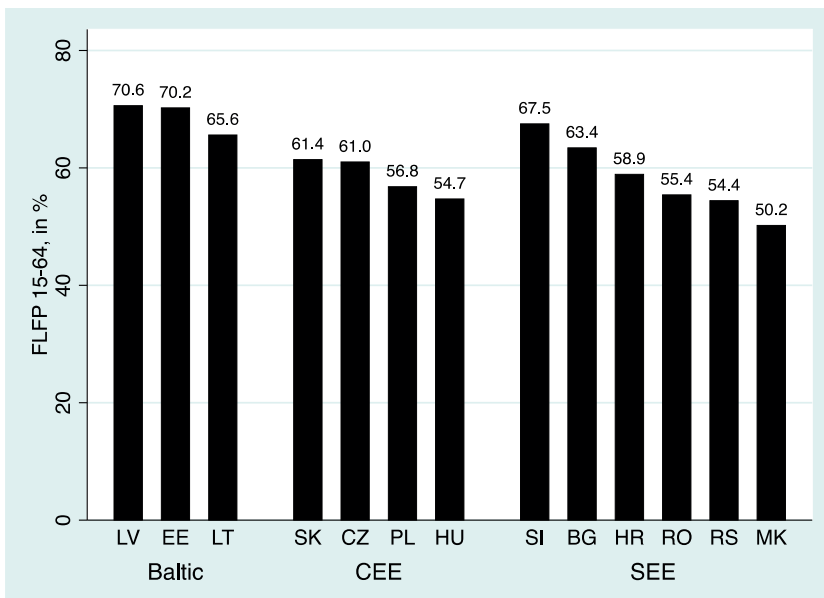
*zemlje istočne Evrope, suočila sam se sa dilemom da ili da istočnoevropske zemlje označim kao „devijantne“, jer se nisu uklapale u već postojeće zapadno-centrične teorijske okvire, ili da izgradim novu, korisniju teoriju koja bi bolje odražavala istočnoevropsku postsocijalističku realnost. Kako me je interesovao socioekonomski razvoj istočne Evrope, a ne validacija zapadno-centričnih teorija na istoku, izabrala sam drugu opciju. Cilj je bio da otvorim crnu kutiju tranzicije i da premostim teoretski jaz između zapadne teorije i istočne realnosti u oblasti roda i tržišta rada, uz istovremeno pružanje odgovora na konkretno istraživačko pitanje. Da bih to postigla, analizirala sam različite pristupe objašnjavanju u društvenim naukama, i ponudila novu teoriju aktivne strukturacije ženske radne snage koju sam nakon toga testirala kombinacijom statističke analize i kvalitativnih studija slučaja.*

**KLJUČNE REČI:** poluperiferija, građenje teorije, interdisciplinarnost, kombinovani metod, ženska radna snaga, istočna Evropa

## 1. Introduction

This article presents an interdisciplinary research framework that I developed to theorise and empirically test how different trajectories of transition to capitalism affected female labour market opportunities across Eastern Europe. My research question was informed by the fact that Eastern Europe had the highest female labour force participation (FLFP) in the world during socialism, and the fact that this trend was reversed with the onset of transition (World Bank, 2011, p. 59). For some of the countries, this reversal was a temporary consequence of the negative shock of transition, while for others, low FLFP has become a more permanent feature of their economies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. FLFP in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, 2008



Source: Eurostat (data for Serbia is from the ILO KILM database).

These empirical observations generated to the following research question that I was interested in answering: Why have some Eastern European countries successfully reintegrated women into their labour markets during transition while others have not? This project constituted my PhD thesis in political economy, which I defended at the London School of Economics and Political Science in December 2015. The fact that I was doing a PhD in political economy, rather than in regional studies, and at an Anglo-Saxon institution, required me to adopt a methodological and theoretical approach that would yield innovative insights while staying embedded in the Anglo-Saxon political economy literature and contributing to it. Since my research findings were published elsewhere (e.g. Avlijas, 2016; Avlijaš, 2017), I do not discuss them here. Within the autoethnographic tradition of writing in the social sciences (see Ellis et al, 2010 for overview), the aim of this article is to survey the epistemological and methodological challenges that I faced while searching for the most suitable research design for this project.

The article is structured as follows. The next section summarises the key challenges that I faced, while the rest of the sections delve deeper into each component of the challenges and my solutions. Section 3 shows the limitations of using existing knowledge on in Eastern Europe as a theoretical input for my research question. Section 4 presents the methodological approach that I adopted to build a new theory within the positivist tradition in the social sciences, while Section 5 discusses the multi-method empirical strategy that was based on Lieberman (2005). Section 5 concludes.

## 2. Key Challenges

The first challenge was to develop an adequate theoretical framework. As I attempted to apply existing theories from consolidated capitalist economies onto the Eastern European cases, I was faced with the dilemma of having to either label the Eastern European cases as 'deviant', because they were not fitting into the pre-existing Western-centric theoretical categories, or to build a more useful theoretical abstraction which would reflect the Eastern European post-socialist reality. These economies were seen as 'deviant' because they experienced a de-development of certain socio-economic gains that were achieved during socialism (e.g. withdrawal of women from the labour force) and because they 'went wild' instead of following a theoretical trajectory of transition from socialism to capitalism that was predicted by economic theory and expected by many reformers (Meurs & Ranasinghe, 2003 in Smith & Stenning, 2006: 205). At the same time, transition as a macro phenomenon has remained poorly theorised, and used as a platitude for economists to justify everything that has gone 'wrong' with the Eastern European socioeconomic development since the early 1990s, in the spirit of "It's the transition, stupid!". There was little effort in the Anglo-Saxon political economy and economics literature to open the black box of transition and understand the causal mechanisms through which this phenomenon influenced labour market outcomes.

Being interested in on-the-ground socioeconomic development of Eastern Europe rather than validation of Western-centric theories in the East, I chose to address this gap between Western capitalist theories and the Eastern emerging capitalist reality by building a theoretical abstraction that would adequately characterise the phenomenon I was focussing on – the mechanisms through which transition affected female participation in the labour force. This generated several challenges. While economic research on labour markets and gender in consolidated capitalist economies has seen a pluralist agenda, including the influential field of feminist economics, labour economics research in Eastern Europe has been predominantly shaped by neoclassical economic theory and individual countries' policy needs, as it was predominantly financed by intergovernmental organisations and bilateral donors due to severe fiscal constraints that the transitional countries faced. This impetus for policy-driven research likely explains why most economic studies on labour markets have focussed on individual countries or at best on sub-regions (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe – CEE or South Eastern Europe – SEE). Because of this scarce production of theoretical knowledge on the effect of transition on labour markets, I faced the following 'Catch 22': If I resorted to literature on the region to identify the theoretical stakes on which to base my argument, I would be forced to cite single articles and their findings to make a point rather than refer to bodies of literature, simply because there were not enough articles addressing the topic of my interest. This would give away an impression that I was unfamiliar with the broader literature, although this literature did not even exist. At the same time, if I used the more abundant and theoretically 'richer' Western literature to draw conclusions about the Eastern European cases, my conclusions would not be useful for understanding transition.

Having taken up the challenge to resolve this conundrum, I searched for solutions by embarking on a study of the history of explanations in the social sciences, and conducting an interdisciplinary survey of literature from economics, political economy and economic sociology on Eastern Europe, as well as on consolidated market economies. My synthesis of these different insights produced a *theory of reactive structuration of the female labour force*<sup>3</sup> which I then empirically tested. Empirical testing represented another challenge, because I was confronted with limited data availability, especially for the period of the 1990s. This constraint led me to develop a mixed methods empirical strategy which combined statistical analysis with qualitative case studies.

### 3. Limited Theoretical Inputs from Eastern Europe

Adhering to neoclassical economic theory, Eastern European policy makers initially paid insufficient attention to labour markets because it was assumed that the increased supply of labour generated by post-socialist restructuring would automatically become absorbed by the new economy (Stiglitz, 1999) and

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3 The name of this theory was developed through a brainstorming exercise with Marina Hughson.

that market forces would ‘naturally’ improve everyone’s economic opportunities. As it became clear that the large number of people who lost their jobs were not going to create new employment for themselves, labour market policy gained political salience.

In theory, three options are available to policy makers who want to generate new employment: i) structural supply side policies, ii) active labour market policies (ALMPs), and iii) demand stimulation. Structural supply side labour market policies are intended to remove institutional and legislative rigidities to make the labour market more flexible and therefore more efficient. The ALMPs include measures such as job brokering (matching job seekers with vacancies), labour market training to upgrade or adjust job seekers’ skills, and provision of public works and subsidised employment in the private sector. These types of policies belong to the supply-side economics school of thought. Traditional demand stimulation, on the other hand, is a Keynesian approach which starts from the premise that unemployment is primarily due to insufficient demand so fiscal policy is the key instrument that regulates the economic boom-and-bust cycle and consequently employment levels in an economy (Baccaro & Pontusson, 2015).

Eastern European policy makers have focussed on implementing structural supply side policies and ALMPs. Liberalisation of the labour market (e.g. making hiring and firing easier) became a key policy recommendation across the entire Eastern Europe, despite frequent political resistance to it. The ALMPs have grown particularly popular because of their seemingly apolitical nature and direct involvement with job seekers. These policy choices reflected the Western economic consensus of the time which emphasised creation of ‘a more adequate’ supply of labour as key to resolving the unemployment problem. Traditional demand stimulation, instead, fell out of favour with Western policy makers during the 1980s because fiscal expansion was considered to generate the risk of increasing inflation while creating only moderate employment gains. This ‘pro-market’ bias had a strong influence on Eastern European policy makers (Epstein, 2008).

The absence of demand stimulation was furthermore pronounced in Eastern Europe because these countries had little room for manoeuvre when it came to fiscal policy. This was the case because these countries were constrained by the concurrent processes of EU and global economic integration. The region had to introduce taxation, a key component of fiscal policy, from scratch, following the collapse of communism. According to Appel (2011), tax policies across the region ended up being very similar because they were determined by international factors rather than domestic politics. A global race to attract foreign sources of capital drove Eastern European corporate tax rates to very low levels. When it came to indirect taxes, such as the consumption tax, existing EU regulations were adopted in their entirety. Furthermore, the requirements of the EU’s Stability and Growth Pact, which defined an excessive budget deficit as one greater than 3 per cent of GDP, also left little room for macro-management of the economy.

While personal income taxation was more politically salient, it was strongly influenced by the ideologically liberal imposition of the flat tax (Appel, 2011), as well as concerns about the weak administrative capacity of transition countries

to implement more complex tax structures (Ganghof, 2006). Finally, in order to ensure political stability, the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) especially had to pay substantial non-employment benefits to the losers of transition, which represented a large item of their expenditure (Vanhuysse, 2006). For all these reasons, Eastern European countries were severely fiscally constrained throughout their transition to capitalism. Further resistance to demand stimulation may have come from the desire to end the legacy of state dependence and macro management of the economy that was rife during communism.

Given the supply-side focus of Eastern European policy makers, their inability to pursue economic macro optimisation policies, and the financial dependence of the local research agenda on policy trends, research on labour markets and gender in the region mostly focussed on labour supply and wages while little academic effort was placed in understanding the macro implications of transition on labour markets. When it came to gender, there was an interest in whether women's incentive to supply their labour to the market changed during transition (Brainerd, 2000; Chase, 1995; Jurajda, 2003). Specifically, Chase (1995) analysed the changing wage elasticities for married women during transition and their LFP in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Moreover, very little attention was paid to the structural sources of female unemployment/labour market inactivity, with an assumption that attraction of any FDI would create jobs in a gender-neutral fashion. A rare study by Orazem & Vodopivec (2000) compared women's wage and employment trends in Estonia and Slovenia and concluded that women benefited from the increasing demand for educated labour during transition. However, none of these studies have been informative when it comes to understanding the broader impact of transition to capitalism on women's participation in the labour market.

Today, more than 25 years since the fall of the Berlin wall, it appears that a lot more than the market mechanism has shaped the region's labour markets. "[E]xisting models did not predict and cannot explain the outcomes [of many transition related phenomena], a fact which has prompted economists to search for explanations outside economics" (Pistor, 2013, p.2–3). It has become clear that even market-oriented policies require a state to implement them, and that no state is neutral in its relationship with the market (Hemerijck et al. 2013; Thelen, 2014). While comparative political economy has tried to address this literature gap, and while it has been theoretically more innovative and informative for the academic understanding of transition than the economics literature (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012; Feldmann, 2006; Nölke & Vliegthart, 2009), none of these contributions have specifically focused on labour markets nor on gender. At the same time, Barbara Einhorn's seminal work on the sociology of market transition, *Cinderella Goes to Market*, argued that gender was at the heart of political, social and economic change in Eastern Europe (Einhorn, 1993). Gal & Kligman (2012) also emphasised centrality of gender in transition in their compelling anthropological analysis of gender in Eastern Europe. In light of these absences in theorising on transition, labour markets and gender, my research project combined the different disciplines and synthesised their states-of-the-art on

these subjects. My aim was to enrich the comparative political economy literature on Eastern Europe and develop an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to be able to tell a story of how transition as a macro phenomenon affected women's labour market opportunities.

#### 4. Theory-oriented Mode of Explanation

My research design was based on the theory-oriented mode of explanation. Hall identifies this mode as one of three commonly encountered variants of explanation within the positivist tradition in the social sciences. The other two are historically specific and multivariate explanations (Hall, 2006: 24–25). The theory-oriented explanation focusses on illuminating the precise theoretical mechanism through which relevant variables cause certain outcomes that can then be empirically tested. As such it can be contrasted to the historically specific, which aims to provide a complete explanation of why a phenomenon occurred in a certain context, and the multivariate, which focusses on identifying a small set of variables that have a measurable impact on a broad class of events (Hall, 2006: 25).

Hall (2006) recommends the theory-oriented explanation where multiple causal factors that may matter for an observed outcome can be contended (25),<sup>4</sup> as this is the case with FLFP. Furthermore, my assumptions about the non-linear structure of causal relationships between the independent variables and their interaction with the dependent variable also point to the theory-oriented explanation as the most appropriate methodological approach for the research question of interest (Hall, 2006: 25).

A theory-oriented approach to analysis counters a common tendency in much of today's social science research to conduct an empirical analysis following which the results are squeezed into a pre-existing theory or labelled in an ad-hoc manner. By applying the theory-oriented mode of explanation, the researcher is allowed substantial space and time for critical reflection on a plethora of existing theories that could serve to explain the phenomenon of interest, following which these theories' relative merits are carefully evaluated against the empirical findings, which could be quantitative, qualitative or a mixture of both.

As Swedberg (2014) points out, with the advancement of statistical methods and their emphasis on prediction, there has been a substantial falling behind of theoretical developments. Many studies have been reduced to 'thin theory' where the impact of specific variables on certain outcomes are analysed but the causal mechanisms between them, or the theoretical abstractions that can be generalised from these findings, have been left out as a marginal concern. In light of these trends, explanations that focus on assessing the relative empirical merit of some theories over others have become welcome and much-needed contributions to social science research.

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4 This motivation can be contrasted to the motivation behind multivariate explanations, which seek to estimate "the precise magnitude of the impact of well-known causal factors" (Hall, 2006: 25).

As Blagojevic & Yair (2010) point out, an additional challenge for research on Eastern Europe is that “countries in the center are implicitly framed as ‘model countries’ with ‘model knowledge’ systems, while countries in the semiperiphery unintentionally become ‘deviant cases’ or ‘comparative cases.’” (348). The two authors further argue that this trend works to the detriment of social science more generally which stands to benefit from the exchange of different experiences and authentic emerging country paradigms.

Following these insights, I designed my research around an issue that is typically addressed econometrically – what drives FLFP – and complemented it with a thicker and a more informative political economy-oriented theoretical account on the causal mechanisms behind the phenomenon of interest (Owen, 1994, as discussed in Hall, 2006; and Rodrik, 2003).

While theory-driven explanations of social phenomena should compare the explanatory power of different theories, Hall (2006) points out that journal articles often fall short due to word limits. Following Lakatos (1970), each theoretical contribution should ideally reflect a ‘three-cornered fight’ between the new theory, its rival theories and empirical observations (Hall, 2006: 27). This allows the researcher to check for the theory’s internal consistency apart from its external validity, which is an important additional criterion for proving the validity of a theory. As Peter A. Hall explains:

“Although some have argued that the realism of a model’s assumptions is irrelevant to its validity, on the grounds that the latter should be judged only by the accuracy of its predictions (cf. Friedman, 1968), it strikes me as perilous for analysts of causal mechanisms to ignore the realism or plausibility of their assumptions.” (Hall, 2006: 29)

If the theory is shown as logically consistent vis-à-vis other theories, it can be considered valid even if the empirical analysis fails to confirm the hypotheses that stem from the theory. The rejection of an internally consistent theory through empirical analysis could then also be attributed to inadequate operationalisation of theoretical concepts and/or to poor data quality. As the best-case scenario, the confirmation of both internal and external validity of a theory proves the robustness of the theoretical contribution in question. This research project, by testing both the theory’s consistency against other theories and its empirical validity, was inspired by this logic of scientific enquiry. At the same time, complete implementation of the ‘three-cornered fight’ logic of enquiry is an agenda that is too ambitious for one research project. Therefore, both the testing of my theory against other theories and the testing of its empirical validity suffer from limitations that I exposit in the empirical analysis.

Finally, instead of suggesting an all-encompassing theory on the drivers of FLFP, my research project was informed by an observation by Rodrik (2015b), who argues that every model captures a salient aspect of the social experience. He maintains that our aim should not be to replace one model with another, superior one, but for them to expand horizontally so that we can explain a growing part of social reality. Adhering to this logic of social enquiry, my *theory*



of reactive structuration of the female labour force offers the “bigger picture” explanation, i.e. how the structure of female labour force reacted to changing economic opportunities during the Eastern European transition to capitalism.

In the first part of the project, which focused on theory building, I surveyed some of the well-established, existing economic theories on the determinants of FLFP as well as the more recent institutional and welfare state oriented accounts. These have almost exclusively focussed on the western market economies. I then combined these existing theories with general insights based on the axiomatic logic of comparative political economy and my previous knowledge of Eastern Europe in order to develop a theoretical model that offers a conceptual explanation of drivers of FLFP in Eastern Europe. Bringing the different components of this vast literature together, and re-interpreting them in the context of Eastern Europe, was the main theoretical contribution of the research project.

In the second part of the study, which focused on theory testing, I relied on a mixed-method strategy for comparative research that Lieberman (2005) identified as ‘nested analysis’. Lieberman’s nested analysis begins with a preliminary large-N analysis (LNA), which determines the empirical robustness of a proposed theory using quantitative methods such as econometric or descriptive statistical analysis. If the LNA finds empirical support for certain theoretical propositions, the researcher moves onto a model-testing small-N Analysis (SNA) in order to complement and/or strengthen the conclusions from the LNA (Lieberman, 2005: 437). While this method is discussed in further detail in Section 4 below, Figure 2 summarises my overall methodological approach.

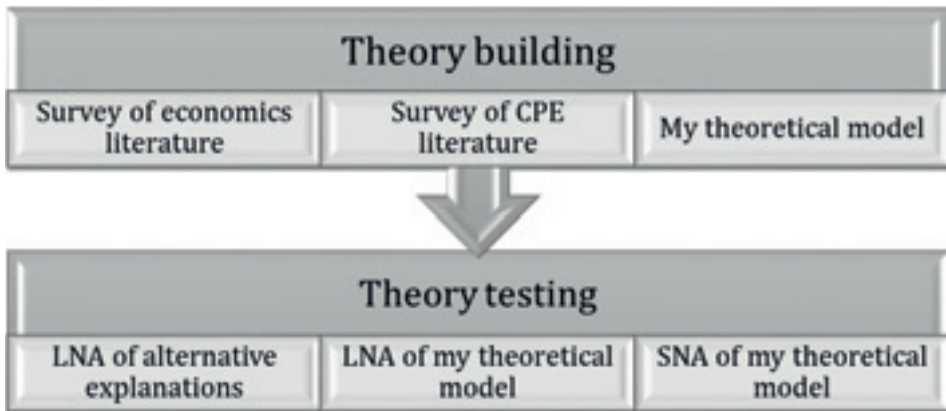


Figure 2. Theory-oriented research design

While Hall’s instructions focus on case studies as the basis for empirical testing, he also suggests that we should seek “as large and diverse a set of observations as feasible from each case” in order to strengthen a theory’s validity (Hall, 2006: 28). This approach to analysis is also recommended by King, Keohane, & Verba (1994). In fact, mixed methods have become popularised

even among some economists during the 2000s, as they started supplementing their econometric analyses with case studies. They sought to obtain a better understanding of the causal mechanisms at work, thus admitting the limited ability of quantitative approaches to explain complex social phenomena (most notably Rodrik, 2003).

Although it is undoubtedly informative to econometrically estimate the size of impact of one variable on another, Shalev (2007) points out that comparative political economy is far more concerned with theoretical mechanisms and the direction of causality, rather than the quantification of marginal effects of one variable on another. This is the case because some of the variables of interest in macro-comparative research are ambiguous and difficult to measure precisely (266). For example, there are many challenges involved in the operationalisation of variables such as the knowledge economy or the general skills regime which form part of the theory of reactive structuration of the female labour force. I thus underline the importance of the conceptual contribution of my theoretical framework, besides the empirical one, because equating concepts with their operationalisation is not very helpful for theorising (Swedberg, 2014: 76).

## 5. Empirical Strategy: A Multi-Method Analysis

The empirical part of the research project identified 21 testable hypotheses, of which the first 11 were based on the socio-economic and structural drivers of FLFP from the literature, and the last 10 stemmed from my theory of reactive structuration of the female labour force. This empirical endeavour combined descriptive statistical analysis, econometrics and co-variational descriptive analysis of case studies, which resulted in a multi-method empirical strategy (first identified by Lieberman, 2005). Following King, Keohane & Verba (1994) and Hall (2006), my aim was to gather as much empirical evidence as possible in support of my theoretical model of reactive structuration of the female labour force. Because of the complexity of the proposed causal mechanism, the focus of empirical testing in this project was not only on the successful operationalisation of individual theoretical concepts and components into variables of interest, but also a thick description of what a manifestation of a theory means empirically. In order to achieve this outcome, I nested my qualitative findings into the wider quantitative ones.

The empirical part started with a LNA of 11 testable hypotheses that stem from the existing economic theories. This is because my goal was to test the empirical robustness of several alternative theories that could explain the phenomenon of interest. I conducted this LNA on a time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) analysis of a sample of 13 Eastern European countries – 11 Eastern European current EU member states and two candidate countries, Macedonia and Serbia – during the period 1990–2010. I relied on this method to sieve through the empirical validity of existing economic explanations because the 11 hypotheses that I developed are based on thin theory and can be tested in a straightforward manner using multivariate and descriptive statistical analysis.

In accordance with my theory-oriented mode of explanation, my aim was not to eliminate every possible economic explanation. Rather it was to use some of the empirical insights that may carry some weight and reinterpret them in the context of my theoretical model of reactive structuration of the female labour force which accommodates more complex notions of causality.

Following this LNA that tested the empirical congruence of alternative theoretical accounts, I conducted an LNA that assessed the empirical robustness of my own theoretical model. While explaining diverse empirical outcomes across only 13 Eastern European countries during the period 1997–2008 for which sectoral data is available makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions from econometric analyses alone, exploring a limited range of cases is particularly relevant for the comparative political economy scholarly community, because its members are interested in being able to compare country cases rather than analyse average cross-country effects (Shalev, 2007: 264). In fact, Shalev (2007) argues that by keeping the cases visible the researcher is directly catering to the needs of comparative political economy researchers.

Since LNA has limited capacity to test its full empirical manifestation because of the complex causality chains in my model, I focussed on econometrically analysing the relationships between the variables that form the theoretical basis of my model and supplementing these findings with descriptive statistical analysis. Shalev (2007) argues that a descriptive analysis of data in tabular and graphical format represents a viable alternative to multiple regression analysis (261).

Following satisfactory results from the econometric and descriptive statistical analyses, I proceeded with the SNA that focussed on a smaller number of cases. The qualitative analysis allowed me to trace the causal mechanisms behind the relationships that have been shown as robust in the econometric analysis. I based my case selection on the following criteria: Since I was interested in a theory-driven mode of explanation, the process of case selection should also be theory driven. According to Blatter & Blume (2008), a case is crucial if it provides strong evidence undermining the dominant theory and supporting an alternative theory. These two regions indeed do that. Therefore, it is the knowledge of the theoretical discussions on the causes of the phenomenon of interest that is the essential ingredient for systematic process analysis rather than the detailed knowledge of the empirical cases. In addition, CEE and the Baltic contain some of the most economically and institutionally developed countries in the region. According to *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Transition Indicators*, these countries have completed their transitions to capitalism and their institutions correspond to those of fully functioning market economies. This is another reason why I investigate the cogs and wheels of transition and its impact on female labour on them.

My qualitative observations included co-variance between my statistical indicators of interest, but they also included an analysis of the policies and processes that constitute part of the suggested causal mechanism. In order to do that, I used development strategies from these countries' governments and international organisations analysing developments in the region, such as the

OECD, World Bank and the EU. I also relied on thick description from academic literature on the region. Finally, given the nature of my variables of interest, apart from primary and secondary literature, I also used quantitative indicators to improve our understanding of my country cases, as endorsed by Collier (2011). As argued by Sen (1980), selection of which information to include and which to leave out is an extremely important part of any research, including a descriptive analysis, and it should primarily be driven by theory. In other words, we cannot explain everything so we have to focus on those observations that will help us to learn more about the phenomenon of interest, using theory to guide us.

Given that the aim of this research project was to create a more complex account of causality between the variables that affect FLFP rates, rather than to rule out all other socio-economic and structural factors, I expected that some of the hypotheses that I identified would be confirmed while others would be rejected. This is because my theory did not need to rule out specific factors, such as education or economic growth, as lacking explanatory power. Instead, it moved beyond conclusions such as 'education and economic growth matter for female employment' in attempting to understand the kind of education and growth that matter and the ways in which they are significant. In that way, it reflected the complexity of interaction between demand and supply drivers, as well as the role of government policy and institutional settings in mediating these interactions. For example, specific public policies and budgetary decisions were identified that these countries' governments needed to adopt to correct biases that can stem from the non-gender-neutral job creation process driven by foreign direct investment. These insights led to an overall conclusion that fiscal policies have significant scope for increasing FLFP if the right ones are implemented, such as the expansion of tertiary education and proliferation of general skills that are transferable between firms and sectors of the economy.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This article presents the research framework that I developed to identify the theoretical mechanisms through which transition affected female labour market opportunities in Eastern Europe and empirically test them. The article surveys key theoretical and empirical challenges that I faced in attempting to bridge the gap between Western-centric theory on labour force participation of women and Eastern socioeconomic reality. It then discusses the epistemological and methodological tools that I used to overcome these challenges and produce new theory.

The article emphasises the importance of combining literature from different disciplines to resolve the challenges of conducting research on the semiperiphery, which is characterised by a shortage of authentic theoretical paradigms that can explain the socioeconomic changes that took place over the past 30 years. I show how interdisciplinarity is a key tool that can be used to overcome these absences. Since I faced a research question that I could not answer using standard economic theory and methods, due to low availability of both theory and data on

Eastern Europe, I was forced to change my angle of analysis by stepping outside discipline-based bodies of literature and synthesising insights from different disciplines into one coherent research framework that would allow me to answer my research question. This allowed me to formulate a novel theory of reactive structuration of the female labour force.

The article also shows how a theory-oriented mode of explanation within the positivist tradition of the social sciences was applied in the context of the semiperiphery. Such an approach is in line with a renewed interest in the development of social theorising, which, as Swedberg (2014) argues, had been neglected during the second half of the 20th century as a result of over-emphasis on the use of empirical methods in the social sciences (p.14–15). Finally, the multi-methods empirical strategy that I applied to rule out alternative theories and test my theory indicates that mixed methods can be used as an effective tool to overcome problems of data availability.

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