

# Concluding Remarks

## A “Social Quality Observatory” for Central and Eastern European Countries?

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### The Amsterdam Declaration on Social Quality, 1997

More than twenty years ago many European scholars started with the development of a new theory and its application with a declaration, the first paragraph of which follows here:

Respect for the fundamental human dignity of all citizens requires us to declare that we do not want to see growing numbers of beggars, tramps and homeless in the cities of Europe. Nor can we countenance a Europe with large numbers of unemployed, growing numbers of poor people and those who have only limited access to health care and social services. These and many other negative indicators demonstrate the current inadequacy of Europe to provide social quality for all its citizens.

At that time, it was signed by one thousand scholars from Western, Central, and Eastern European countries (IASQ 1997). Since then societal relationships have changed, also due the radical new techniques for communication and also miscommunication. This thematic issue of the *International Journal of Social Quality* tries to explain the new challenges for, among other things, the contemporary state of affairs of the theory and application of social quality. In this case, we are talking about the SQT and the SQA as they apply to Central and Eastern European countries. With this in mind, how can we interpret this declaration of more than twenty years ago?

### The Intentions of the Concluding Remarks of the Thematic Issue on the CEE Countries

This thematic issue explores current political, economic, and sociocultural transformative processes in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. This article aims to discover some of these processes on the basis of four case studies published in this thematic issue and two added articles. The case studies concern the Visegrad group of



countries, namely Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. The first added article is a comparative study about Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Japan on two of the above-mentioned processes. The second added article contains a reflection on inevitable external influences on the entire CEE region. The proposal to turn the attention of this issue toward this region in a thematic issue came from the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences. There is a history behind this proposal. At the end of 2015, this academy invited the International Association of Social Quality (IASQ) to start a European internet research group. Its aims were to explore the possibilities to apply the social quality approach (SQA) in Ukraine based on the theory of social quality at that time (SQT). The reason was to obtain instruments to contribute adequate interventions in current processes of transition in Ukraine through the lens of social quality. Thanks to input from Ukraine and from the Western European side, this research group was able to provide their ideas in working paper 17, which was published in December 2019 (IASQ 2019). One unexpected result of this research effort concerns the elaboration of a “procedural framework” for the SQA as an equivalent to the two older frameworks, namely the conceptual and the analytical. This allowed us to place the research that we carried out for Ukraine in the broader perspective of the CEE countries and vice versa. The final aim of this concluding article is to pave the way for a Social Quality Observatory for CEE countries so that scholars can follow the ongoing transition in these states from the perspective of the SQT and the elaborated SQA. This new entity should contribute to a transition which addresses, enhances, and strengthens the five normative factors of social quality: social justice, solidarity, equal value, human dignity, and eco-equilibrium. These factors may be a decisive point of departure for adjusting the assumptions about and operationalization of the rule of law for contemporary interhuman relationships—something we need to do to help develop overall sustainability (Polcini 2017). This will be the main challenge for the proposed Social Quality Observatory. All of this implies a deep understanding of the “the social” (IASQ 2019: 49).

In these concluding remarks, I would also like to go beyond merely reflecting upon the six articles of this thematic issue. This is because I think it is useful to open with a clarification about the given context of these articles. Since the start of social quality work in the mid-1990s, attention has already been dedicated to the CEE countries through the lens of the evolving theory and approach of social quality.

Many studies have been published in the *European Journal of Social Quality* and its successor, namely this *International Journal of Social Quality*. Also, it is important to note that working paper 17 is based on this previous work. Added to this collection of work may be the new working paper by Peter Herrmann (2020), which delivers theoretical background information about the recent transition of the CEE countries. Some parts of it are reviewed in this concluding article. However, neither these previous articles, nor the articles of this thematic issue can be understood as stand-alone documents. They all contribute to our understanding of what is still a moving target.

Furthermore, I would like to articulate some of the characteristics of the six articles, which may be functional for designing new research and for shaping future dialogues about the future of the CEE countries under the lead of the above-proposed Observatory. The first is the need to explain similarities and differences between Western European and Central and Eastern European countries, while the second is to clarify the conceptual framework of SQT and especially the meaning of the concept of “the social.” The third is to deepen this theory and its application with regard to social inclusion (and its domain of participation) and social cohesion (and its domain of trust). The fourth is to unravel the frequently occurring confusion about the meaning of the quality of life approach compared to SQT and the SQA. And the fifth is to open the debate about the normative factors of social quality as foundations for a vision of the CEE region in the context of the influences of outside political and economic forces.

With regard to the similarities and differences between the CEE region and region of Western Europe (the so-called “EU-15”), two profound historical events in the first region from the 1930s till the 1960s may explain the divergent interpretations, legends, myths, narratives, and especially feelings about the daily circumstances in both regions. The first concerns the hardly fathomable subject broached by American historian Timothy Snyder, namely the history of the so-called “Bloodlands” between 1935 and 1945. It concerns the territory between Leningrad and Odessa and between Poznan and Smolensk (Snyder 2010): a topic that has not made it into Western European collective memory. The second concerns one of the subjects treated by Isaac Deutscher, the famous Polish historian, which has to do with the postwar devastation of the socioeconomic infrastructure of the CEE countries and their “Sovietization” very soon after World War II. The sociopolitical, the socioeconomic, and the socio-cultural dimensions of everyday life underwent a paradigm shift in the CEE region. This is in stark contrast to the postwar history of the Western region. It concerned the introduction of a pervasive, authoritative bureaucratic-based system of governance featuring a five-year planning system based on quantitative data as a means for regulating daily life (Deutscher 1968).

Because of the long-lasting Iron Curtain, a completely free, open, and critically founded debate about the similarities and differences between the two regions and the meaning of these was nipped in the bud. In many ways, it appears from the six articles that the ascension of the CEE countries into the European Union is perceived by many from the CEE region as due to the possibility or the necessity to imitate the Western European model of governance. But there was and is no “Western model.” There are many societal approaches in the Western region, which have been determined by the historical pathways of each individual country. And many from the Western region perceived the new connection with CEE countries as the insertion of an undifferentiated whole of “postcommunist states” into *their* union. From this Western perspective, the insertion was not conceived as an “integration process” of equivalent parts. Indeed from only a narrow (neoliberal) economic perspective, there

was no equivalence among countries at all. The new countries should follow—as will be reviewed below—the World Bank Agenda to become equivalent, but in a restricted way. In order to reach a balance between the differentiated Western region and the differentiated CEE region, one may need, with the introduction and application of SQT and the SQA, to go beyond this narrow perspective. The above-mentioned European research group studying Ukraine criticized, for example, how the European Support Group for Ukraine introduces in a top-down and eclectic way “important” Western examples concerning the sociopolitical and socioeconomic dimensions of societies. It introduces an inextricable amalgam of non-connected examples from different Western countries. Furthermore, this Support Group ignores the differences between the Western countries, and its own vision of Ukraine is conspicuously absent (EC 2016, 2017; IASQ 2019). According to the SQT and SQA perspective, this process should and can be reversed. This requires the articulation of a vision from Ukraine about desirable societal changes. And with help of this way of thinking, criteria must be articulated to determine which examples from the West are important for the realization of this vision and which are dysfunctional.

## **Earlier Studies on CEE Countries through the Lens of Social Quality, 1999–2010**

According to Herrmann, the late 1990s became the era of bidding farewell to a specifically European-Union-defined approach to social policy and society building. This paved the way to the Lisbon Treaty of 2000, which stated that it “has today set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade; to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy of the world” (EC 2000). In a confusing way, this is packed in with otherwise relevant but unexplained objectives such as increasing human dignity, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law in all member states. It reminds us that the annual expensive conferences up till now of the “rich mouthpieces of multinationals” in Davos (Switzerland) with prominent politicians talking for decades about the position of the poor and the seemingly inevitable decline of the overall sustainability of human life on earth. And Herrmann argues that the quintessence of this Lisbon Treaty (as well as the meetings in Davos) was strongly embedded in the “*Zeitgeist*,” which in his view was marked by the following characteristics: competitiveness, individual advantage, privatism; and a paternalistic subordination that ignores the societal contradictions of the past decades that caused inequality, poverty, and a decrease in the level of overall sustainability (Herrmann 2020).

In the first edition of the *European Journal of Social Quality*—thus a year before the presentation of the Lisbon Treaty—Alan Walker, as one of the co-founders of SQT and the SQA, explained the existing parochial vagaries and handmaiden position of the multitude of societal policies toward the economy and various political interests. This was not only the case for Britain, but for all (at that time) fifteen members of

the European Union (the EU-15). According to Walker, it was becoming increasingly clear that unless something could be done to reconstitute the relationship between the economic (thus the socioeconomic dimension) and all the other relevant societal dimensions, “the European project will lose contact with everyday concerns of citizens as it concentrates overly on economic[s] and the monetary Union and becomes primarily a ‘Bankers’ Europe’ (1999: 12). The final stage of the exit of Britain from the European Union (Brexit) at the end of 2020 was the crowning glory of the aim to strengthen neoliberal economics in Britain. As two British social quality studies have eloquently demonstrated, its protagonists succeeded with the help of ostentative falsehoods and with the support of people who did not have the necessary income and community support to create a decent life for themselves. They were urged to distrust the Union as the supposed cause of their daily circumstances and frustrations (Corbett 2016; Mahoney and Kearon 2018). With the social quality initiative of 1997 in mind—as published in the IASQ’s first social quality book (Beck et al. 1997)—Denis Bouget explained that, in accordance with the *Zeitgeist*, despite all the fine words, “participation” was reduced to an economic role and status as a consumer, a worker, entrepreneur, or landlord (1997: 36). As a consequence—and due to the lack of a well-grounded sociopolitical and juridical vision of the European Union at that time—all forms of social protection were officially conceived of as “productive factors” for the economy (Begg et al. 2001; Herrmann 1999). Also specific interpretations of human dignity, the rule of law, freedom, and peace were *eo ipso* conceived as conditions or productive factors for the socioeconomic dimension and herewith related interests.

In this same issue of 1999, Zsuzsa Széman wrote a rather optimistic article about Hungary. With the accession of Central and Eastern European countries in prospect, the role of nonprofit organizations in this country concerning the redistribution of sources from state institutions, nonprofit organizations, and market actors were soon looking to be on the rise. This would stimulate the flexibility and problem-solving ability as conditions for increasing the social quality of daily circumstances in Hungary (Széman 1999). This argument supposed, according to Ivan Svetlik from Slovenia, that we had at that time at our disposal a theoretically grounded consensus of the concepts to be used in social quality theory and the social quality approach. In other words, the socioeconomic and financial dimension should be put at the service of human values that the EU claims to pursue. He was especially focused on the conceptualization of the four conditional (objective) factors of social quality: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment. They are part of the pathway for the inevitable transformation of the socioeconomic dimension as can be seen, for example, in the societal consequences of the current COVID-19 pandemic (Editorial 2020). Svetlik asked at the end of the 1990s whether policies to enhance these factors will pave the way for people “to be more competent and self-reliant as workers, citizens and community members? . . . Will they stimulate [in the line of the social quality thinking] there community-based offices where people can find advice in the event of certain social and economic difficulties or get help in career planning?” (1999: 86).

In 2001 Zsuzsa Ferge—the Grand Old Lady of the Sociology in Hungary who welcomed the new SQT—expressed a more gloomy interpretation of the process leading to the accession of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the European Union. She argued that these countries should become connected with the “European Social Model.” The European Commission claimed at that time that “this model is based both on common values and the understanding that social policy and economic performance are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing” (CEC 1997: 1). But this is not an explanation of the concept of “social model,” nor we can find any theoretically sound explanation up till now either. And this supposed mutuality denies more than one hundred years of excellent sociopolitical analyses about the role of actors in the socioeconomic dimension. Furthermore, this claim refers to the indefensible duality between “social and economic,” a core assumption of the neoliberal doctrine. Ferge argued that, unhindered by any political-theoretical thought, the EU-15 gave wide scope for the introduction of the World Bank Agenda to direct the ascension of the aforementioned CEE countries. This refers implicitly to the dominant neoliberal market principles as expressed in the Lisbon Treaty. She argued that with regard to the ascension states from the CEE a completely different path was taken with regard to the socioeconomic and socio-cultural dimensions compared to the existing pathways that had been taken by the EU-15. For her at that time, this meant “strengthening the individual responsibility and the weakening of public responsibility in societal matters; the promotion of privatization and marketization in all spheres; the emphasis on targeted assistance to the truly needy; the scaling down of social insurance to assure ‘work incentives’; and the abolition of universal benefits” (Ferge 2001: 27). This was to be a recipe for the future of a strong visible divide between the EU-15 and the first ascension states.

Between 2001 and 2006, thanks to the support of the European Commission and fourteen European academic institutes—one from Hungary and one from Slovenia among them—the European Network on Social Quality Indicators (ENIQ) theorized and operationalized the social quality indicators (IASQ 2009). The IASQ’s second book on Social Quality—*A Vision for Europe*—also argued to the European Commission that it should finance this comprehensive project (Beck et al. 2001). These indicators are conceived as instruments to understand changes in only the four conditional factors of social quality in a certain space and at a specific time. The outcomes will deliver essential but not sufficient information for determining the social quality at a certain place and time. After all, that should also imply the understanding of the changes of the constitutional and normative factors. Thanks to ENIQ, these indicators were applied in fourteen European countries and the outcomes were presented in the double issue of the *European Journal of Social Quality* (Gordon 2005). In Hungary, this first SQ empirical exploration was made by Szilvia Altorjai and Erzsébet Bukodi (2005). Among many other important conclusions, they argued that “investigating the Hungarian data, it is a fact that distrust is more common among losers—those with little education, low income, and low status and who are unsatisfied with their

life . . . these kinds of causes in Hungary may show that people expect resolution from government” (2005: 142).

The first SQ empirical exploration in Slovenia was made by Masa Filipović, Srna Mandič, and Ruzica Boskič. And this exploration can also function as a point of departure to explore the current state of affairs in other CEE countries. According to the three researchers, for Slovenia at that time the most striking result of the SQ approach was its finding that places for collective gatherings and meetings were quietly disappearing, while the family and kinship networks were “getting a more prominent role . . . [therefore] the kinship networks in Slovenia are overburdened by the family support they are providing. . . . So the main issue from the SQ perspective is how to reverse this process . . . the decline of generalized trust and the roots of this developmental drawback predominantly lie in the distrust of people in the performance of particular public policies that are directly affecting their daily lives” (Filipović et al. 2005: 277).

In 2006, Gábor Juhász built on the analyses of Zsuzsa Ferge. Based on thorough comparative empirical research concerning the CEE countries, he argued that the former CEE “communist states” offered a high level of protection in exchange for keeping wages low, curtailing civil and political freedoms, and using trade unions as a transmission belt for the policies of the Communist Party. By comparing employment rates, unemployment rates, and so on, he concluded as follows:

Political and economic transformation in the 1990s made the adjustment of their welfare system to the European Social Model difficult and the EU had little impact on the shaping of East-Central European soci[et]al policy . . . the focus on the introduction of market economy contributed to a massive growth of inequalities in the region. Social security reforms limited solidarity in pension and health care systems. Economic decline concomitant to the transformation process prevented most governments from increasing social spending. Social and civil dialogue started right after the regime changes in all the countries, but it still is not as sophisticated as it was before the eastern enlargement in the EU. (Juhász 2006: 105).

Herrmann (2020) refers to both questions in his recent working paper about processes in the CEE countries. He argues:

- That as well the former EU-15 and now the EU-29 had and have to cope with an enforced secularization of a specific form of “capitalist modernity”: “a form of capitalism that has been very much an expression of the general geopolitical orientation allowing that the winner takes all” (2020: 9); and
- That seen from the social quality perspective “the transformation [see Juhász and many others] had been meant to be an adaptation of the new EU-15 development strategy that had been especially criticized—among others—by the founders of social quality thinking for its one-sided prospect of a social model, being a new neoliberal economic approach” (2020: 10). The foundation of this supposed “model” had not been “the social” understood as “the outcome of the dialectic between processes of self-realization of people (as social beings) and processes

resulting into [sic] the formation of collective identities” (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012: 46). Instead, it referred to a restricted economic doctrine standing on the pillars of:

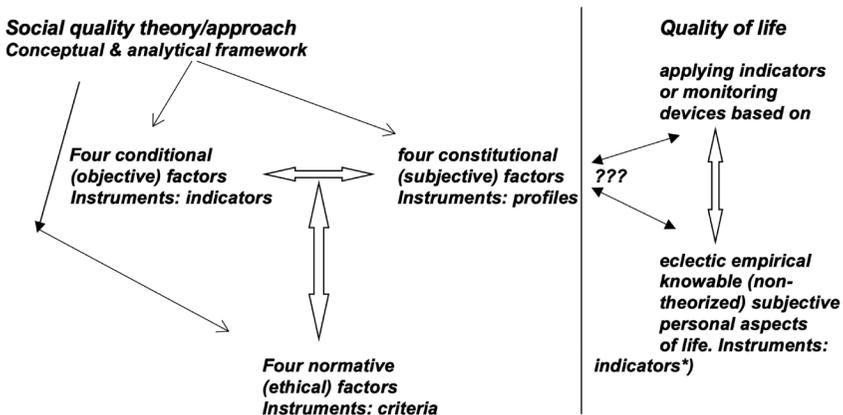
- ◆ “Growth (measured in GDP standards) as expression of wealth and well-being,
- ◆ Competitiveness as evidence of a health performance,
- ◆ Knowledge as instrument instead of acknowledging it as matter of sociopersonal development, [and]
- ◆ Social cohesion as reduced understanding of a complex relationality” (2020: 10).

## More Recent Articles about the CEE Countries between 2010 and 2015

Over the years, Aberdeen University in the United Kingdom has shown a great interest in the Central and Eastern European countries. Over time, this university began to draw scholars’ attention to the first notions about SQT and its application. One of the first applications concerned the interpretation of the beginning of postsoviet Moldova and Belarus. Pamela Abbott (2007) applied empirical research in order to understand what the consequences were of the traumatic shock the countries had experienced since 1991 with regard to the social quality of their respective citizenries. In collaboration with Claire Wallace, this social quality research was able to be applied more intricately to postsoviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This was thanks to the increased understanding of SQT and the outcomes obtained by the ENIQ as sources for the distinction between the four conditional factors. The latter are oriented toward the objective, understandable world: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment (Gordon 2005: 8–24). But both researchers drew upon the “quality of life indicators” in their sample survey of 8,400 individuals for understanding the changes of the conditional factors instead of the social quality indicators (Abbott and Wallace 2010). Of interest is their attention to the subjective sphere, which was at that time in SQT *in statu nascendi* (Beck et al. 2001). They applied qualitative interviews with a purposefully selected sample of individuals, health experts, and focus groups for understanding the change of the subjective sphere (Abbott and Wallace 2010). Herewith, they implicitly contributed to the elaboration of the constitutional factors afterward, namely personal (human) security and resilience, social recognition and self-worth, social responsiveness, and personal (human) capacity (Beck et al. 2012). More or less the same procedure that was applied in their research was applied in their study about Central Asia and the Caucasus (Abbott et al. 2011). Again, the mixing of both types of indicators remained.

The elaboration of the outcomes of their research from 2007, 2010, and 2011—including new research concerning other CEE countries—was published in 2014. The central question was whether rising economic prosperity in the new member

states of the European Union, since they had joined the Union, was also reflected in a better “quality of life” for their populations. The question also sought to answer just what constituted a better “quality of society” for the citizens of these countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria). In order to understand the social quality of these circumstances—they applied again the European Quality of Life Surveys for 2003 and 2007 as the instruments for their empirical research. They concluded that, notwithstanding the increase of the quality of the socioeconomic dimension in these countries, through the lens of social quality it can be concluded that the quality of their societies remained problematic because of the negative feelings that many of their citizens had toward the state of affairs of their everyday lives (Abbott and Wallace 2014). The results of the theory of social quality at that time were not really incorporated (Beck et al. 2001). Notwithstanding this fact, with their research in the CEE countries they contributed strongly to the reflection on the ontological and epistemological possibilities or impossibilities of using instruments for analyses from approach x to explain the changes as conceived by the application of approach y. Figure 1 below may deliver some help in understanding this remark. It will explain that the quality of a given society (objective sphere and subjective sphere) will be determined by applying analyses of the conditional and the constitutional factors, and that the results of their connection to one another can be judged by normative factors (approach x). But the quality of life approach (i.e., approach y) focuses on the feelings of individuals about their everyday lives. It has an affinity with methodological individualism, which is oriented around feelings of being estranged from societal processes and conditions.



\*) These indicators are in fact empirical based monitoring devices, functional for measuring results of interventions in one of the manifolds of policy areas on behalf of individual citizens. Indicators are instruments to understand the results of societal and interhuman processes for everyday life (van der Maesen 2013).

Figure 1. Social Quality Approach and Quality of Life Approach(es)

The 2013 study by Vyacheslav Bobkov and colleagues (2013) about the socio-economic dimension of Russia demonstrated as well that the theory of social quality and its application was a “work in progress.” They explored the nature of the growth of Russian capitalism on the basis of empirically based research. Their conclusion was that this form of “state-monopoly capitalism” causes a low social quality of daily socioeconomic circumstances, which in turn causes instability in societal development. The economic standard of living increased for all groups of the population in the first decade of the 2000s, but the economic inequality continued to grow. With regard to the observed volatility and discreteness in income related to employment, workers experienced precarity and earned lower wages on average (Bobkov et al. 2013). It is possible with current insights to substantiate more clearly their conclusions about the low social quality in this socioeconomic dimension of Russian society. It should be noted that to date almost all emphasis in empirical social quality research has been placed on the changes in the conditional factors. The constitutional factors remain neglected. The linking of both sets of factors was not discussed. For the first time, these constitutional factors came into the spotlight in the study by Judith Wolf and Irene Jonker (2020) about their application in the methodology for coping with vulnerable people in the context of seventy-five Dutch care organizations. In this way, the conditional factors were put into a new perspective at the same time because they were linked with the constitutional factors. Also, in the case of the CEE countries, Aberdeen University has started to become interested in using the SQA to think about the subjective nature of everyday life.

As argued above, the determination of the nature of social quality in a certain space and at particular time happens by the judgment of the linking of the conditional and constitutional factors with help of the normative factors. This is explained in the IASQ’s third social quality book (Beck et al. 2012: 64). This book refers to the work of Marina Calloni, in which she argued that social quality in Europe, challenged by economic processes of globalization and local cultures, has to be based on cosmopolitan assumptions and be able to integrate the traditional informative approach to human rights, an interest in constructive international collaboration, and respect for local populations. Global issues in fact always have to be connected to local issues (Calloni 2001: 74). Since as recently as 2016, there has been a fresh attempt to investigate more deeply the normative factors of social quality, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the IASQ’s third book (Abbott et al. 2016; Herrmann 2019; Polcini 2017). Figure 1 above suggests that we have to go beyond the rather eclectic as well as fragmented approach to social quality. To understand the nature of social quality also in the CEE countries, the development of a complex and integrated assessment with reference to indicators, profiles, and various criteria (judgments) should be the kernel of any complete understanding of societal processes. With help from a number of perspectives also elaborated in Asian countries, this was argued in a study by Ka Lin and Peter Herrmann (2015), which was published soon after the above-mentioned studies.

## Articles about the CEE Countries through the Lens of Social Quality since 2015

Especially in their social quality oriented book, *The Decent Society*, Abbott and colleagues put the normative sphere at the center of their focus. This is based on also their social quality approach of CEE countries and African countries (2016). They also stressed the importance of the societal characteristics of the subjective sphere. They explained that those who restrict themselves to subjective feelings of well-being, happiness, and satisfaction take a purely utilitarian hedonic approach. This seems to amount to a fond farewell to the quality of life approach. Those who argue for more explorations of the quality of daily circumstances under which people are living in a society are more concerned with people's standing in societal life. They apply a more expressionistic, eudemonic measure that focuses on meaning and self-realization, and that defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning. According to them, a decent society is one where residents can trust government, each other, and the rule of law, where corruption is controlled, where resources are sufficient for something more than survival, and where people have the possibility of expressing their capabilities in actions and taking control of their lives.

Another study focusing on the CEE countries was that of Ferenc Bódi and colleagues (2017) from Hungary, which delivers important points of departure. They analyze two groups of European countries, namely, four Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) and four postsocialist countries known as the Visegrad group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). They developed four new complex indicators from the ESS Social Well-Being Module reflecting the social quality of society in the given countries. In line also with aforementioned studies, they concluded that "today's Hungary can be a good example, where the macro-economic situation and the state of the budget have been improving [over] the past years, while the same hopelessness still exists in the average person's mind" (Bódi et al. 2017: 55). And especially with regard to the Visegrad group, they have concluded that employment possibilities and fair income are needed, first of all, in a given region for preserving the personal capacity and social quality for those living there. It is for future analyses to be conducted in the CEE countries highly recommended to connect their studies with the British research by Mark Tomlinson, and colleagues called the "What Impact Does Low Pay Have on Social Quality?" (2016). Utilizing the social quality approach and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), these researchers conclude that, in terms of poverty per se, poor employees are worse off in terms of economic security, housing, health, human capital, trust, and voluntarism.

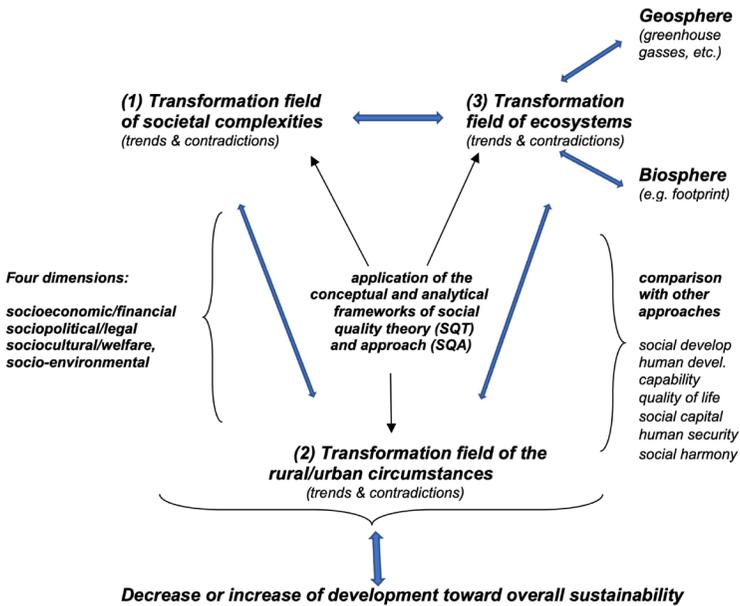
This concluding article opened with the initiative of the internet research group on Ukraine. SQT was already well known in Ukraine, for Yuriy Savelyev (2015) wrote an article on social quality and its conditional factor of social inclusion as a point of departure for understanding the nature of participation in Ukraine. He argued that the structure of participation as a domain of social inclusion in Ukraine has

similarities with the structures found in democratic countries such as Germany, France and Poland, as well as with authoritarian states such as Russia and Belarus. But the disproportionately low levels of civic and societal participation in Ukraine till 2015 point to problems with “social inclusion” and especially its domain of participation. Without reforms, participation will not lead to the strengthening of democratic institutions in Ukraine and the establishment of a stable system of consolidated democracy.

As indicated in the beginning of this article, during the work of the research group on Ukraine, there was a growing awareness of making a more astute distinction between social quality theory and the social quality approach. The conceptual framework concerns the theoretical. The new procedural framework concerns the approach. The analytical framework may be considered as the nexus between the two. The rationale is that the analytical framework (see the first article of this thematic issue on social quality architecture and its further explanation in Figure 1) has to be applied to processes in four relevant dimensions. These four dimensions will be expressed or “realized” in at least three essential fields of human life, namely, (1) the field of societal complexities, (2) the field of rural/urban circumstances, and (3) the field of ecosystems. This way of thinking had already surfaced during the start of the connection of social quality work with the challenge of determining overall sustainability (IASQ 2012), and was applied in the Manifesto for the Paris Climate Conference signed by four hundred scholars all over the world (IASQ 2015). These two distinctions resulted into the procedural framework of the SQA:

- The distinction between four central dimensions: the socioeconomic/financial, the sociopolitical/legal, the sociocultural/welfare and the socio-environmental. They are expressed in the three fields.
- The distinction between relevant fields, namely, societal complexities, rural/urban circumstances, and the field of ecosystems. Between these fields there is reciprocity via processes in the four dimensions.
- The conceptual and analytical frameworks of social quality enable us to analyze the processes in the four dimensions and their expression in the three fields.
- This happens thanks to the procedural framework . . . This framework enables an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach based on the conceptual framework, mediated by the analytical framework (Westbroek et al. 2020).

Because these three fields deliver the basis of overall sustainability, this procedural framework gives us the possibility to understand its decrease or increase in an interdisciplinary and comprehensive way. As a first researcher, Zuzana Reptova Novakova used this procedural frame of reference, namely, the distinction between four relevant societal dimensions. In this case, her focus was on the first field. It functioned as point of departure for analyzing the current problematic of Ukraine through the lens of social quality (Novakova 2017). Using interviews and group discussions with public servants and civil society actors actively involved in the ongoing reform processes, this article



**Figure 2.** The Procedural Framework: a New Phenomenon in Human Sciences

zooms out from the rather fragmented reform discussion to embed it in a broader societal context. This article lies at the root of this thematic issue of *IJSQ*. The aspects of the fundamental problematic of Ukraine in all four dimensions—systematized in this study—were caused in part by the collapse of the Soviet Union and later by the war situation in the eastern part of Ukraine. The perspective of the National Academy of Ukraine is presented in an overview of the outcomes in IASQ working paper 17 (IASQ 2019). This overview was supplemented by the exploration of Gianfranco Tamburelli (2015), which analyzed the “food aid conflict” due to the war in eastern Ukraine and “the overall socioeconomic crisis of Ukraine” (Tamburelli 2016). As I mentioned above, Novakova reordered this information according the point of view of the procedural framework (see Figure 2). This reordering may function as an example for other CEE countries to follow. Novakova concluded that, by highlighting the embedding of ongoing reforms in a given sociospatial context, her article provides an entry point and stepping stone for further analysis on the reciprocity of interrelated problems and the changing nature of “the social.” This concerns the always-changing outcomes of the productive and the reproductive relationships of human beings concretized in structures, practices, and conventions (IASQ 2019: 49).

Two years later, Valeriy Heyets (2019), initiator of an international collaboration for elaborating SQT and the SQA for Ukraine, published an article about the role of the state in exploring the meaning of social quality in a transitive society. Starting from the procedural framework, he concentrated on the changes in the sociopolitical

and socioeconomic dimensions of Ukrainian society, focusing on the first field. His central assumption was that the state as actor in the sociopolitical dimension is the main initiator of the transformations in both dimensions. But for Ukraine, its role is highly difficult to ascertain because of some of its contemporary characteristics. After the destruction of Soviet institutions, the so-called process of “atomization” took place. The basis for learning how to cope with future challenges disappeared. Under such conditions, the temporal circumstances of the formation of mistrust consolidated, and the individualized behavior associated with the atomization of citizens fell under the dominant exogenous influences. The cause was the destruction of the previous societal space, which was represented by the corresponding institutions in all four dimensions of societal life. What are the pathways to allow the state to play its role in an open and transparent way, in accordance with the basic principles of the rule of law? (Heyets 2019).

## Six Articles about Central and Eastern European Countries

### *Some Remarks about Previous CEE-Oriented Articles*

As may be concluded from the previous sections—which present social-quality-related articles about the CEE countries—the interest from scholars in these countries in this theory and approach is increasing. But until now the instruments for creating a systematic and coordinated method have been absent. Therefore, the theoretical and methodological aspects could not be fully explored as parts of the proposed Figure 1. For example, scholars were too quick to form a judgment about the consequences of just one aspect of this approach for determining the nature of social quality in a certain place and at a certain time. On the other hand, as far as the CEE countries are concerned, suppositions about the procedural framework (see Figure 2) have come into sharper focus. Thanks to this, especially in this region we can observe increasing in-depth efforts to distinguish and connect in a new way the conceptual framework of SQT with the procedural framework of the SQA. The analytical framework functions in these efforts as a connecting link. This should inspire us to take new steps and—concerning the CEE countries—to go beyond the stereotypical images that the Western, Central and Eastern European regions have of each other. A common in-depth approach to the socioenvironmental dimension in all three fields—which is lacking—may function as a catalyst of change. For further analysis and a deeper understanding of societal processes in all the CEE countries discussed in this thematic issue, especially between these countries, this enhancement is a *conditio sine qua non*. For going beyond existing eclectic and/or fragmented approaches, a comprehensive approach to these processes is indispensable. A recently published scientific-philosophical study in this journal describes how the SQT—with its ambitions to contribute to a foundation for interdisciplinary work in the human sciences—aims to deliver points of departure (Westbroek et al. 2020).

## *About Slovakia in the Context of the CEE Region: Accent on a Frame of Reference*

The first article, by Zuzana Reptova Novakova, about the Slovakian case, refers to the new “procedural framework” of the SQA, as presented in Figure 2 of this concluding article. As all other authors, she concentrates her analysis on the role of the four societal dimensions in one of the three fields, namely, the first field of societal complexities. The focus is on the interrelation of a manifold of policy areas in the first field. No author in this thematic issue is focused on the field of rural and urban circumstances or on the field of the ecosystems. Therefore, at this stage, the reciprocity of processes between all three fields in the ECC countries is not yet a concern here. The first article demonstrates that, like all other ascension states, in macroeconomic terms the wealth in Slovakia has increased since its connection with the European Union. At the same time, socioeconomic inequality has increased since 1995 in an intolerable way. This has led to increasing tensions in society. With regard to the sociopolitical dimension, there was initially great belief in the examples of Western European countries. This resulted in the drive, or the willingness, for an imitation not founded in theory. But the socioeconomic consequences undermined this belief, or better it showed “the emperor without clothes,” as Zsuzsa Ferge (2001) had predicted. And this is not only because of the economic inequality, but also because the absolute majority of the population of Slovakia is convinced that oligarchs and financial groups have a strong control over the government, undermining “freedom, equality and fraternity,” the political assumptions operating in the Western countries. They demonstrate an open and ruthless hedonistic tendency to prosper at the expense of fellow human beings. Novakova also concludes that the grandly set up individual-oriented quality of life surveys with their optimistic outcomes were completely at odds with the outcomes of societal-oriented research in Slovakia, explaining the nature of everyday experiences. She formulates a highly relevant question in the light of previous studies referred to in this concluding article: “Why is it that three decades after the Velvet Revolution Slovakia ranks very well on the (also ‘quality of life’) indicators standardly employed for evaluating the outcomes of the transition, yet the public does not seem to share such an optimistic appraisal at all?”

Novakova presents the analytical framework of SQT and the SQA as depicted in Figure 2. As argued above, this framework can be applied to the procedural framework in order to pave the way for a new type of analysis and research. She focuses her attention to two conditional factors, namely social inclusion and social cohesion. The first such factor, namely social inclusion, concerns—according to SQT—the nature of membership in societies. Novakova argues that its core domain is “participation,” which on an individual level gives people a sense of ownership and social responsiveness in their lives. On a societal scale, it makes democracy work. A research conclusion is that among Slovak citizens the willingness for regular civic and political participation has decreased significantly since the Velvet Revolution. The second concerns the

understanding of social cohesion, which concerns—according to SQT—the primary source of developing interhuman conditions, connections, and relations. The core domain is “trust in people and institutions.” Processes which stimulate unbearable economic inequality such as those characteristic of the Slovakian socioeconomic dimension in the first field, undermine in an ostentative way the sources of interpersonal and institutional trust in this dimension and therefore the sources for trust in the sociopolitical dimension. In this article, Novakova (as do authors of the following articles) accentuates the necessity to strengthen both conditional factors, namely, social inclusion and social cohesion, and their various domains. But this case study, and most other case studies, implicitly exposes the lack of a theoretical foundation of participation as a core domain of social inclusion. In the early stages of SQT, this concept figured as a constitutional factor (Beck et al. 2001), became a key concept in the definition of social quality (Beck et al. 2012), but disappeared as a constitutional factor, and got no place as a domain of the conditional factor social inclusion where it, according to a very specific form of reasoning, actually belongs.

### *About Poland in the Context of the CEE Region: Accent on the Role of Political Formations*

The first question Michał Gulczyński asks is why the seemingly homogenous country could have become so divided. With this in mind, this article is especially concentrated on the reciprocity between the sociopolitical dimension and the sociocultural dimensions. Two main political formations are expressions of the contemporary divide: the PiS (for law and order) and the PO (for civic participation). The attention for this reciprocity is stimulated by a widely supported desire for a Polish identity. This is caused by the experiences of the Polish division into a Prussian, Russian, and Habsburgian part in the nineteenth century, and the dramatic partition into the German and Russian hegemonies during World War II. The contemporary divide is anchored in the rural eastern Poland and the urban-oriented western Poland. And especially with regard to the sociocultural dimension, the Roman Catholic Church emphasizes the value system from the past as a means of regaining Polish identity. This is embraced by the PiS. As a consequence, its accent is laid on family relations and support, and on endeavors designed to seriously weaken the *trias politica*. According to Gulczyński, steps are already being made to change the “rule of law” into the “rule by law.” Notwithstanding this move, the PiS used its political position to apply the World Bank Agenda stimulated by the European Union for the ascension states as already explained by Ferge (2001).

New lifestyles, caused by the transition of production and reproduction relationships, are embraced by the PO. Gulczyński adds that a part of the civil society connected with the PO remains robust and shows its ability to successfully protest against the abuse of power as highlighted in the case of the recent ruling of the controlled Constitutional Tribunal restricting access to abortion. This refers to the question of

civic participation in public affairs. This happened also with the setting up of a “fire-wall” that slowed down democratic backsliding under the five years of the PiS government. But as Bódi and colleagues (2017) make clear, the state of affairs with regard to employment in Poland is highly problematic. Furthermore, the socioeconomic transformation saw a rapid increase in the divorce rate as well as an increase in marriage postponements. And lately the visibility of the LGBTQ community has become more pronounced, and secularization has been on the rise. Added to these changes can be the divide between young women and men: the first group is significantly more educated, which will certainly have a durable impact on their life courses. At this stage—also because migration from the rural areas to the cities by young women is on the rise—there are more young women than men in cities. The spatially unequal distribution of young women and men as well as the large gender gap in education will not be conducive to social cohesion and therefore people’s trust in the societal circumstances of their daily lives. In the context of the European Union, the progress of the “rule of law” in connected to the weakening of the *trias politica* in Poland (and also Hungary), and it is causing huge problems in the sociopolitical dimension (Polcini 2017).

### ***About Hungary in the Context of the CEE Region: Accent on Historical Determinants***

We can observe a political divide of two opposed movements in Poland, but is such a divide present in Hungary? As American research has demonstrated, the political elite in Hungary is able to use European funds for agriculture in Hungary (as in other countries), without any hesitation on the part of a large portion of the population, for personal gain (Gebrekidan et al. 2019). Ferenc Bódi and Ralitsa Savona place an emphasis, in the third article of this thematic issue, on the history of Hungary as a part of the CEE region. They outline the position of the region between East (Europe) and West (Europe). A crucial assumption about most CEE countries including Hungary is put forward in this article. The countries between Western Europe and Eastern Europe were always and are part of a transition zone. The countries that joined the European Union belong to this zone. Previously, these countries were called former socialist countries (the Eastern Bloc, also known as the Communist Bloc, the Socialist Bloc, and the Soviet bloc). Important is that Bódi and Ralitsa note that the nature of the transition zone does not in itself explain the reason for the processes in the four relevant societal dimensions taking place in it. They argue that we can conclude that this transition zone is a zone of conflict, where interests of East and West have been in constant collision for centuries. Therefore, the issues of independence, sovereignty, and identity are now high on the political agenda. These inevitable political questions have become particularly important in the years after the countries in the region joined the European Union. But as usual, the energy in the European Union with regard to the ascension states remained dedicated to the socioeconomic dimension. In addition to

many other relevant historical issues, the authors also highlight the period after 1945 in the countries of the transition zone, when the communist leaders who came to be in complete control and ordered everything according to their own ideology of violence. Contrary to the formation of modern welfare states, the postwar Western countries, in the small countries of this region conquered by the Soviet Union no attempts were made to alleviate the complex problems of social injustice and inequality through legal and economic means. People in power wanted to resolve it with a policy of violence in the name of the primitively interpreted notion of equality. After the weakening or disintegration of the former state parties, there was no significant political force that could form in Hungary a large opposition coalition against them. As a country in transition, the ruling forces in Hungary have therefore no common ideology, as they are organized into pragmatic, media-influenced mass parties and offer what the majority of voters want from them.

### *About the Czech Republic in the Context of the CEE Countries: Accent on Trust*

The fourth article of this thematic issue is from Nicole Horáková. Although it starts from the case of the Czech Republic, it also examines a general theme for the CEE countries. It concerns trust in political parties, political institutions, and leading political representatives—in other words, trust among the actors in the sociopolitical dimension and the consequence for the field of societal complexities (see Figure 2). Also Horáková considers—in the line of SQT—trust as a domain of social cohesion (Berman and Phillips 2012). A link with the previous article with its emphasis on historical-based determinants comes to the fore. Horáková notices that various studies have shown that the population of the CEE countries, and especially the citizens of the Czech Republic, lack trust in state institutions and democratic structures. This is often based on the “socialization into fear,” a process used by communist rulers before the Velvet Revolution. It was characteristic of them to strengthen the distrust within the population in order to support their regime. The fact that a large group of the Czech population distrusts political institutions has recently been fed by current corruption scandals. They are explained by the fact, or supposition, that part of the old communist regime is still in power and pursuing clientele policy in its own interest. And according to different studies on the CEE countries, the decrease in trust on the individual level has caused in the majority of the population a lack of institutional trust, and vice versa. Because trust in parties, political institutions, and their actors is a condition for open, free, and democratically inclined interpersonal and societal interrelationships, a great deal of attention in this article has been devoted to the mostly Western discourse on the meaning or consequences of interpersonal and institutional trust and mistrust as domains of social cohesion. For the objectives of this thematic issue on the CEE countries—namely to contribute to the application of the SQA—her exploration of this discourse is highly functional. In this case,

the relevant questions become: What does this exploration of the Western discourse teach in the light of the hitherto developed theory of social quality? Does a thorough theoretical foundation of the concept “the social”—as happened in SQT— play a role in the mainstream Western discourse? And the elements of this discourse, do they deliver points of departure for connecting social cohesion and its domains with other conditional factors such as socioeconomic security, social inclusion, and social empowerment? Or do they remain fragmented and disconnected from these other conditional factors and all constitutional factors as illustrated in the analytical framework as referred to in the first article? This article, with a rich overview of the classical and modern theories of trust, may give us answers to these questions. With regard to the Czech Republic, Horáková concludes on the basis of her exploration that trust in institutions is no longer an *a priori* state. It has to be earned. One way in which this can be done is that the actors in political institutions and parties be interested in the concerns of citizens, satisfy their needs, and demonstrate certain competencies. With this in mind, the question of Abbott and colleagues (2016)—presented in their recent book, will be: will this desired political praxis result in a decent society?

### ***About the Case of Ukraine in Comparison to the United Kingdom and Japan: Accent on Participation***

The fifth article, by Tadashi Hirai, may be appreciated as a special addition to the previous articles. It starts with underlining the importance of the concept and praxis of participation as—under certain conditions—an essential aspect of acceptable societal development. It may be appreciated as the kernel of social inclusion. But as already noticed above, it does not appear as a “domain” of the conditional factor (Walker and Walker 2012). Notwithstanding this issue, the article defines social quality as “the extent to which people are able to participate in soci[et]al relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacities and potential” (Beck et al. 2012: 68). It is interesting that Hirai explores different interpretations of the concept of participation and related praxis, from those which really enhance people’s well-being, capacities and potential, to stringent top-down approaches under the label of participation. Furthermore, the argument for this article starts from one of the CEE countries, namely Ukraine, but the author immediately compares the application of the ultimately chosen interpretation and herewith related (new) indicators between the state of affairs in Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Japan. In other words, this article adds a broader perspective that goes beyond the context of the CEE countries. Finally, Hirai connects the outcomes of his analysis of participation as a domain of social inclusion with trust as a domain of social cohesion. He argues that this nexus plays a key role in societal processes that pave the way for (acceptable) democratic institutions, attitudes, conventions, and related values. With this nexus, Hirai presents a different approach than Horáková (see above), which enriches the exploration of the concept and praxis of trust. He stresses the many views on participation: the

manipulative, the passive, the instrumentalist, the consultative, the functionalist, and the interactive. Recognizing the similarities and differences between both will deepen the theory of social quality. In this light, it was instructive for Hirai to compare SQT with the capability approach as introduced by Amartya Sen *et al.* on behalf of the Human Development Programme of the United Nations in 1990. We can conclude that there is a lack therein of context-specificity with the implementation of participation as a consequence of the rhetorical use of this approach. In other words, the term has been used as a black box in the capability approach (Gasper 2007). It should be implemented more systematically according to societal contexts. And this is the new and important challenge that faces SQT in order for it to be adequate for understanding and assisting processes in the CEE countries.

Hirai takes a step beyond this. For participation—one of the most important domains of social inclusion—in processes that influence everyday life, trust as a domain of social cohesion is an unmistakable condition. It lubricates the frictions between individuals and bolsters the development of a community of shared values. According to scholars of social quality (among others), trust is a ubiquitous theme in the definition and operationalization of social cohesion and therefore of social quality. Also, Hirai distinguishes between interpersonal trust and institutional trust. Both must be developed as strongly as possible to make participation work in full. Otherwise, people will arouse suspicion and secure their self-interest by cheating others, particularly when such practices prevail in society. Hirai articulates the indicators to compare trust and to compare participation in the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and Japan. This happens in such a way that the outcomes can be connected. If trust in institutions is low—and that is the case in Ukraine—strengthening forms of participation can be counterproductive, because people are not safe. Processes for deepening social cohesion in Ukraine, and thus interpersonal and institutional trust, are indispensable for playing a responsible role in communities and local and national institutes.

### *About the CEE Countries Seen from a Polish Perspective: Accent on Geopolitics and Economics*

The main point of the sixth article of this thematic issue, by Gracjan Cimek, concerns geopolitics and geo-economics in the context of globalization. He used Poland as his case study. And this is not without good reason, because both China and the United States view this country as the main port of entry for the CEE region. As will be argued below, the rationale to close this thematic issue with this article is quite obvious. Previous articles are dedicated to questions that are considered relevant for looking for pathways to make SQT and the SQA more adequate for the CEE countries, so as to unravel and understand (see Figure 2 about the procedural framework) the complexities of processes within and between the four societal dimensions, which are realized in and between the three fields of everyday life. This understanding is a condition for politics and policies to function properly in a “decent society” (Abbott *et al.*

2016). The previous five articles are dedicated to different parts of the kaleidoscope that are needed to achieve this aim. The author of the sixth article has chosen another course. He explores from an Archimedean point of view, or from a helicopter view, which powers operating on a global scale influence the CCE countries, and especially Poland. On the basis on interpretations of historical events—see also the third article, which is about the case of Hungary—the current tendency is to distinguish between the Western, the Central, and the Eastern European countries. This concerns respectively the EU-15 and all ECC countries except Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. But further west, the United States aims at maintaining the order of neoliberal globalization. Further east, the contemporary counter-hegemony comes from China. This balance has recently been underpinned by the new BRICS-platform (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). As Cimek notices, according to the mainstream geopolitical and economic discourse the time of this east–west bifurcation means that states do not know how to deal with growing unemployment, alienation of structurally separate economic forces, and the crisis of values. He argues that a specific way out of these antinomies is the use of the critical perspective of the world system. The aim is to identify the situation of Poland, which has resulted in the search for a change in the cultural sphere. This may build images of identity based on the distinction between East (Russia) and West (EU), instead of a change in the economic structure. Poland began to be treated by China as the leader of Central Europe, as evidenced by the first summit of the “16 + 1” group held in Warsaw in 2012. In 2019, Greece joined this group in order to develop a counterforce to the “troika” (European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Commission). The group should build an “economic belt” with support of the new Development Bank of BRICS, which is located in China. All of this became strongly supported by the governments of Hungary and the Czech Republic. But in 2018, with the help of the United States, Poland re-emerged as the leader of Central European countries. This was highly appreciated by Poland’s government, and also by the Government of Hungary. Their animosity toward the European Union—of which most Central European countries are a part—was supported by the US administration and underscored by a benevolent look at the process leading to Brexit.

### *Final Remarks*

With the results of the sixth article in mind, all previous articles can be viewed from a new angle, that is, retrospectively. In the sixth article, a reference is made to the potential of the BRICS platform of five emergent countries in terms of its economic, political, and cultural potential. In a social-quality-oriented study by Eurispes in Rome about the first decade of this platform, its main collective aim is stressed, namely, to enhance the “quality of the global development.” Eurispes has been included in the 2020 ranking of the best independent think tanks in the world oriented around sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural questions, changes, and challenges

(Eurispes 2021). In this study, the contours of the procedural framework of the SQA as illustrated in Figure 2 are applied to explore the results achieved by this platform (Ricceri 2019). With regard to the most important aim of the BRICS platform, questions are raised about what is meant by “quality” (see Calloni 2001), which collective instruments will be applied for achieving this quality, and with the help of which criteria such quality can be determined or judged—and if so, to what extent this aim will be realized. Without transparent answers, this all-encompassing aim is meaningless. This may serve as an example of how the potential of this procedural framework can be made productively applied to an analysis of trends, contradictions, and challenges in the complexity of the problematic of designing new political strategies for the CEE countries and for the region as a whole. What can be learned from all six articles of this thematic issue—and all previous studies I have referred to—is that stand-alone approaches to particles of the societal kaleidoscope seem to be normative and natural. These approaches—concerning politics as well as human sciences—refer to a motley set of strategies based on noncombinable ontological and epistemological orientations and methodologies. For designing strategies with which to approach the entire kaleidoscope according to a vision that can be adjusted time and again, two conditions should be addressed. First one needs to develop on behalf of the human sciences the foundations for an interdisciplinary approach. Second, one needs to deliver herewith related points of departure from a comprehensive perspective. All separate approaches of the particles of the societal kaleidoscope should be connected with the results of the work focused on both conditions (Westbroek et al. 2020). In the IASQ’s Manifesto for the Paris climate conference, the question of both conditions, as posed especially to the academic world, was already the center of attention (IASQ 2015).

As argued in the sixth article, we have to understand all countries of the CEE region in an ongoing stage of transition, situated between the West and the East, both in the near and far sense. To address the inevitable process of transition resulting from the influences from West and East, we need first of all a consensus about the understanding of “the social” as the quintessence of social quality theory as illustrated recently in IASQ working paper 17. The social is the result of the dialectic between processes of people’s self-realization and the formation of collectivities. Their results concern the always changing outcomes of the productive and reproductive interrelationships of human beings concretized in structures, practices, and conventions (IASQ 2019: 49). This understanding is highly desirable, because the usual application of the “nontheorized” adjective and noun “the social” in the human sciences—see, for example, the expressions and ideas about “social Europe,” “the European Social Model,” or the “social dimension of sustainability”—disturbs and may undermine real knowledge about the consequences of transition processes, and thus the nature of the sustainability of human life on earth. The popularity of the referrals to the “social dimension” of sustainability, as has been practiced for decades in the discourse on sustainability, casts a bank of fog between the effects of dominant processes in the socioeconomic dimension with regard to the world’s ecosystems. This leads to disastrous

results. The plea coming from many contemporary economists—anchored for the most part in utilitarian-individualistic assumptions—to pay attention to “the social” without explaining what they mean by it is taking humanity from the fire into the frying pan, if you will. Nor does the interesting study by Kate Raworth (2017) about “doughnut economics” offer any clarity on this term. This easygoing and thoughtless use of the adjective “social” and the noun “the social” avoids drawing attention to the complexity that exists because of the ongoing dialectic between people and their (given) circumstances, as well as the increase in complexity due to the incessant technical changes in (and increasing influence of) production techniques—and thus in people’s productive and reproductive interrelationships. Add to this the fact that the proposed understanding of the concept of “the social” in SQT may deliver a basis of interdisciplinary work for building a comprehensive understanding of societal changes (Westbroek et al. 2020). This forces us all to deepen the suppositions underpinning Figure 2 of this article, as well as Figure 1, as the heart of the matter. As a way to look at the quality of everyday life in the CEE region—and also the quality of global development as proposed by the BRICS platform—the normative factors of social quality can be used as the instruments for judging the outcomes of politics and policies regarding the four dimensions (see Figure 2) on the changes of the conditional and constitutional factors of everyday life (see Figure 1). This will deliver the point of departure of the deepening of the rule of law. The question of “quality” is not hanging in the air. It touches on the essence of “the social” about which the application of the normative factors can be judged. An Observatory carried out by academic institutes from the CEE countries may pave the way for addressing this complex set of challenges.

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