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**The Lisbon Agenda as a New Khrushchev Call.  
On the Relevance of the Soviet Experience of Modernization for the  
European Union.<sup>1</sup>**

Forthcoming in: A.Kukliński & K.Pawłowski (eds.) *Europe – The enigma of the XXI century*. Wydawnictwo “Rewasz”, Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu National Louis University, Nowy Sącz-Warszawa.

The fact that the global scene is becoming more and more competitive and the position of the European Union is increasingly challenged by old and new world powers is a widely recognized fact. The awareness of this constantly growing pressure on the EU, its economic and social systems, in particular from the process of globalization stimulates numerous debates on the future of the continent. European politicians, academic and business communities debate on the ways of improving EU competitiveness, stimulating innovativeness and sustaining growth. New projects, initiatives and directives are launched by EU and national administrations each year with the aim of revitalization of the old continent. In the academic and political debates discussants are looking for new ways and modes of much needed modernization of European economies and societies as well as workings of the institutions of the European Union. This paper is envisaged as voice in the above mentioned debate on modernization of Europe. In particular it is aimed at pointing out at a trap of imitative thinking – a common problem for most peripheral modernization projects. As it seems, Europe is more and more tempted by the simplicity of the imitative thinking, in particular by following the fashionable slogans of discourses of globalization which promise an easy way of facing the future by embracing the principles of the “Knowledge Based Economy” or the “Information Society”. In this context the experience of the Soviet Union modernization efforts are reminded below, as they have been one of the most spectacular examples of a failure caused by excessive reliance on following the fashionable trends of the modernization discourse.

Communism as an Extreme Form of Modernity

Communism in Europe collapsed over a decade ago but, as it seems, its lessons have not yet been fully studied outside of Central and Eastern Europe. As I would like to argue in this paper, the experiences of the tragic

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<sup>1</sup> This is an expanded version of a comment on Antoni Kukliński's paper “*Universities driving regional development. The challenges of the XXI century*” (Warsaw, 2004) and my own paper in Polish (Zarycki, 2006a).

“communist experiment” are worth rethinking not just for the sake of expanding one’s historical knowledge but for quite practical reasons, such as the planning of Europe’s future. Among the key questions worth revisiting are the roots of the collapse of the communist system and the sources of its non-competitiveness, both of which seem particularly relevant for analyzing the challenges facing the contemporary European Union.

There are several competing interpretations of the causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>2</sup>. Among the more interesting in this context is an analysis of the process of decomposition of the communist states viewed from the perspective of the crisis of modernity. As it has been suggested by Zygmunt Bauman (1991), the communist Soviet empire could be seen as the last bastion of classical Enlightenment-born modernity. Its collapse would be, from this perspective, a moment of the final defeat of modernity and the advent of the yet unchallenged era of post-modernity. One could however note that the communist project, as many other social and political ideas and undertakings of Russian origin was in many respects an extreme, radical version of modernity. Its originally totalitarian character and radicalism strengthened such traits as homogenizing tendencies, a reinforced emphasis on rationality, hostility towards any forms of religion and indigenous cultures, reliance on central planning and emphasis on hierarchy and belief in progress and the power of technology. Such radicalism and simplicity of the Soviet modernization project seems to have played an important role in its collapse<sup>3</sup>. However, the simultaneous general crisis of modernity as a mode of Western civilization can not be easily identified with the crisis of modernity in the Soviet version. Thus I am far from calling for adoption of an equally radical opposite attitude towards modernity just on the basis of the collapse of the communist project. Nevertheless, I would argue that the extreme character of the interpretation of modernity in the communist states gives students and historians of these constructs a unique insight into the mechanisms of crisis of the classical modernistic mode of development. This is why the bitter experience of the years of “building up communism” and of the collapse of the communist system seem worth studying even today in the context of the crisis of the European Union. Of course the fact that most of the countries of Western Europe didn’t embrace modernity as radically as the Soviet Russia and its satellites implies that they didn’t experience its crisis and many of its consequences as drastically as the communist countries. This doesn’t mean however, that some of the problems that the Soviet block experienced earlier are not relevant for Western Europe today, as the heritage of modernity is still very strong in the Old Continent. This may also have its benefits, but whatever our view of Enlightenment and its consequences are, we have to take into account the fact that Europe is currently facing the rising challenge of powers in which modernity has never as strong influences as in Europe. This also concerns the United States, which never fully embraced modernity as some

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Zarycki (2006b)

<sup>3</sup> See for example Gierus (1998) for an extensive discussion of Soviet Union’s modernity.

analysts point out<sup>4</sup>, and this in turn helps them better accommodate to the post-modern era. Thus I would argue, the European Union and its leading countries may be still facing some of the challenges and problems stemming from their reliance on traditional modernist modes and strategies of social and economic development in the context of the global rise of post-modernity. These challenges may be, as I have mentioned, less traumatic and delayed than those experienced by the Soviet Union, but the Soviet experience still demands some serious rethinking in the context of the current debates on the future of the European Union.

### The imitation trap

Here in particular I would like to point to one of the common traps of the projects inspired by the simplified ideals of modernity, namely the trap of imitation. The imitation trap is caused mainly by an over-reliance on the concept of linearity of economic progress, which is supposed to have some universal mechanisms and a clear sequence of stages of development. The waves of economic development are supposed to spread from centres of growth to the peripheries. In such a model the success of peripheries is defined by the speed and extent of their assumption of the innovations observed in the areas commonly recognized as the poles of growth. This strategy, especially if adapted in an uncritical way, has a major weakness which is the assumption by the peripheries of the goals and priorities of the development of the centre. However, these goals are usually not adequate for areas besides those in which they have emerged. A particular form of this trap is fascination with the status symbols for which the centres of growth are best known and admired. These symbols of prestige, success and wealth are not only usually much too expensive for the peripheries to attain in a short term perspective, but moreover they are often mistakenly identified with the essence of the centre's success. In fact they are just visible, superficial aspects of the prosperity enjoyed by the centres. Adopting such expensive and inadequate goals as acquisition of status symbols by the peripheries may in radical cases worsen rather than improve the peripheries' situation by increasing its dependence on the centre and wasting restricted resources on unproductive or at least not really needed investments. This problem in fact concerns not only the purely symbolic investments but also strategies of development which are theoretically supposed to "modernize" peripheries, or less wealthy countries or regions. However by imitating the un-contextualized solutions of the centres this, in fact, often leads such regions in the opposite direction. In particular the imitation strategy may lead to an often unconscious sponsoring of the centre by the periphery by financing the projects actually impossible to be fully used and taken advantage of outside the core regions of the world. A good example of such a policy is the production of excessive innovation which does not take into consideration local innovation absorption capabilities.

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<sup>4</sup> One of the advocates of this thesis is Samuel Huntington who argued that United States' model of governance and state ideology also comprises important aspects of rejection of modernity. See Huntington (1968).

The Soviet communist project, which has been imposed on several countries of Central and Eastern Europe, was undoubtedly a victim of the classic trap of imitation. From its very beginnings Russian communists were fascinated with the West and in particular with the United States and its economic achievements. The most extreme manifestations of this attitude were Nikita Khrushchev's statements during and after his visits to the U.S. in which he declared the USSR's ambition to overcome the U.S. in several spheres of economic and social development. While condemning America in the ideological dimension, Soviet leaders had, in fact, always imagined the Soviet project as an imitation of American success in economic development. In particular the communist politicians became obsessed with catching up to the level of the indicators of development of the US economy. This strategy was highly dubious since these indicators are always selective measures of the state of the economy, and, moreover, many of them appear to have only short term validity as measurements of the development of cutting-edge sectors of the economy. In effect the Soviet Union and most of its allies were trying to catch up with the development of the modes of production which had been often already been outdated in the US and elsewhere in the developed world. At the same time the Soviet Union began copying enormous numbers of American symbols of wealth and prosperity including cars and New York-type skyscrapers, several of which Joseph Stalin ordered to be built in Moscow. Later, interestingly, he decided to build another one in the very centre of Warsaw, as a "gift from the Soviet people for Poland". The building, known today as the Palace of Culture and Science (previously named after Stalin), for a long time dominated the city as its tallest structure and was supposed to be, among other things, a symbol of Soviet economic might and the ability of communism to implement American-born modernity in Poland. Other Soviet symbols of modernization included copies of Western achievements in the aerospace industry such as the American space-shuttle and the British-French supersonic Concorde. These Russian equivalents, built to a large extent because of political ambitions, were the Buran space-craft and the Tupolev Tu-144 airplane. They both appeared to be very costly and ultimately futile ventures. Buran never reached space and the Tu-144 served for just a few months on regular flights. Today their rusting bodies are among the numerous monuments of the failed modernization initiatives of the Soviet Union.

### The Lisbon Agenda in Light of the Soviet Experiences

Taking into account the above context, it is not surprising that when the Lisbon Agenda, best known for its call to transform Europe by means of bureaucratic directives into "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world by 2010" is mentioned, associations between the European Union and the Soviet Union immediately come to the minds of many Central and Eastern Europeans historians and analysts who are mindful of the experience of communist modernization. It serves to remember here that it was Nikita Khrushchev, the secretary general of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, who wanted the Soviet Union under his leadership to "catch up with and surpass America". The cruel irony

of Khrushchev's call was that in the years to come the distance between his country and the United States, quite in contradiction to his ambitions and decrees, grew constantly. Interestingly, the same appears to be happening in the case of the EU Lisbon Agenda, which in fact also amounts to a "catch up with and surpass the US" call. The relative distance between Europe and the United States is growing instead of decreasing. Let us hope that the European Union will avoid the fate of the Soviet Union; that is a complete disintegration after a couple of decades of implementation of the ambitious "catching up with America" strategy. This is, of course, an ironic remark, but one could argue that in some aspects, the EU's efforts to revive its economies and societies are increasingly resembling unsuccessful attempts at modernization as they were undertaken by the Soviet Union and its empire. Even if this thesis may be considered as a considerable exaggeration, it seems that such a provocative view can shed a new light on the problems the EU is currently facing in the process of re-shaping its development strategy. As I have mentioned, the former experiences of the post-communist and now new EU member states may appear useful in the current debates on EU reforms. The sensitivity of the former communist states to excessive statism and its ineffectiveness in management of their respective national economies and societies could, as it seems, help to balance the assumptions of many of EU strategists - which are truly ambitious but largely based on wishful thinking and driven by a growing inferiority complex of Europe towards the US.

I would like to propose in this place to adopt the theoretical framework proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, namely the theory of the three primary types of capital: economic, social and cultural. As it was suggested by Eyal, Széleányi and Townsley (1998), assuming the Bourdieu framework, the logic of economic capital could be related to the organization of modern, advanced societies, while social capital, in particular in the form of political capital, could be seen as characteristic for the functioning of the pre-modern or lagging behind societies. On the other hand, we could relate the economic capital vs. social capital opposition to the centre-periphery dichotomy. The Centre could be characterized by the dominating role of economic capital. Peripheries would rely more on social, and in particular political capital. Political capital as well as cultural capital serves in the peripheries as a substitute for the shortage of economic capital and its logic. The Soviet Union was a perfect example of a peripheral region relying heavily on the role of political capital in its attempts to overcome its backwardness and dependence on the West. The question in the current context is to what extent the European Union will follow a similar way and chose to use political capital to compensate for other weaknesses as a player on the global scene.

### The Imitative Discourse of the EU science policy

The strength of the temptation of the imitation trap facing the European Union is clearly visible in the mainstream discourse of the Brussels bureaucracy. It is full of lofty, ideological slogans referring to dreams of progress and technological sophistication, most of which unfortunately manifest at the same time undertones of the traditional and simplistic "catch up" philosophy. In

particular notions of the “knowledge based society” or “knowledge based economy” which play such a prominent role in EU official discourse seem to be based on the largely imitative assumption of replicating the processes observed in the United States. At the same time “innovation” is the buzzword, all present term and the most favourite adjective added to every second noun in the documents on economic and social development. One could note that the EU obsession with the production of innovation and their statistics on and promotion of it, has become the equivalent of the Soviet obsession with statistics on the production of coal, meat or iron. At the same time the discussion of actual needs in this discourse has been marginalized. Instead, the emphasis is put on the necessity of creation of demand for the surplus of innovations. This happens as the EU is sponsoring the production of innovations which are not necessarily relevant to the European context and in effect there is a need to spend additional public funds to artificially stimulate that demand. The whole process is thus not the effect of a rational mechanism of adaptation to actual needs but a classical case of a politically sponsored spectacle devised as a proof of Europe’s American-style modernity and commitment to technological progress. Therefore, paradoxically the actual effect of these politically devised mechanisms is largely imitative, even if their official goal is declared as the production of innovations. Such paradoxes again resemble sometimes the organization of the Soviet economy where demand had to be stimulated artificially for not really needed goods and services produced as an effect of the imitative ideological plans of the command economy.

The nature of EU scientific policy is an excellent example of imitative and bureaucratically driven development. As we look for examples in the EU of so called “framework” programs, we see that the majority of them have a predefined character offering money for dealing with specific problems arbitrarily designed as relevant to the EU at a given moment. Most of them are in fact calls to European scientists to “catch up” with America in particular areas (or rather sub-areas as many grant offerings are very specific). The grant rules demand most of the proposals to offer “innovative” solutions for the specific questions which are also expected to be instrumental in transforming the EU into the “knowledge based society”, almost irrespectively of the area they are related to. The popularity of such ideological, vague slogans as strategic goals of development once again calls to mind the role of the ideology of progress in the Soviet Union. One may recall that most scientific projects financed by the communist states were supposed to be instrumental in development of such abstract notions as “advanced socialist society”. Thus, as it can be shown in several other examples, the bureaucratic EU science financing system seem to become more political capital than economic capital driven and more imitation than innovation-stimulating in its nature. Academics are expected to submit proposal for large projects on subjects which are defined by officials in Brussels as important for competition with the US in certain areas, or relevant for other political goals, rather than on topics they feel competent in and have innovative ideas relating to particular European contexts. Another aspect of the weakness of the system is its institutional format. One of the key problems is a fascination with the notion of “networks” and “networking” which results in demands for compulsory construction of

large consortia expected to consist of several teams from different countries. The proposed consortia are often compiled with no other aim but to meet the grant criteria, which were clearly designed with political aims in mind such as developing international contacts. Moreover we deal here with the result of a mechanism typical for peripheral imitative development. Observation of the importance of networking in US science has been transformed in the EU into an administrative directive restricting in effect the flexibility of its own science policy. Such an imitative philosophy is also inspiring the emergence of concepts as “centres of excellence”. This is in fact the mechanism where the observation of the existence of several world-class academic centres in the US has given EU officials the idea of creating their equivalents by means of administrative decision.

Norman Fairclough (2006) presents an interesting interpretation of the spread of the “Knowledge Based Economy” discourse which he defines as a type of globalization discourse. In his radical interpretation “the emergence of KBE as an international strategy is in large part due to the USA’s decision in the late 1980s to base its bid to defend its global economic hegemony from European and Asian competition on its supremacy in knowledge industries and what came to be called >intellectual property<”. (Fairclough 2006:48). Of particular importance is Fairclough’s thesis that KBE is to a large extent a discursive phenomenon, or in other words an American project followed blindly in many part of the world. Non-reflexive embracing of the KBE discourse outside the US and treating its slogans as universal truths is theorized by Fairclough as part of discursive recontextualization or rescaling of the nation-state. In effect national challenges (and as one may note EU’s challenges as well) are no longer described in national (or European) terms but in global terms of KBE buzzwords. One may again point out to another similarity with the failed Soviet plans of competing with the US. Namely the so called “Strategic Defence Initiative” of Ronald Reagan’s administration known also as the “Star Wars” project. Soviet leaders become obsessed with it treating it as the main threat to the geopolitical position of the Soviet Union (Schweizer, 1994). As it later appeared the project was far from feasible although it stimulated several important technological inventions in the US. However, as it has been argued, the Soviet obsession with the Star Wars project become one of the important reasons of the communism’s collapse, as it resulted in diversion of considerable resources into futile undertakings aimed at competing with the US in the above mentioned area. The idea of Knowledge Based Economy seems to be equally elusive concept, which stimulates important changes in the American economy but when assumed as an official goal of EU policies, may lead the Union to spending much of its resources for projects not necessarily relevant for its real needs.

Interestingly, in the case of Poland, which just after the fall of communism created the State Committee of Scientific Research (KBN) following the pattern of the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), integration within the EU system of scientific policy seems to constitute a step backwards in some respects. Brussels’ budgets may be much larger than Poland’s national research and development funds but it seems to be much less flexible and at the same time more opaque and political capital driven. It is important to

notice that the NSF type system, while opening possibilities of financing research at any topic and at any scale, still gives much room for state control over science policy, for example, by means of shifting funds between priority areas. At the same time it is much better designed in terms of its ability to value the innovativeness of research projects, not just by their “political correctness” or “political demand”. It also gives much greater possibilities to younger and individual scholars (or smaller teams) as it does not require membership in large consortia and other hierarchical and long-term networks. Unfortunately, Poland under Brussels’ influence is introducing its own national framework-programmes, returning in this way to the pre-1989 politically driven organization of research. This cycle can be probably called another instance of “a detour from periphery to periphery” (Berend, 1996) at least in this particular area and is to be observed in several other post-communist countries<sup>5</sup>.

### The EU as a New Periphery?

As I have already mentioned, the imitation oriented philosophy of development is a typical problem of peripheries (which can be defined on different levels including regional, national, continental and others). It is important to emphasize here that peripheries may be dominated by centres not only in the economic dimension but in most cases they are also dominated in the symbolic or ideological aspect. Symbolic dependence is understood here as the inability of choice of development strategies relevant for one’s own context (again it may be defined at the local, regional or national level) and instead the adoption of strategies and goals of centres. The above described inclination towards imitation-oriented policies in the EU may be therefore interpreted as one of the symptoms of a move of the Union towards the periphery or as an assumption of peripheral identity. At the same time this increasingly peripheral identity of Europe is evident in internal psychological tensions streaming from its non-acceptance of its own weakening position in the global scene. Such processes have been also observed in the Soviet Block and they included, first of all, the non-acceptance of its peripheral position in relationship to the West. At the same time we could observe the base formation of the Soviet identity as an opposition towards the West and an attempt to overcome dependence and economic weakness by means of political capital based modernization, which, it was hoped, would allow for long-term self-sufficiency. Today in many respects Europe’s place in the world system is weakening and Europe is in effect becoming more and more peripherally positioned, in particular with its relationship to the United States. In such context, the realistic acceptance of dependency seems to be a much wiser choice than attempts at ignoring it or uniting against the US with the intention of compensating for economic weakness by strengthening political mechanisms. Taking into account the fact that reproduction of the social and

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Fairclough (2005) for an interesting study of replication of the EU Lisbon Agenda’s discourse in the Romanian government’s National Development Strategy. Fairclough points out to the imitative character of the goals set in the Romanian document and in particular definition of the ‘information society’ as a strategic goal for Romania on the basis implicit and idealised claims about the ‘information society’ as a universal reality.

economic mechanisms observed in the centre is most often impossible in the peripheries, such an approach will be more and more disappointing and will increase Europe's objective and subjective backwardness. What Europe should choose instead is, as I would argue, not whether it wants to "catch up" or just maintain its still privileged position in world economy, but whether it can adapt<sup>6</sup>. Adapt to the global world economy and integrate with it using its own strengths, rather just integrate internally with the intention of becoming a self-sufficient "anti-US" as the Soviet Union aspired to be. Instead of Europe trying by all means to be stronger than the US, it may become more complementary with the US and other world economies; strong and influential by being indispensable for their functioning. This attitude of the EU towards the US which seems particularly effective may remind some of the Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Finland in their relationship towards their stronger European neighbours. Swedes and Finns seem to integrate the recognition of their own weaknesses on the international scene with confidence in their role in global economy, openness to international influences with an insistence on the sustainability of their own identity and culture and readiness to face the challenges of globalization with a determination to maintain their own social philosophy and values. This seems to also be a good philosophy for a non-imitative European Union.

#### A Case for a Two-Speed Science and Education Policy in EU

A good example of how an adaptive, non-imitative philosophy of the EU could look is in the field of science and education. The adaptive approach in this domain could be labelled as a two speed approach based on a distinction between political capital-driven and economic capital-driven science, or globally and regionally minded scientific policies. The regional universities have an important function in making our continent work and in maintaining European values. They should provide good education for the population of their regions on as universal and as cheap a basis as possible. They should serve as mediators in diffusion of innovations from global centres to regions, institutions and firms. They should also be active places of regional culture production, reproduction and revaluation. This function of regional universities seems crucial for building regional identities and in turn regional dignity and the self-esteem of regional communities. On a wider scale, cultural capital reproduction is also a very important function of universities for Europe and self-esteem of Europeans on the global scale.

Returning to the regional scale however, let me question the assumption of the global vocation of regional universities. Instead of trying to turn most of the regions of the old continent into new Silicon Valleys and their universities into Stanfords, one could rather realistically assume that most of the regional universities will be unable to compete on the global scale and should be demanded to deliver first of all their "political" functions. As mentioned above, we would expect them to educate the regional populations, mediate in transfer

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<sup>6</sup> I owe my inspiration as far as the importance of the notion of "adaptation" is concerned to Roman Galar. See for example Galar (2005).

of know-how and serve as centres of reproduction and symbols of cultural capital of their regions. In accordance with their role, regional universities should be financed on the basis of the traditional political capital based rules. Thus, they could be demanded to concentrate on areas considered as crucial for their regions by officials and politicians, they could even pretend to be “on the cutting edge of world knowledge base society development” in order to elevate the self-esteem of the region’s populations as well as engage in networks for the sake of networking by showing off their alleged international character and connections. Another important function of regional universities can be also seen also in providing stable employment for academics, including those who would otherwise not be able to find jobs on the competitive global market. By accepting large numbers of students and providing scholarships regional universities may also play important political role in alleviating such social problems as unemployment.

On the other hand however, stimulation of emergence and separation of a clearly defined economic capital driven science sector in EU seems necessary. Europe needs world class academic centres which would be not just declared “centres of excellence” by some officials but actually be globally recognized centres of excellence. They should be fully fledged participants in the global research and development system. Their financing should be based not on the traditional European political capital based logic but on a flexible, competitive and innovation-rewarding logic of economic capital. Their role would not be to imitate American universities and their research. Instead they would be expected to develop their own identities and ideas to be followed by the rest of the world. To achieve such an aim, development of two separate systems of financing, rather than the arbitrary division of universities into two or more categories, seems crucial. Among several obvious functions of global universities which should emerge in Europe are the restraining of the brain-drain from the Europe as well as the improvement of the continent’s self-esteem, which otherwise risks falling into a deep inferiority complex, which, in turn, can lead to unwise choices in EU development - decisions which will create an impression of “strengthening of Europe” but in fact will only deepen its marginalization and dependence on other leading economies of the world.

## Conclusion

Thus, as it has been shown, the contemporary European Union may learn an important lesson from the experiences of the Soviet Union and its communist satellites. It should become more sensitive to simplistic and imitative answers to the global challenges it is facing. It should also learn to better differentiate between innovations which are in fact just ideological slogans used to describe largely imitative strategies, and real innovations which do not follow the processes observed elsewhere but creatively solve existing problems and answer real needs. Such innovations in the wide sense would be solutions which are context-relevant and follow adaptive policies relating to particular cultural and economic conditions. They would be innovations which address the needs of particular societies and economies and not simply follow the

fashionable but imitative trends and slogans borrowed from other regions of the world. Moreover, they would be innovations whose primary function would be not to superficially dazzle by novelty and impress by sheer size, price or similarity to objects of pride of the world's richest club. Competing in size, as exemplified by the development problems of the extra-large Airbus A380 aircraft, which was applauded so loudly by many EU politicians, seems to testify, may be very costly for the taxpayer and not very effective in improving the societies and economies of the European Union.

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