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Reacting to the 2008 crisis: Competitiveness performances of Southern Italy and CEE regions

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The 2008 Global Financial Crisis influenced geo-economic dynamics in the EU, triggering a repositioning of less developed regions. This analysis examines whether their competitiveness changed after 2008, and why some regions improved in performance. Using ERCI data, we compare EU lagging regions at NUTS2 level, finding that the Central and Eastern European (CEE) regions reacted to the crisis better than Southern Italian ones. We find that the divergence in their competitiveness pathways depends on the scale of their financial resources and on institutional endowments and legacy, which in turn directly affects the implementation of regional policies.

Keywords: EU convergence, ERCI, less developed regions, Southern Italy, regional policies
JEL Classifications: R11

Introduction[1]

It is known that the Covid-19 has been worsening regional disparities within the European Union (EU), with less developed regions harder hit than others, due to the structural weaknesses of their economy and society (Bailey et al., 2020; Fana et al., 2020). The pandemic emergency, with its asymmetric impact, both across Europe and within countries, caused by restriction measures, follows the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, which had such strong intensity and duration that its consequences are still affecting EU economies (Aliber and Zoega, 2019; Cuadrado-Roura et al., 2016; Erdem, 2020; Fratesi and Rodríguez-Pose, 2016; Raitano, 2016). It is too early to assess what the full impacts of these two sequential global crises will be. The first, which arose out the incorrect functioning of the world capitalist system, penalised the already marginal regions of the EU. The negative macroeconomic dynamics, such as the increase of unemployment's rate and the decrease of the economic growth, have prompted significant impetus to find solutions, as demonstrated by the policies adopted by international bodies, the EU itself and national states.

Considering this background, we analyse how the 2008 financial crisis eroded competitiveness in less developed regions of the EU. More specifically, we focus on the case of the Southern Italian regions, using a comparative supranational perspective, by investigating *if* and *how* regional inequalities have grown.

The main research questions are:

- How did the competitiveness of EU less developed regions change after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis?

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- Why did some regions improve their competitiveness in the decade after 2008, whereas Southern Italian regions did not achieve the same?
- What was the role of financial and institutional resources in reacting to the crisis?

We attempt to answer these three questions, demonstrating that the specific historical and institutional legacy of less developed regions can have a specific role in regional competitiveness, overcoming a 'normative' way to use it (Martinelli, 2020).[2]

Our key assumption is that the different institutional endowments may have contributed to either curb or increase the impact of the crisis on the economic and social system. We point out that the magnitude of financial resources received in responding and in facing its consequences, although necessary, is not a sufficient condition for public policies to be successful, as their formulation and implementation depend on the institutional context, which in turn directly affects the potential for economic growth and the capacity to provide collective goods (Charron et al., 2015; Martinelli, 2019; Pellegrini and Tortorella, 2018; Rodriguez-Pose, 2010; Rodrik, 2003; Rodrik et al., 2004).

We have chosen to devote more attention to the case of Southern Italian regions for two reasons. The first is related to the longevity of their socio-economic depression, persisting from Unification of Italy to the present. The second is due to the long-term public policies in place to sustain the Southern Italian regions. After the Second World War, significant financial aid was put in place, restricted to this area, from national government (centralised policies) and, since the beginning of 1990s, financial contributions from the EU (regional policies). Both national and European policies have encountered constraints in supporting Southern Italy's development. The combination of the persistence of the gap and the incapacity of the policies to reverse the development path, marks the uniqueness of the Italian case respect to other countries.[3]

The literature dedicated to Southern Italy, both prior to and after European integration, has mainly focused on the concept of dualism from a national viewpoint, by studying territorial inequalities in a national dimension. Instead, the problem of the underachieved development of this area, which includes about one-third of the Italian population, has intersected more deeply with the construction of the European project since the 1990s (De Vivo, 2008). Despite being the main beneficiaries of Structural Funds, together with other areas, Southern Italian regions continue to lag behind, notwithstanding the financial contribution allocated through multiannual programming cycles. Several endogenous and exogenous factors have undermined the achievement of regional development policies objectives (Petraglia and Provenzano, 2018).

In the case of endogenous variables, peculiar centre-periphery relationships of the political system are still permeated with family relations and clientelism, the bureaucratic machinery has had difficulties in assimilating procedural and administrative innovations introduced by regional policies and the governance practices have been sometimes ambiguous. There has been a long-term intervention, styled 'extraordinary intervention' to address persistent issues which then was assimilated into the ordinary sphere[4] (Barca, 1998, 2006) and adjustment to the European Union's guidelines, has curbed the expected change. This latter has been weakened by the re-functionalisation of norms and informal behaviours in political, economic and social systems which further hinder the process of modernisation (De Vivo and Sacco, 2008; Trigilia, 2011, 2015).

The role of exogenous variables in influencing Southern Italy's development are also relevant. The reference context has considerably changed over time since Italy joined the European Union, with several enlargements which involved other countries and changing

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EU composition. Moreover, the acceleration caused by globalisation has worsened social and economic conditions. The financial crisis of 2008 limited the competitiveness and in fact exacerbated internal inequalities (Saraceno, 2019).

Within this conceptual framework, our methodology compares Southern Italian regions with other European less developed regions,[5] at NUTS2 level. The analysis focuses on the post-2008 changes in the main economic, social and institutional indicators that influence the competitiveness of regions, as summarised in the European Regional Competitiveness Index throughout the period 2010–2019.[6]

In the next section, we will discuss how the 2008 Global Financial Crisis increased divergence in the EU less developed regions. We will examine social and economic indicators that deal with institutional capacity, to bring out how their combination results in a specific level of competitiveness. Then, we go on to argue that the ways regions have reacted to the crisis depend not only on the amount of financial resources they were allocated, but also on their institutional assets.

The 2008 global financial crisis ten years on: convergence and competitiveness

One of the most complex and problematic issues affecting European integration is the unachieved convergence among EU regions,[7] a problem that has resumed a central role in the political and scientific debate after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. A vast literature shows that thirty years of EU regional development policies have resulted in a decrease in socio-economic inequalities between more and less developed member states, while the gap between regions has increased, especially since 2008 (Caldera Sánchez, 2018; Farole et al., 2018; King and Le Galès, 2017; Leonardi, 2015). As shown by Monfort (2020), until 2008 an aggregate reduction in the divergence among regional economies ('between countries' index) was observed across Europe, although internal regional differences ('within countries' index) remained stable until 2005 and then slightly increased. This process was halted by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, with the contraction of economic activities and employment, which had a dual effect: firstly it worsened the performance of the more developed regions; secondly, and to an even greater degree, it stopped the upward trend of less developed regions. The result was an interruption of the 'between countries' regional convergence and a continuation of the regional divergence 'within countries' (see Figure 1).

The economic recession has also weakened EU political legitimacy, as evidenced by the rise of populism and/or Euroscepticism (Pavolini, 2018; Saraceno, 2019), ostensibly due to its difficulty in providing concrete policy responses to European citizens in distress. The EU as a whole and its member states, are facing a high rate of unemployment and poverty, and low levels of private capital attraction. As maintained by Mény (2019), even in those countries where some economic indicators have increased, social issues are undermining their stability.

It is therefore interesting to ask whether the different responses to the 2008 financial crisis by the less developed regions of the EU are related to their political, economic and social institutions. To address this, we will focus on competitiveness gaps, rather than on economic growth as measured through GDP.

As demonstrated by a large body of scientific literature which has highlighted the limits of GDP (Leonardi, 2015; Mancha-Navarro and Garrido-Yserte, 2008; Osti, 2010),[8] from a wider viewpoint, convergence is a process leading to achieving territorial, social, institutional and economic targets, equal opportunities in structural terms, adequate contextual assets able to foster the birth, growth and economic survival of productive activities. Ultimately, convergence should have the quality of the population's living conditions as its end goal.

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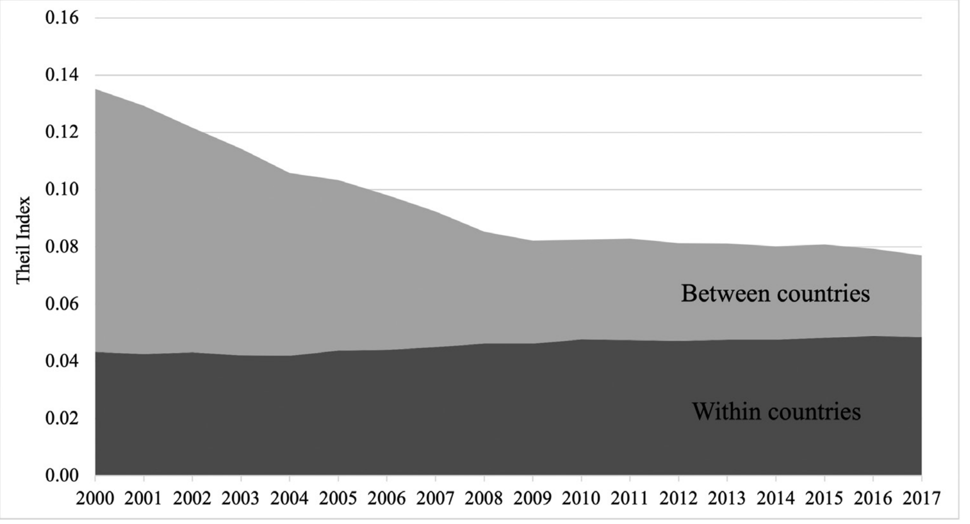

Figure 1. *EU disparities in GDP per head within and between Member States of EU28 at NUTS3 level. Source: Monfort, 2020.*

Following this perspective, we will compare all the less developed (NUTS2) regions of the EU (Figure 2), using the European Regional Competitiveness Index (ERCI)[9] and the three 'Pillars' that it includes: the 'Basic pillar', the 'Efficiency pillar' and the 'Innovation pillar' (Figure 3).

As shown by the evolution of the ERCI, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis eroded regional competitiveness in the Southern Italian regions. It clearly emerges that they, as most EU15 regions, are facing the dynamism of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) regions, which, despite starting from very similar—if not worse—levels of the competitiveness index in 2010, have made significant steps forwards (Figure 4). In most CEE regions, there has been an increase in competitiveness between 2010 and 2019. In particular, the Czech Republic has recovered several points, bringing their ERCI close to the EU average or indeed above it. Although still lagging behind as regards the index value, the regions of Bulgaria and Romania, which also started from a low level of competitiveness, have demonstrated a significant reduction of the margin. Conversely, in Italy—as well as in Greece, Spain and Portugal—there has been a worsening of the competitiveness of Southern regions, which, with the exception of Basilicata (which has essentially remained at the same levels), have moved backwards by almost half a point.

Campania, Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, together with Western Greece, have shown the five worst performances in terms of variation between 2010 and 2019 (Table 1). More specifically, Southern Italian regions have lost competitiveness in all three ERCI pillars, with some exceptions (see *ultra*). In other words, although they are still better positioned than some Romanian and Bulgarian regions, they have declined over the past ten years, as indeed have other EU15 regions. The case of the UK should be considered on its own, because the two regions of Cornwall and Isles of Scilly, and Western Wales and Valleys are the only ones that, among old members, have improved their performances, often achieving the best results both in 2010 and in 2019 in the total ERCI and in each pillar.[10]

In the CEE regions the improvement is certainly evident: the frequency with which they

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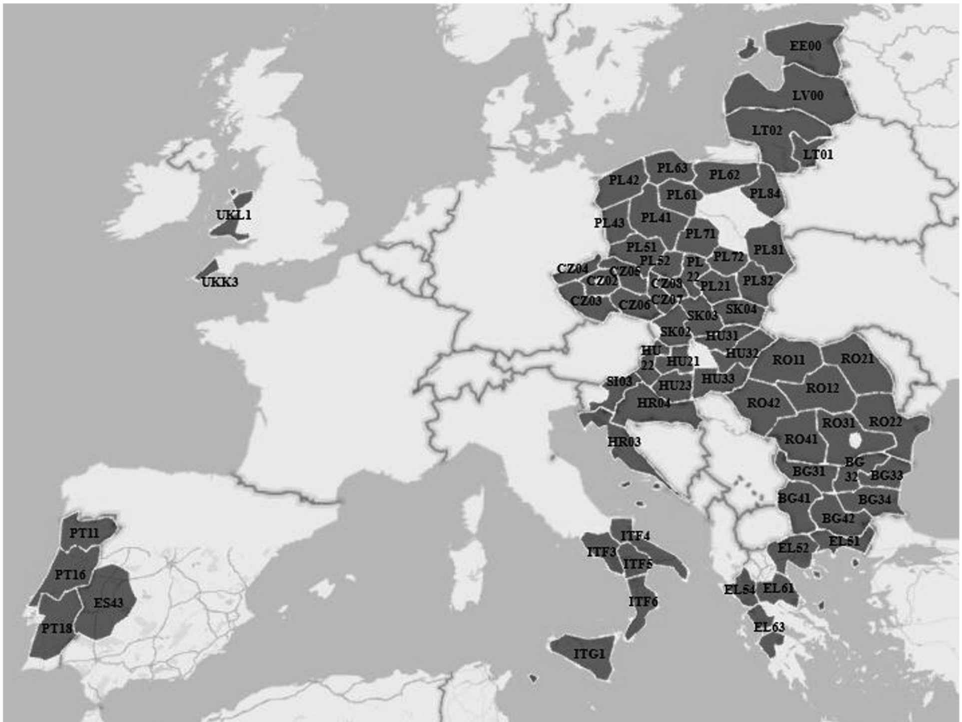

BG31	Severozapaden	HU22	Nyugat-Dunántúl	PL71	Lódzkie
BG32	Severen tsentralen	HU23	Dél-Dunántúl	PL72	Świętokrzyskie
BG33	Severoiztochen	HU31	Észak-Magyarország	PL81	Lubelskie
BG34	Yugoiztochen	HU32	Észak-Alföld	PL82	Podkarpackie
BG41	Yugozapaden	HU33	Dél-Alföld	PL84	Podlaskie
BG42	Yuzhen tsentralen	ITF3	Campania	PT11	Norte
CZ02	Střední Čechy	ITF4	Puglia	PT16	Centro (PT)
CZ03	Jihozápad	ITF5	Basilicata	PT18	Alentejo
CZ04	Severozápad	ITF6	Calabria	PT20	Região Autónoma dos Açores
CZ05	Severovýchod	ITG1	Sicilia	RO11	Nord-Vest
CZ06	Jihovýchod	LT01	Sostines regionas	RO12	Centru
CZ07	Střední Morava	LT02	Vidurio ir vakaru Lietuvos regionas	RO21	Nord-Est
CZ08	Moravskoslezsko	LV00	Lettonia	RO22	Sud-Est
EE00	Estonia	PL21	Małopolskie	RO31	Sud - Muntenia
EL51	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	PL22	Śląskie	RO41	Sud-Vest Oltenia
EL52	Kentriki Makedonia	PL41	Wielkopolskie	RO42	Vest
EL54	Ipeiros	PL42	Zachodniopomorskie	SI03	Vzhodna Slovenija
EL61	Thessalia	PL43	Lubuskie	SK02	Západné Slovensko
EL63	Dytiki Ellada	PL51	Dolnośląskie	SK03	Stredné Slovensko
ES43	Extremadura	PL52	Opolskie	SK04	Východné Slovensko
HR03	Jadranska Hrvatska	PL61	Kujawsko-Pomorskie	UKK3	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly
HR04	Kontinentalna Hrvatska	PL62	Warmińsko-Mazurskie	UKL1	West Wales and The Valleys
HU21	Közép-Dunántúl	PL63	Pomorskie		

Figure 2. *EU less developed regions (NUTS 2). Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat data.*

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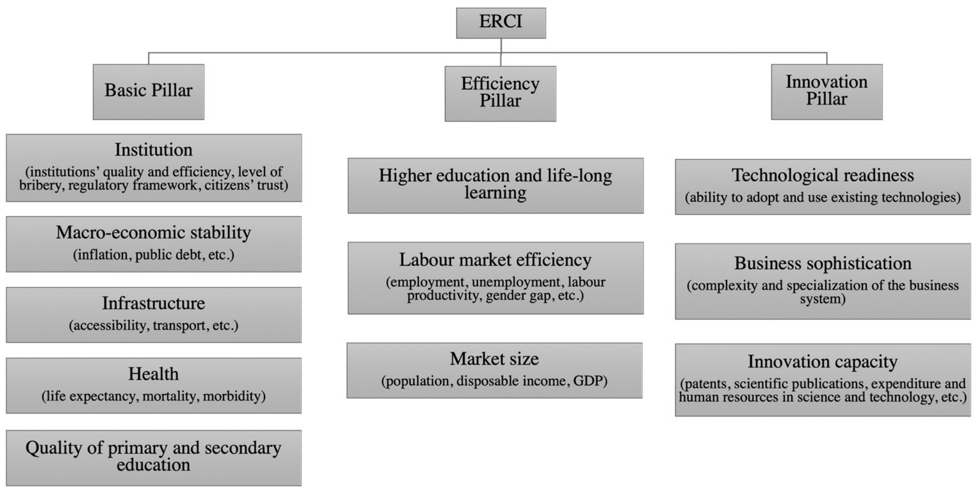

Figure 3. *The structure of the European Regional Competitiveness Index (ERCI).Source: Authors' elaboration based on Annoni and Kozovska, 2010; Annoni and Dijkstra, 2019.*

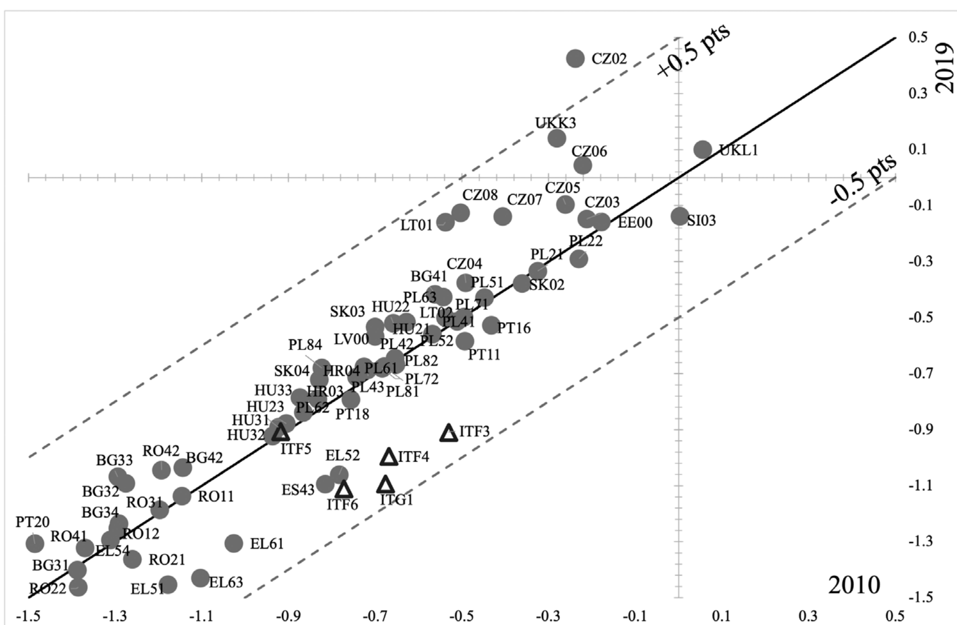

Figure 4. *Evolution of the ERCI in EU less developed regions between 2010 and 2019. Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission's data (ESIFopendata platform).*

positioned themselves at the top for the performance of each competitiveness indicator included in the three pillars of ERCI (as in Figure 3) has increased over time (Table 2).[11] In contrast, the Southern Italian regions had the best performance few times, whereas some of them had the highest frequencies of worsening their indicators during the decade.

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Table 1. *The best and worst performances of ERCI (the table highlights the EU15 regions).*

	2010		2019		Change 2010–2019	
Best 5	UKL1 West Wales and The Valleys	0.056	CZ02 Praha & Střední Čechy	0.425	CZ02 Praha & Střední Čechy	0.663
	SI03 Vzhodna Slovenija	0.003	UKK3 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.140	UKK3 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.421
	EE00 Eesti	–0.178	UKL1 West Wales and The Valleys	0.100	LT01 Sostinės regionas	0.379
	CZ03 Jihozápad	–0.212	CZ06 Jihovýchod	0.044	CZ08 Moravskoslezsko	0.377
	CZ06 Jihovýchod	–0.221	CZ05 Severovýchod	–0.096	CZ07 Střední Morava	0.267
Worst 5	EL 54 Ipeiros	–1.311	RO21 Nord-Est	–1.363	ITF4 Puglia	–0.328
	RO41 Sud-Vest Oltenia	–1.369	BG31 Severozapaden	–1.402	EL63 Dytiki Ellada	–0.328
	RO22 Sud-Est	–1.385	EL63 Dytiki Ellada	–1.431	ITF6 Calabria	–0.339
	BG31 Severozapaden	–1.387	EL 51 Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	–1.454	ITF3 Campania	–0.381
	PT20 Região Autónoma dos Açores	–1.485	RO22 Sud-Est	–1.462	ITG1 Sicilia	–0.418

Source: own elaboration based on the European Commission's data.

We now analyse in detail each of the three pillars of the ERCI index.

ERCI Basic pillar

We begin with examining the performance of the 'Basic pillar' and its component indicators.[12]

As shown in Figure 5, after the crisis, the Southern Italian regions managed to keep their performance at medium-high levels (within the investigated group), yet still below the European average and regressing compared to 2010. On this metric, it is Romanian regions that show the worst performance, always being in the last positions, while Greece recorded the sharpest decline in the decade under consideration. The EU15 regions are far surpassed and outdistanced by the regions of Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, but also Lithuania and Latvia, which made important strides upward, especially in the sphere of macroeconomic stability and in the quality of institutions.

Focussing on individual indicators, the quality of institutions and the health system appear the most problematic in Southern Italian regions. The quality and efficiency of institutions, as measured by the level of perceived corruption, the ability of the regulatory and institutional framework to promote business activity and the degree of citizens' confidence in their institutions, Campania and Calabria are among the 5 worst ones (fourth and fifth to last) in 2019, along with three regions of Bulgaria (Yugozapaden, Yugoiztochen, Severozapaden). Southern Italian regions also record the worst variations in the time frame considered. They have regressed to the levels observed in Greek regions in 2010. All other EU15 regions have performed better, with Spanish and Portuguese regions moving very close to the European average.

In the Italian case, the low quality of institutions involves both the national and the regional governments, especially in measures such as legality (regulation, crime, corruption, etc.) and efficiency (stability, accountability, impartiality, transparency, etc.). The national government is still predominant in driving social and economic policies, but regional governments have significant autonomy in the management of EU Cohesion Policy resources, and coordination between the two levels proves difficult.

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Table 2. *Positioning among the best/worst 5 in all ERCI indicators.**

Best 5		Worst 5	
2010			
UKL1 West Wales and The Valleys	10	PT20 Região Autónoma dos Açores	7
EE00 Eesti	7	BG31 Severozapaden	6
SI03 Vzhodna Slovenija	7	RO41 Sud-Vest Oltenia	6
BG41 Yugozapaden	5	RO22 Sud-Est	5
CZ06 Jihovýchod; UKK3 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	5	EL54 Ipeiros ; RO21 Nord-Est ; RO31 Sud-Muntenia	4
(…)		(…)	
ITF4 Puglia	2	ITF4 Puglia	1
ITG1 Sicilia	2	ITG1 Sicilia	1
ITF3 Campania	1	ITF3 Campania	1
ITF6 Calabria	1	ITF6 Calabria	1
ITF5 Basilicata	0	ITF5 Basilicata	1
2019			
CZ02 Střední Čechy	12	RO22 Sud-Est	9
UKK3 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	10	RO21 Nord-Est	7
CZ06 Jihovýchod	8	BG31 Severozapaden	6
EE00 Eesti	8	BG34 Yugoiztochen	6
UKL1West Wales and The Valleys	7	EL63 Dytiki Ellada; PT20 Região Autónoma dos Açores; RO41 Sud-Vest Oltenia	4
(…)		(…)	
ITF3 Campania	3	ITG1 Sicilia	3
ITF4 Puglia	1	ITF3 Campania	2
ITF6 Calabria	1	ITF4 Puglia	1
ITG1 Sicilia	1	ITF6 Calabria	1
ITF5 Basilicata	0	ITF5 Basilicata	0
Change 2010–2019			
CZ02 Střední Čechy	8	ITG1 Sicilia	5
UKK3 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	7	EL63 Dytiki Ellada	5
CZ08 Moravskoslezsko	5	EL52 Kentriki Makedonia	4
LT01 Sostines regionas	5	EL61 Thessalia	4
PT20 Região Autónoma dos Açores	4	ITF3 Campania; ITF6 Calabria; PL43 Lubuskie	4
(…)		(…)	
ITF6 Calabria	1	ITF4 Puglia	3
ITF3 Campania	0	ITF5 Basilicata	1
ITF4 Puglia	0		
ITF5 Basilicata	0		
ITG1 Sicilia	0		

Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat data.
*The table shows a comparison between the Italian regions and those with the highest frequencies and how many times each region is positioned in best/worst 5.

It is especially in the health sector that the lack of efficiency and integration between the national and regional governments' intervention appears strongest in Italy. In this sector, even prior to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and to a much greater extent after it, there has been significant disinvestment and large cuts in public expenditure (Arlotti, 2014; Pavolini and Vicarelli, 2013). Nevertheless, compared to their European peers, Southern Italian regions

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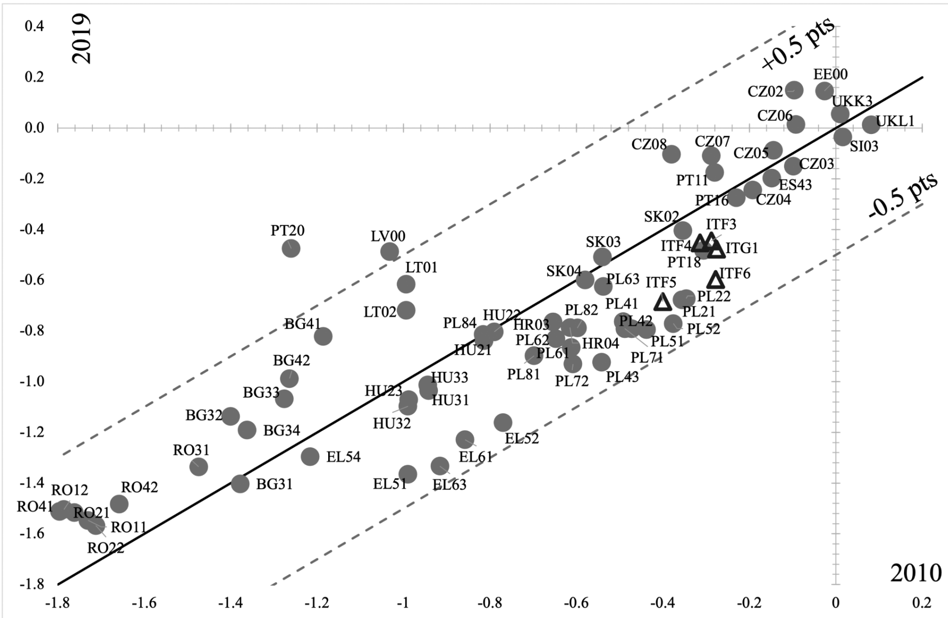

Best 5		Worst 5	
2010			
UKL1 - West Wales and The Valleys	0.082	RO22 - Sud-Est	-1.712
SI03 - Vzhodna Slovenija	0.016	RO11 - Nord-Vest	-1.73
UKK3 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.01	RO21 - Nord-Est	-1.762
EE00 - Eesti	-0.026	RO12 - Centru	-1.786
CZ06 - Jihovýchod	-0.092	RO41 - Sud-Vest Oltenia	-1.796
2019			
CZ02 - Praha & Střední Čechy	0.15	RO12 - Centru	-1.504
EE00 - Eesti	0.146	RO41 - Sud-Vest Oltenia	-1.512
UKK3 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.055	RO21 - Nord-Est	-1.516
CZ06 - Jihovýchod	0.013	RO11 - Nord-Vest	-1.547
UKL1 - West Wales and The Valleys	0.013	RO22 - Sud-Est	-1.567
Change 2010-2019			
PT20 - Região Autónoma dos Açores	0.785	EL 51 - Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	-0.376
LV00 - Latvija	0.545	PL43 - Lubuskie	-0.381
LT01 - Sostinės regionas	0.379	EL52 - Kentriki Makedonia	-0.392
BG41 - Yugozapaden	0.364	PL52 - Opolskie	-0.395
RO41 - Sud-Vest Oltenia	0.284	EL63 - Dytiki Ellada	-0.417

Figure 5. *Evolution of the ERCI 'Basic pillar' (the table highlights in grey the EU15 regions). Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission's data (ESIFopendata platform).*

still exhibit better performance in life expectancy, infant mortality, the incidence of diseases and health habits, which are worse in central-eastern regions (Figure 6).

ERCI Efficiency pillar

Having examined the drivers included in the 'Basic pillar' of the ERCI, we now turn to the 'Efficiency pillar' and its three constituent

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indicators.[13] These refer to the potential of human resources, the structure of the labour market, the market organisational structure and model. In these fields, the effectiveness of institutions is an essential determinant of competitiveness, as it is the prerequisite for creating adequate conditions to attract investment, to foster economic interaction and trade, to promote innovation (Domorenok et al., 2020), to increase productivity and to reduce the risk of social and political instability.

With regard to the 'Efficiency pillar', all the EU15 regions are lagging behind, since they remain in the last positions by the value of the index in both 2010 and 2019. Among them, Southern Italian regions not only record the lowest values in the group, but also show a significant gap compared to the European average, which has become larger over time (Figure 7). Conversely, the regions of the Czech Republic and Poland have increased their performance and in some cases have even managed to exceed the European average.

Looking at individual indicators, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis appears to have impacted the Southern Italian regions in terms of market size,[14] measured by combining GDP per capita, disposable income of households and population. While these regions were well placed in 2010, with Campania, Sicily and Apulia in first, third and fourth position respectively, in 2019 all three had lost ground compared to the Czech (Central Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia) and Polish (Silesia and Malopolska) regions. Only Campania has remained in the top five, while Sicily has had one of the sharpest drops in the index. Southern Italian regions have had a decrease in GDP with a near-stagnation of household disposable income and a concurrent decline in population growth (Figure 8). This mix has resulted in a slowdown of economic growth, an increase in the risk of poverty (Dijkstra

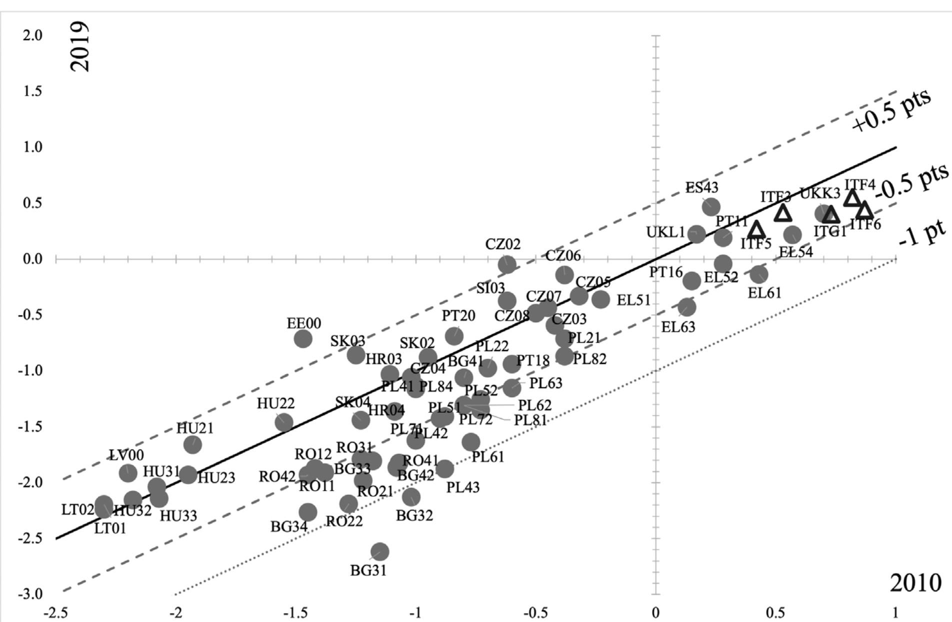

Figure 6. *Evolution of the ERCI-Health. Source: Authors' elaboration on European Commission's data (ESIFopendata platform).*

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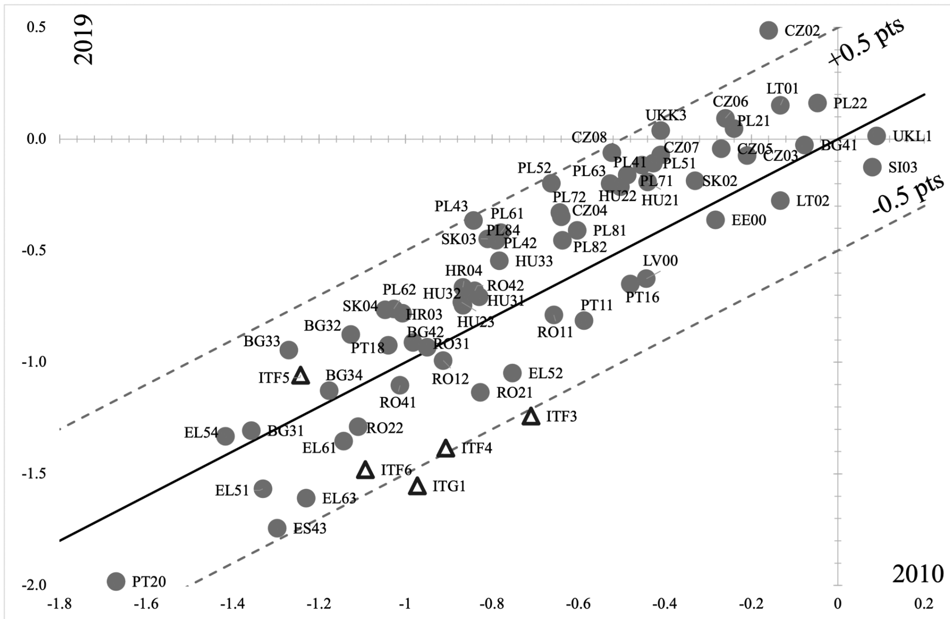

Best 5		Worst 5	
2010			
UKL1 - West Wales and The Valleys	0.09	ES43 - Extremadura	-1.297
SI03 - Vzhodna Slovenija	0.08	EL 51 - Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	-1.33
PL22 - Śląskie	-0.047	BG31 - Severozapaden	-1.357
BG41 - Yugozapaden	-0.077	EL 54 - Ipeiros	-1.417
LT01 - Sostinės regionas			
LT02 - Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas	-0.133	PT20 - Região Autónoma dos Açores	-1.67
2019			
CZ02 - Praha & Střední Čechy	0.487	ITG1 - Sicilia	-1.553
PL22 - Śląskie	0.162	EL 51 - Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	-1.567
LT01 - Sostinės regionas	0.152	EL63 - Dytiki Ellada	-1.608
CZ06 - Jihovýchod	0.093	ES43 - Extremadura	-1.744
PL21 - Małopolskie	0.048	PT20 - Região Autónoma dos Açores	-1.982
Change 2010-2019			
CZ02 - Praha & Střední Čechy	0.647	ITF6 - Calabria	-0.388
PL43 - Lubuskie	0.479	ES43 - Extremadura	-0.447
PL52 - Opolskie	0.465	ITF4 - Puglia	-0.477
CZ08 - Moravskoslezsko	0.463	ITF3 - Campania	-0.531
UKK3 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.449	ITG1 - Sicilia	-0.58

Figure 7. *Evolution of the ERCI 'Efficiency pillar' (the table highlights in grey the EU15 regions). Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission's data (ESIFopendata platform).*

et al., 2019) and a progressive weakening of young human resources accessing the labour market.

The decline in employment opportunities for the younger generations is particularly visible in the functioning of the labour market.

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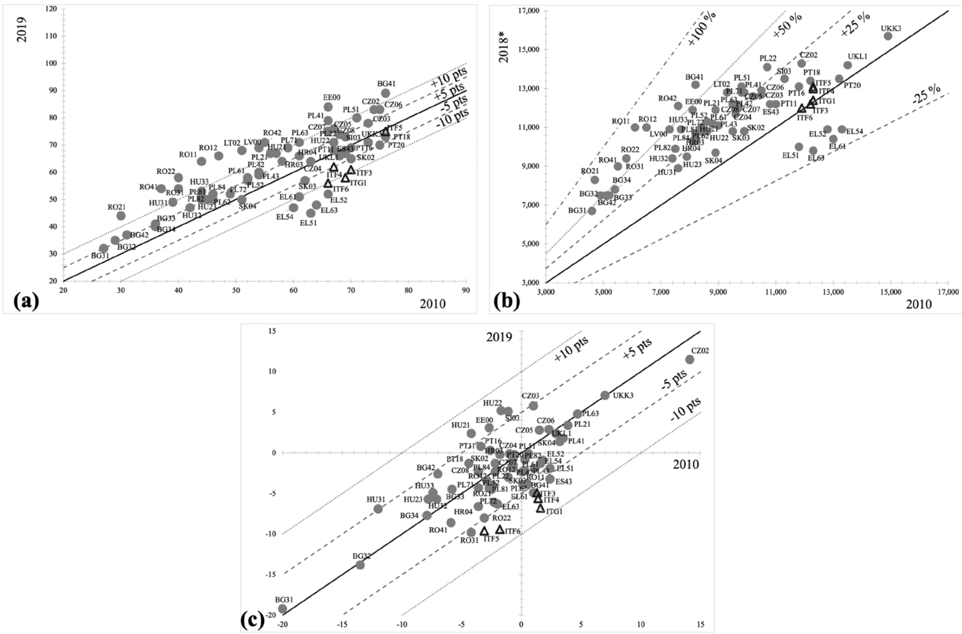

Figure 8. *Evolution of indicators of market size: (a) per capita GDP (PPS % EU average); (b) household disposable net income (PPS/inhabitant); (c) growth rate of population (% previous year). * Latest available data. Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat data.*

The regions of Southern Italy, such as others of the EU15, exhibit the lowest employment rates in Europe, as well as the worst short- and long-term unemployment rates, which undermine the efficient allocation of human resources (Bianchi et al., 2019).

The efficiency of the labour market is strictly linked to the institutional performance of the educational system. Once again, the Southern Italian regions are at the bottom of the ranking, with a decline in higher education and training performance. For this metric, two different aspects must be considered. First, in Italian Southern regions very low percentages of the population aged 25–64 have obtained a higher degree, i.e. between 14 and 17%, compared to percentages reaching 56% in Lithuania, 41% in Estonia, 30–33% in Poland. Southern Italian younger generations have paid the price of inadequate public investment in higher education (Rodríguez-Pose and Garcilazo, 2015): Italy spends in general much less than other countries. In Europe, the worst performers are in some regions of Romania, where the lowest participation in lifelong learning activities is also recorded, as is the case in Bulgaria and Greece.

Second, the problems of early withdrawal from studies and the growing NEET population are strongly emerging: while several Polish and Czech regions have taken measures to counteract these issues, in Southern Italian regions almost one in three young people does not study or work, with a huge loss of human capital for these territories (Figure 9). Indeed, the rate of NEETs can be considered to be an indicator of how much a region wastes one of its most precious resources, namely younger generations' potential. The current condition of the labour market and educational systems, exacerbated by the crisis, is further evidence of how institutional inefficiency can weaken regional competitiveness and contributes to drift from convergence targets.

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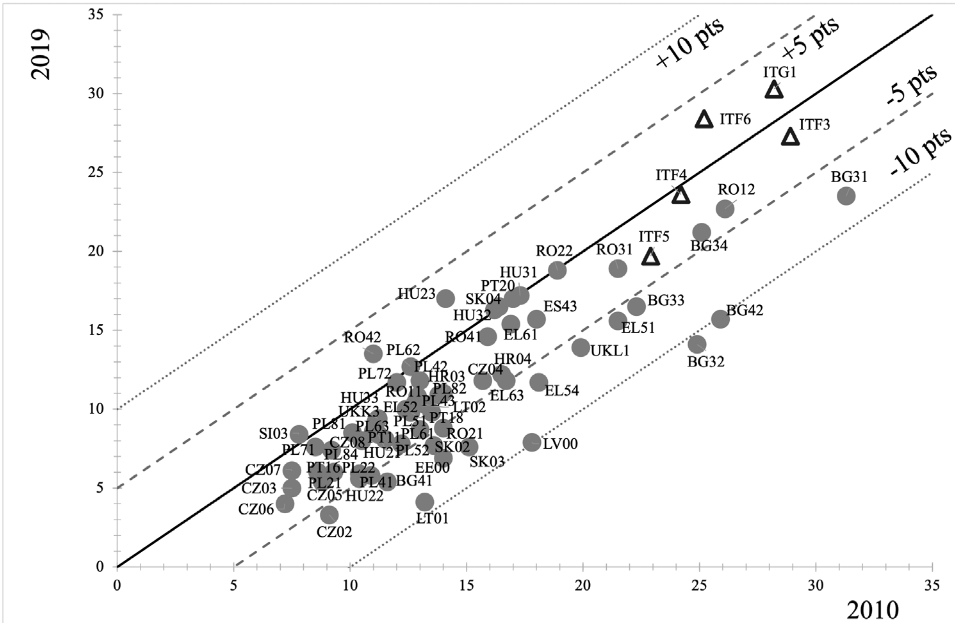

Figure 9. *Evolution of the share of NEETs (%). Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat data.*

ERCI Innovation pillar

We now address to the third pillar of the ERCI, i.e. the 'Innovation pillar'.[15] In the most advanced economies, institutions have a strategic role in promoting innovation processes. Regional competitiveness relies upon the complexity and specialisation of the business system, the synergies between public and private investments, the creation and the strengthening of clusters and networks of enterprises, especially in high-value-added sectors. The institutional capacity to stimulate and develop innovation might have supported the resilience of regions during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, by favouring the ability to create innovative environments. Among others, fruitful relationships between enterprises and scientific institutions can contribute to the production, exchange, and dissemination of knowledge.

From this perspective, Southern Italian regions show less incisive trends in innovation, compared to other less developed regions of both EU15 and CEE (Figure 10). Looking at domestic expenditure in R&D, for example, Campania is the only Southern Italian region to still maintain good levels of expenditure, even if the proportion of the working population employed in "science and technology" has remained almost unchanged over the decade. A similar trend has occurred in Apulia and Basilicata, whereas a decrease is recorded in Calabria and Sicily. Other European regions have moved in the opposite direction: the Czech Republic (Central Bohemia and Jihovýchod) and Poland (Malopolska) have risen to the top positions in R&D domestic expenditure and increased (by up to 15 percentage points) the proportion of employees in science and technology sectors. Among EU15 regions, Northern Portugal, Eastern Greece and Epirus also exhibit good performance.

Thus as we have demonstrated, all the less developed regions belonging to EU15 lost competitiveness subsequent to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and have not kept pace with the performance of many CEE regions (in

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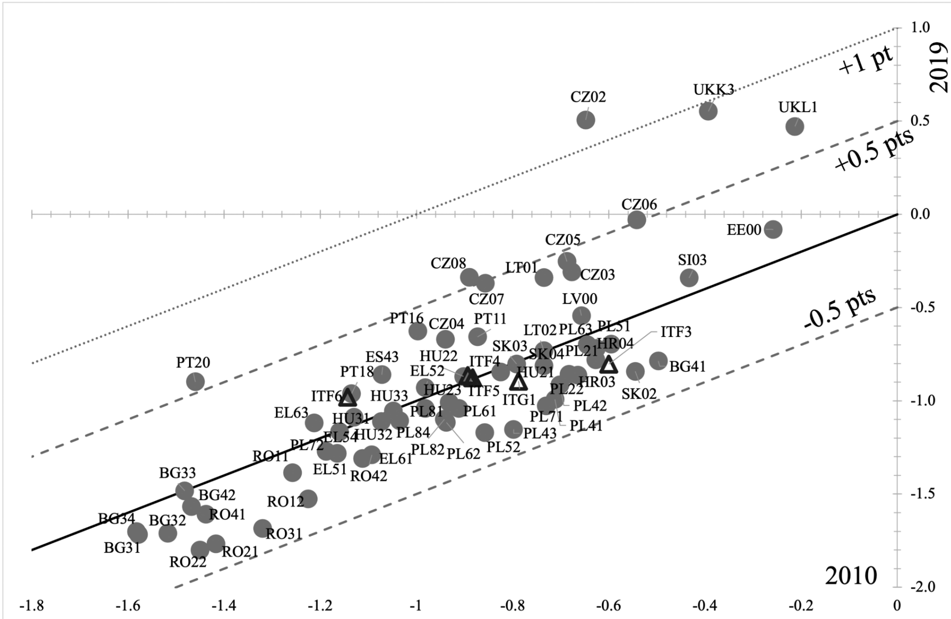

Best 5		Worst 5	
2010			
UKL1 - West Wales and The Valleys	-0.213	BG42 - Yuzhen tsentralen	-1.468
EE00 - Eesti	-0.258	BG33 - Severoiztochen	-1.482
UKK3 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	-0.393	BG32 - Severen tsentralen	-1.517
SI03 - Vzhodna Slovenija	-0.433	BG31 - Severozapaden	-1.578
BG41 - Yugozapaden	-0.497	BG34 - Yugoiztochen	-1.582
2019			
UKK3 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.553	BG34 - Yugoiztochen	-1.701
CZ02 - Praha & Střední Čechy	0.506	BG32 - Severen tsentralen	-1.71
UKL1 - West Wales and The Valleys	0.471	BG31 - Severozapaden	-1.717
CZ06 - Jihovýchod	-0.03	RO21 - Nord-Est	-1.767
EE00 - Eesti	-0.081	RO22 - Sud-Est	-1.8
Change 2010-2019			
CZ02 - Praha & Střední Čechy	1.154	PL52 - Opolskie	-0.312
UKK3 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.946	RO21 - Nord-Est	-0.35
UKL1 - West Wales and The Valleys	0.684	RO22 - Sud-Est	-0.35
PT20 - Região Autónoma dos Açores	0.562	PL43 - Lubuskie	-0.355
CZ08 - Moravskoslezsko	0.552	RO31 - Sud - Muntenia	-0.364

Figure 10. *Evolution of the ERCI 'Innovation pillar' (the table highlights in grey the EU15 regions). Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission's data (ESIFopendata platform).*

particular of Czech Republic, Baltic Republics and Poland). They remain mired in a spiral characterised by low-level development, low availability of qualified young people, a low degree of innovation, little expansion of new job opportunities and low competitive growth of enterprises. In contrast, the most dynamic CEE regions are those which, despite having

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started from the most unfavourable positions, have actively pursued restructuring strategies, showing a high degree of adaptation to market economic conditions (Cherkas, 2018; Fratesi and Perucca, 2014; Masca et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2014).

Reacting to the crisis: financial and institutional resources

What factors explain the difference in competitiveness between the two groups of regions? Could their performance differences also be due to the financial and institutional resources in reacting to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis? To answer these questions, two preliminary remarks must be made. First, public investments designed to tackle economic and social problems have a specific composition in each country, comprising public (national and European) funds and private investments. Second, regional policies have been accompanied by attempts to implement domestic reforms. As we will see, both factors contribute to regional development paths.

The beginning of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis coincided with the start of the 2007–2013 programming cycle of the EU Cohesion Policy. The magnitude of financial resources provided by the EU and the way these were used by EU15 and CEE can explain the differences in development patterns previously highlighted through the ERCI indicators. Some of the CEE partners gained evident advantages from their accession to the EU (Dall'Erba and Fang, 2017; Dyba et al., 2018) when their starting conditions before injection of public funds and the socio-economic advancement made afterwards are considered. In other words, these regions achieved strong competitiveness performances, in part as a result of EU aid received since 2004, with some regions having grown more considerably than others (Iammarino et al., 2019). The crisis affected these countries in different ways, with more serious economic and social consequences in the Baltic Republics than in others. It should be noted that Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) inflows, which had a crucial role in the transition from communism to a market system, declined after the 2008 financial crisis. Regardless, the recovery in all these countries was both rapid and strong, in part as a result of Structural Funds, which replaced FDI as the most important external source of finance (Bohle, 2018).

After 2008, the Cohesion Policy became the major source of finance for investment in many countries, representing up to 57% of government capital investment. In CEE, it represented about three-quarters of the disbursements of the Community budget (Prota et al., 2020). Over the past two programming cycles (2007–2013 and 2014–2020), there was a shift of funding from EU15 towards CEE, which absorbed about 55% of the total resources (360 billion euros, Figure 11). About 40% of this amount went to Poland, which thus turns out to be the main beneficiary. During the same two programming cycles, Italy and Spain continued to be well funded with more than 66 and more than 63 billion euros respectively, against 48 billion euros to the Czech Republic, 46 to Hungary, 42 to Romania, and 14 to Bulgaria.[16]

In the Italian case, although the overall amount of EU funds has not significantly declined, it must be stressed that these resources have gradually lost their character of *additionality* concerning national public resources. The EU funds have increasingly replaced *ordinary* state intervention and have not been centrally coordinated, as demonstrated both by the absence of a national strategy to counteract the downward drift of Southern Italy (Cannari et al., 2009; Citarella and Filocamo, 2017) and the reduction of national public investments in these regions, even after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (Bianchi et al., 2019; Boscariol, 2020). According to the annual report of Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale (2020), additional resources represent on average (in

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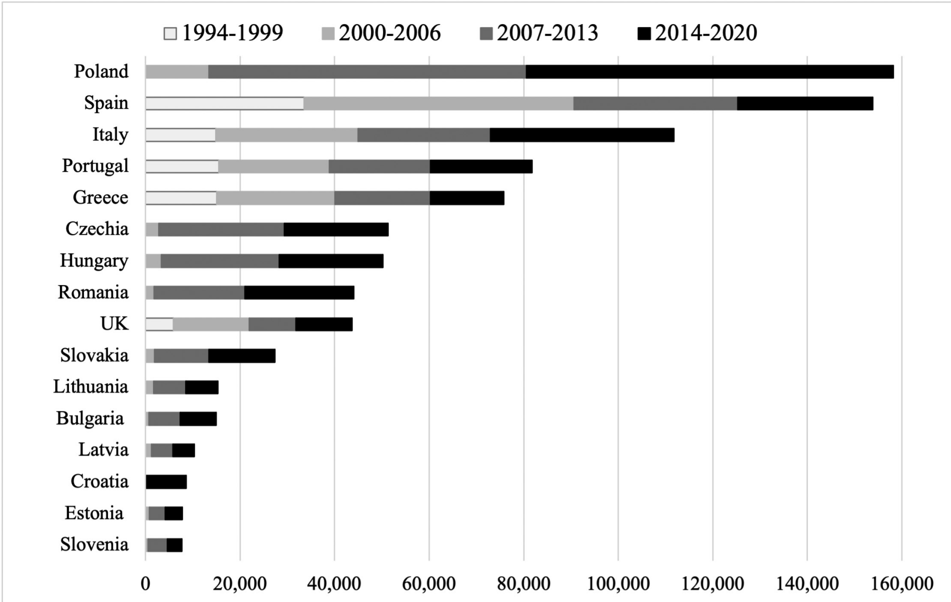

Figure 11. *Allocation of EU Cohesion Policy resources by programming cycle and by country (M€). Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission's data (ESIFopendata platform).*

the 2007–2019 period) half of total capital expenditure, with peaks which, in the closing phases of the programming cycles, reach even higher levels: 61% in 2007, 70.6% in 2015, 41% in 2018.[17]

Empirical evidence has demonstrated that the Cohesion Policy is affected by the characteristics of the programs, the structural characteristics of territories and the institutional context (Fratesi and Wishlade, 2017, Medeiros, 2016; Spallone, 2020), according to the new regionalism approach, which gives great relevance to material and immaterial assets in supporting competitiveness. The previous conceptual theories have been profoundly overturned (Amin, 1999; Martinelli 2020; Martinelli and Novy, 2013; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). Institutional factors have become thus crucial: where contexts are affected by backwardness, institutions are more likely to be inefficient, sometimes corrupted and unable to reach collective goals. The institutional asset as a key issue has been also highlighted by many assessments of the various programming cycles of European funding and has emerged from the comparison of the ERCI data previously discussed. For instance, in the case of the two groups (Southern Italy and CEE) that we observe the relationship between the different levels of government (national and regional) plays a fundamental role in enhancing the competitiveness. They both started with high centralisation—an historical and institutional legacy—but, at different times and through different processes, they pursued the regionalisation/decentralisation of policies.

Since their creation, Italian regional administrations have received weak institutional recognition. Moreover, in Southern regions, the extraordinary intervention based on national dirigisme, which occurred for a significant period until the 1990s, has limited their responsibility and autonomy in regulatory action. The Cohesion Policy promoted regional initiative. Nevertheless, the public debate has pointed out the main limits of Southern regions institutional capacity: delays in the programming phase;

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high fragmentation of objectives and programs (Trigilia, 2011); slowdowns in the implementation phases; excessive emphasis on cash transfers and incentives, often ineffective when distributed according to discretionary practices (Albanese and de Blasio, 2018); and occasionally forms of nepotism or corruption. In the decade after the crisis, as the ERCI indicators showed, these limits have worsened. Although within the same framework of purposes—such as reaching greater autonomy, responsibility and control in the administrative action—each region has faced, or adjusted to, pre-existing organisational structures and political equilibriums, deeply embedded and resistant to innovations introduced by the Cohesion Policy. Indeed, in the face of the State's disinvestment towards the South (Cersosimo et al., 2017), the regional governors tended to take control of decisions regarding development programs and the Structural Funds expenditure. Thus, there was no singular strategy for development nor in institutional coordination between national and regional level and among policies. This critical point has also emerged several times during the periodic evaluations of the impact of European financial resources.

In summary, Southern Italian regions have not been able to improve their competitiveness in the decade after 2008 not only because of changes in the macroeconomic context (i.e. the slowdown of growth rates), but also as a result of endogenous factors, linked to functioning of institutions and decentralisation processes (De Vivo, 2006, 2008; Martinelli, 2020).

How, then, have institutions affected the post-crisis performance of Eastern and Baltic countries? In the CEE, the construction of democratic and market-oriented institutions seems to have both favoured a fast development process and its resilience to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, at least in some of them. With the European incentives that the CEE countries obtained upon their accession, they have managed to reconstruct their institutional structure after communism and join the European Single Market. Thus, the considerable financial resources from which they have benefitted, through European funds, have been decisive support for the reinforcement of their democratic institutions and there is considerable consensus in the literature about aid being given to the CEE also to monitor them politically (Jacoby, 2006, 2010, 2014; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). While EU15 played a pioneering role, by integrating their own pre-existing institutional structures and progressively adapting them during the management of Structural Funds, new members have aligned their apparatus to the EU principles and organisation in a broad variety of fields, such as democratisation, regulatory convergence or administrative capacity building (Surubaru, 2017). The aim of adjusting to European standards, on the one hand, and to the model of Western European countries, on the other, has encouraged reforms, still ongoing in many cases, inspired by the principles expressed in the European Charter of Local Self-Government. This is particularly evident in the fields of education, research, telecommunications, monetary systems and trade relations, with substantial progress, some of which would not have been achieved so rapidly without the EU's contribution. The regional policies have been closely linked to all these internal reforms and to the characteristics of the instruments used.[18] The mix of all these exogenous and endogenous factors has resulted in better competitiveness performances, as we underlined in the ERCI analysis.

The Europeanisation process has had different outcomes at different levels of government, but EU regional policy has also generated ambiguous dynamics. Over time, the pressure of adapting to EU regulations on Structural Funds has created a paradox in these countries, with the old model of centralised territorial administrations having been reinforced. We can observe that the central

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governments' role changed during the implementation of the regionalisation process: at the first, there was a reluctance to decentralise, then they consigned the task of formulation of regional operational programs to regions, later they imposed solutions suiting their interests and favouring the (re)centralisation of power, in line with the Eastern countries' institutional legacy. Despite pushing towards the centralisation, we find some differences in this group of countries, with Hungary following a path of re-centralisation and the Czech Republic and Slovakia have taken steps towards decentralisation.[19] In Bulgaria and Romania the development accelerated after increasing domestic political commitment, as well as following pressure from Brussels (Surubaru, 2017). The Polish way to European integration sparks considerable interest in this sense, as from the beginning it has been marked by a strong will to adjust to EU standards (Cappelen et al., 2003; Manzella, 2011). The Structural Funds promoted unprecedented opportunities for Poland as they provided funding to boost economic activity and thereby narrow the gap with Western Europe, and acted as a stimulus for building a regional development policy which was largely absent during the 1990s (Ferry and Mcmaster, 2005; King and Sznajder, 2006).

These processes have brought relative economic progress in CEE countries, but some social inequalities and political troubles still remain (Faragò and Varrò, 2016). Corruption, conflicts of interest, comebacks of nationalism threaten the full completion of the democratic transition (Bohle, 2018).

Conclusions

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis influenced geo-economic dynamics in EU, triggering a repositioning of the less developed regions. We have started asking if their competitiveness changed after 2008. We have argued that from 2010 to 2019 the performance of regions in the CEE positively evolved, although with differences in some axis of competitiveness, whereas less developed regions in EU15—and especially the Southern Italian ones—encountered obstacles in achieving institutional efficiency, enhancing and qualifying human resources, relaunching the labour market and promoting innovation. These are not minor factors, since the ERCI indicators which recorded the greatest deficits are also those that have greater impact on productivity levels. Productivity is indeed considered as a determinant in achieving growth and convergence goals, which requires policies to improve the quality of human resources, the provision of physical infrastructure and the capacity for innovation. In view of overall maintaining levels of competitiveness, substantial interventions in these fields need to be implemented to correct the negative trend recorded in Southern Italian regions.

Then, we have looked for the reasons why in the last decade less developed regions reacted in a different way to the crisis. We focused on the amount of financial resources provided by the EU and on the institutional context. About the first topic, the outcomes of our research show that, despite EU15 have maintained their quotas of Structural Funds, in the Italian case there was a reduction of national public investments and EU funds lost their character of additionality. This investing decrease, in add with the cuts in the national budget and the austerity policies, has undermined the achievement of competitiveness goals after the crisis too.

Instead, the CEE countries, thanks to the large amount of resources coming from the EU (that counterbalanced the loss in FDI), have been able in a short time to implement development programs aimed at reducing the institutional and economic constraints from which they started.

About the second topic we have explored, we have found that the institutional frameworks of Italian and CEE regions have affected the process of policies' regionalisation. Indeed,

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Italy integrated their pre-existing institutional structures and progressively adapted them to the principles required by the EU. Despite more responsibility were attributed to regional or local governments or specific institutions charged with programming authority, Southern Italian regions have not been able to fully integrate principles, procedures and administrative apparatus. Instead, CEE have reformed their institutional structures and national regional policies after the fall of communism and already in the pre-accession phase, tailoring them to the EU's principles and organisation. In addition, regional policies came after other internal structural reforms attempts, which were focused on broader problems, such as macroeconomic balance, growth, labour market, international economic relations, the balance of payments, industrial conversion and social issues such as unemployment and poverty. In Italy some of these reforms have not completely succeeded, while in CEE have been more integrated with the Cohesion Policy objectives.

It can be concluded that the different performances in competitiveness of less development regions after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis have been amplified or depressed by the historical legacy and institutional endowments. As we have demonstrated, the development paths depend on a place/time-varying combination among all those factors that we have considered, such as the role of the national government in promoting public investments, the more or less (de)centralised administrative/political structure and the institutional capacity of both the national and the regional governments in formulating coordinated strategies and in the implementation processes.

Endnotes

[1] The paper is the result of a common reflection of the authors. Paola De Vivo wrote Introduction, the section "Reacting to the crisis: financial and institutional resources" and Conclusions. Caterina Rinaldi wrote the sections "The 2008 global financial crisis ten years on: convergence and competitiveness".

[2] According to Martinelli (2020), the local development paradigm have become the reference model for regional policies with the 'reification' of governance system. That is the opposite of the exploitation of specific local characteristics and the necessity to construct 'place-targeted' Cohesion Policy.

[3] Greece, Portugal and Spain were also severely affected by the crisis but with fluctuating economic trends (Serapioni and Hespanha, 2019).

[4] Since 1950 to 1986 the Italian government carried out a massive policy in Southern Italy, called 'extraordinary intervention', through the State-owned agency «Cassa per il Mezzogiorno». This agency had a strong autonomy in planning and implementing projects. After this period, with the dissolution of the Cassa, there were attempts to transform the extraordinary intervention into the ordinary administrative system.

[5] The less developed regions are selected as defined for Structural Funds (ERDF and ESF) eligibility 2014-2020 (GDP/head < 75% of EU27 average).

[6] 2010 was the first year the Commission started to periodically measure the competitiveness of territorial systems on a regional basis. As a matter of fact, indexes of 2010 are based on data related to the 2007-2009 period (like those pertaining to 2019 refer to the 2017-2018 period), hence they are already representative of the first changes resulting from the accession of CEE members to EU, the implementation of the European policies and the crisis of 2008.

[7] Cf. Molle, 1998; Viesti and Prota, 2004; Di Berardino and Mauro, 2012; Mccann and Varga, 2015; Petraglia and Pierucci, 2016.

[8] Other attempts to measure the quality of life and the level of development of EU regions are being processed using alternative indicators, such as the Social Progress Index (see Pilati and Hunter, 2020).

[9] Each edition of the index incorporates slight modifications in indicators and some revisions of NUTS2 boundaries. However, as Annoni and Dijkstra (2019) say that changes don't affect its overall structure and it is maintained a high degree of comparability across the editions. In our work for each pillar, we will set side by side the standardised values in 2010 and in 2019—weighted in relation to the European average (=0) and the level of development of each region—and we will point out the changes that have

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taken place over the decade. We will go beyond the index limitations by considering the main changes, analysing the position of the region not in the EU ranking but in the sample of less developed regions and presenting the results in the form of an increased or decreased gap compared to the EU average. The potential bias caused by the different composition of regions does not affect the study because only one region included in it (CZ02—Praha and its commuting area) had a significant change in boundaries. For a more detailed description of the ERCI, pillars and calculation methodology, see also Annoni and Kozovska, 2010.

[10]The future evolution of the UK regions' trajectories of development must be, however, reconsidered in the light of the changes which Brexit will inevitably entail, first of all the gradual withdrawal of European resources and support (on this see D'Aponte and Rinaldi, 2017; Rinaldi, 2019).

[11]The table shows a comparison between the Italian regions and those with the highest frequencies and how many times each region is positioned in best/worst 5.

[12]The 'Basic pillar' is composed of five indicators: institutions, macroeconomic stability, infrastructures, health, quality of primary and secondary education.

[13]The three indicators are higher education/ training and lifelong learning, labour market efficiency and market size.

[14]Market size takes into account not only the regional domestic market, but also the potential one of neighbouring regions.

[15]The 'Innovation pillar' includes the following: technological readiness, business sophistication and innovation capacity.

[16]In the period of 2007–2013 the three Baltic countries, Hungary and the Czech Republic received more than €2,000 per person; Greece, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia around €1,500; Bulgaria and Romania €750, Spain €550, Italy €350, Germany and Finland less than €200, France and the UK around €100 (Prota et al., 2020).

[17]The 2018 corresponds to the N+3 verification for the 2014-2020 programming cycle.

[18]At least in the early stages, development programs drafted by CEE established quite a substantial private match-funding (in some case higher than 70%) as an essential requirement to the State financial aid allotment; likewise, as for financial aid to enterprises, loans or tax concessions were preferred over non-repayable loans (which played a central role in old member countries instead). These choices were all made in the strategic perspective of encouraging the involvement of private actors in development processes.

[19]In Czech Republic, for instance, a specific Ministry for Regional Development has been created, expression of the importance given to this sector of intervention. In almost all countries, then, a formal mechanism of interministerial coordination between various sectors has been arranged and agencies and sub-national regional development authorities have been established (Bachtler et al., 1999).

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