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**The Impact of multinational corporations on diversity, equality, and inclusion in CEE**

(chapter target 7’000-8’000 words – Deadline June 30th, 2024)

**Introduction**

Multinational corporations (MNCs) play a crucial role in disseminating organizational practices across their global network (Geppert et al., 2006; Song, 2021). This transfer often aims to replicate dominant or local practices from the home country abroad or to adapt them to the specific local contexts of subsidiary operations (Kostova and Roth, 2002). Prior research has highlighted that the institutional environments of the subsidiaries need to be considered when practices are implemented (Björkman and Lervik, 2007; Edwards et al., 2007). However, companies may not only be recipients governed by local institutional pressure but may engage in creative or even disruptive forms of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Multinational corporations (MNCs) are pivotal agents in the dissemination of organizational practices throughout their global network. This phenomenon, extensively discussed in scholarly literature (Geppert et al., 2006; Song, 2021), involves the transfer of practices either to replicate dominant strategies from the home country or to adapt them to local contexts in subsidiary operations (Kostova and Roth, 2002). Prior studies have underscored the significance of considering the institutional environments of subsidiary locations during practice implementation (Björkman and Lervik, 2007; Edwards et al., 2007). Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that MNCs may not merely act as recipients influenced by local institutional pressures; they can also engage in innovative or disruptive forms of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

**EDI Transfer**

Managing workforce diversity is argued to represent an integral part of human resource management, particularly in large and dispersed MNCs (Sippola and Smale, 2007; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Workforce diversity is interpreted as differences in demographic (e.g. age, gender, race, ethnicity) or, more broadly, as all personal characteristics such as capabilities, personality, sexual orientation, education, religion, culture, language, disability and working style (Cox, 1993) among employees (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Originating from the USA, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) as a management concept has travelled around the globe especially by means of such MNCs since the late early 2000s (Ferner et al., 2005; Bader et al., 2022; Hilger et al. 2023). It has its origins in Diversity management as a business strategy (Thomas, 1991) that includes “specific policies and programs to enhance recruitment, inclusion, promotion, and retention of employees who are different from the majority of an organization’s workforce” (Mor Barak et al., 2016, p. 308). For MNCs, the question arises of how they deal with workforce diversity at home and abroad and whether there are differences between headquarters and foreign subsidiaries. Both may be subject to very different local contexts, even though both are part of the same multinational organisation (Ferner et al., 2005). Consequently, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) practices will critically differ depending on the country context where those practices are performed or transferred to (Peretz et al., 2015; Bader et al. 2022; Hilger et al., 2023). Thus, due to cross-national differences and local sensitivities, the successful transfer of EDI practices needs to take contextual differences between headquarters and subsidiary institutional environment into account and EDI often becomes context specific (Hennekam et al., 2017; Tsui-Auch and Chow, 2019; Erdur, 2020). The pressures to comply with institutional expectations of diversity may differ immensely between advanced and emerging or developing economies (Küskü *et al.*, 2021). Particularly contexts where diversity is less welcome, for example Northern Africa, may pose a threat to an unadjusted transfer of EDI practices (Hennekam et al., 2017). However, EDI practices within globally dispersed MNCs remain under-researched (Cooke et al., 2019). While early research in the field has primarily focused on the international diversity activities of North American MNCs (e.g. Ferner et al., 2005), more recent research also provides insights into the transfer of DEI practices within MNCs from Europe and Asia (Bader et al., 2022). Ferner et al. (2005) delved into the experiences of six US-based MNEs striving to implement their diversity policies within their UK subsidiaries. The study unveiled a consistent pattern of incomplete policy transfers. The researchers attributed this phenomenon to the complex institutional context marked by dual challenges in the realm of diversity. These challenges were twofold: the variations in diversity frameworks across distinct countries and the contentious nature of diversity during that particular period, even within the United States. Further insights underscored the influence of broader country-level institutional contexts. Miah et al. (2022) explore HR management practices of foreign manufacturing companies in Bangladesh. Their findings suggest that adapting practices to local norms, investing in employee development, and fostering local talent can enhance the transfer and effectiveness of EDI practices. However, apart from select studies focusing on North Africa (Hennekam et al., 2017) or China (Tang et al. 2015), far less information is given about emerging transfer targets. Particularly evident however, is a research gap regarding Central and Eastern Europe as a transfer target.

**EDI in CEE**

While during socialist times, female representation, for example, was superior to the West, the CEE countries have taken different directions regarding diversity legislation, activism and acceptance resulting in distinct national pressures on local companies (Metcalfe and Afaniesseva, 2020; Buyantueva and Shevtsova, 2020). This is particularly evident in local topics of diversity, such as gender roles, same-sex marriage, or abortion self-determination (Morley et al., 2016), accompanied by prevailing xenophobia (Kalmar, 2018) and generally lower openness towards diversity (Nemeth et al., 2020) Such non-compliance to Western EDI ideals results in what Kulpa (2014, p. 432) calls leveraged pedagogy where “the West” engages in “a hegemonic didactical relation where the CEE figures as an object of the Western ‘pedagogy’, and is framed as permanently ‘post-communist’, ‘in transition’, and homophobic.” In such contexts which are less welcoming to diversity, research has shown that companies may deliberately choose not to disclose information, to avoid backlashes (Chow, 2021). In contrast, or as a result, MNEs from CEE are continuously putting efforts into westernizing their business practices, partially emulating the US and Western-European companies, where diversity management is an integral part of human resource management (Hilger et al. 2023; Latukha and Malko, 2019), due to the globalisation of management practices and an increasing focus on competition for human resources. With these supposedly progressive western approaches, MNEs hope to attract investors, global customers, and employees (Carrillo Arciniega, 2021). Globalization and the internationalization of domestic companies as well as the market entries of foreign MNCs may affect the way societies perceive and experience diversity with increased exposure to international cultures and values (Hilger et al. 2023; Engle et al. 2020). This tension between emic and etic views on EDI highlights the significance of research on the impact of foreign, particularly Western, MNCs on EDI in CEE.

**Institutional work**

Institutional theory provides “the most satisfactory description of organization-environment relations, explaining and predicting how organizations conform to prevailing institutional demands, adopt institutionally accepted practices and become similar to their peers over time” (Aksom, 2022, p. 436). Thus, institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995) functions as the backdrop for this chapter, to develop new insights on the impact of foreign MNCS’ impact on EDI in CEE. According to Scott (1995 three types of institutions dominate the national context regulative, normative, and cognitive. Institutional theorists argue, and research on the international transfer of management practices (e.g. Kostova and Roth, 2002) has emphasized as well, the regulatory framework is only one aspect of the complex environment influencing the transfer process and the makeup of the organizations involved (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). According to Scott (1995) normative and cognitive aspects of the environment are equally important. Syed and Özbilgin (2009) thus suggest a multilevel relational framework encompassing macro-level factors such as institutions and culture in national contexts, meso-level factors, such as organisational approaches to EDI, and micro-level factors, such as identity linked to behaviour and relationships of individuals. Similarly, Woodhams and Corby (2007) are focussing on regulative macro-level pressure and its significance on the implementation of meso-level employer practices regarding employees with disabilities in the UK. Additionally, Zhang (2020) showed that the relationship between gender diversity and firm performance varies significantly across countries and industries due to differences in the institutional context. Konrad et al. (2016) found managers customizing practices, balancing competitive and institutional pressures to gain competitive advantage.

Institutional theory traditionally suggests that organisations are compelled to follow emic practices by isomorphic pressures in order to gain legitimacy. This may result in institutional inertia through institutionalized routines which may hinder organizational change (Aksom, 2022). Despite their inertia-inducing stickiness, institutions may be subject to evolutionary processes and subsequent institutional change. This evolution may be driven by organisational behaviour and agency through the dynamic interplay between actors and institutional structures (Tempel and Walgenbach, 2012; Tsui-Auch and Chow, 2019; Aksom, 2022). Hereby institutional work comes into play, which is defined as “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Institutional work shifts the focus to understanding how organisational action affects institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009).

**Macro-Level impacts**

Building on a literature review concerning issues of EDI transfer, contextual influences on EDI and particularly an analysis of institutional work of foreign MNCS in CEE. Drawing on Syed and Özbilgin’s (2009) three-level framework, this study aims to detect a macro-level impact of foreign MNCs institutional work by analyzing the normative institutional context in CEE as well as meso-level company EDI practice, to address the neglected consideration of different contexts as criticised in Özbilgin (2008). Norms determine what is preferred or desirable and showcase how things should be done to inform members of a society about the expected behaviours (Scott, 1995). To examine possible normative pressures, we opt to analyse the diversity charters, i.e., voluntary initiatives aiming at encouraging organizations to implement and develop EDI practices, across ten CEE countries. The more companies, as well as corporate customers, suppliers, and competitors, are part of such initiatives the higher becomes the normative pressure to join by creating peer pressure. By joining, the companies pledge to certain values and have to show their actions to reach the charter targets. We applied an inductive categorization to the charter contents, resulting in the seven dimensions *Initial Impulse, Initial Funding*, *Launch date, Signatories, Share of foreign Signatories*, all directed at detecting whether the charter is driven by external influences, as well as the addressed *Diversity dimensions* in order to analyse whether etic framings of diversity were used.

We find that the normative institutional context in CEE countries is increasingly shaped by foreign forces, particularly the European union and its programmes as well as western MNCs. On the macro-level foreign agents engage in normative institutional work by determining expected behaviours through an organisational commitment to the society to promoting diversity and equal opportunities for its staff. This is showcased by least 40 % (Latvia) and up to 90 % (Bulgaria) of foreign signatories in CEE diversity charters. Only Slovenia stands out, with only 25% foreign signatories. Strikingly, the non-EU countries of Russia and Serbia do not offer diversity charters, indicating a misfit between the countries’ institutional environments and EDI practices.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Charter** | **Russia** | **Romania** | **Hungary** | **Bulgaria** | **Poland** | **Latvia** | **Czech Republic** | **Serbia** | **Slovenia** | **Croatia** |  |
| Impulse | 0 | EU I.D.E.A.S | National | EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme | National | National | National | 0 | EU I.D.E.A.S. | EU I.D.E.A.S. |  |
| Funding | 0 | EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme | Hungarian Ministry of National Economy | EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme | Government | NGO |  | 0 | Justice Programme of the European Union | Justice Programme of the European Union |  |
| Launch date | 0 | Oct 2018 | Oct 2016 | Sep 2020 | Feb 2012 | Feb 2019 | Nov 2014 | 0 | Nov 2017 | Oct 2017 |  |
| Signatories | 0 | 80 | 50 | 10 | 305 | 41 |  | 0 | 60 | 42 |  |
| Foreign Signatories | 0 | 80% | 75% | 90% | 66% | 40% | 75% | 0 | 25% | 45% |  |
| Covered Diversity Dimensions | 0 | 0 | 6 | 8 | 8 | 7 |  | 0 | 8 |  |  |
| Covered Diversity Dimensions | 0 | No particular dimensions mentioned | Race, skin colour, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or political views | Sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation | Gender, age, (dis)ability, health, race, nationality, ethnic origin, religion, creed, religiousness, political views, union membership, psychosexual orientation, sexual identity, family status , lifestyle, employment form | Gender, ethnic background, skin colour, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious or political views; | Gender ethnicity nationality religion disability age sexual orientation |  | Sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation | race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, disability or sexual orientation |  |

Table 1: Diversity Charters across select CEE countries (own elaboration)

Additionally, most countries who did install diversity charters, follow the etic diversity dimensions rather closely (minimum of six out eight diversity dimensions.

**Meso-level Impacts**

This macro level-analysis is accompanied by a meso-level exemplary investigation of five German MNCs and their subsidiaries in the Czech Republic concerning their EDI initiatives and their possible micro-effects. We apply a qualitative methodology to assess the social reality within Western, more precisely German, MNCs and their CEE, here Czech, subsidiaries.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Company | Industry | 2023 Employees (global) |
| 1 | Technology/Manufacturing | 320’000 |
| 2 | Logistics | 48’000 |
| 3 | Technology/Manufacturing | 165’000 |
| 4 | Technology/Manufacturing | 21’000 |
| 5 | Discount Retailer | 360’000 |

Table 2: Case Companies (own elaboration)

Although both Germany and the Czech Republic, like several other CEE countries, are member states of the European Union nowadays, their institutional frameworks have differed over time. This may still influence how diversity management is received and implemented and may affect MNCs and their subsidiaries. According to Yin (2014) the aim of case studies is to understand complex social phenomena and real-life events such as firm and managerial processes. The methodological approach is thus based on Yin (2014) and Mayring (2015), who integrated content analysis into case study analysis. Yin’s case study research design comprises five components: the study’s questions, propositions, units of analysis, the logic linking the data to the propositions; and the criteria for interpreting the findings. Yin underlines the need for researchers to review the relevant literature and include theoretical propositions regarding the case under study before starting data collection, which differentiates it from such methodologies as grounded theory. Consequently, we have conducted an extensive literature review on perception gaps as well as subsidiary control before our empirical analysis. Based on Yin’s (2014) general principles on the case study approach, we make use of multiple sources of evidence converging on the same set of facts or findings for the purpose of triangulation and a case study database (Yin 2014). We focused on collecting data through corporate communication and interviews across the five cases. We interviewed spokespeople within the Czech subsidiary of each German MNC to analyse their EDI practices and in how far they were determined by the German headquarters. We additionally gathered data on the MNC EDI practices from annual reports, company newsletters and company websites. A qualitative content analysis of the data gathered from the documents and interviews was applied. A structuring deductive categorisation of content based on etic diversity dimensions, HQ mandates and external pressure was applied. The structured segments were and interpreted to extract the main messages of the categories in order to able to detect the headquarters impact on local EDI practice.

Here we find that German MNCs, in contrast to what would be expected from the macro-level analysis, are not strongly pushing EDI practices in the subsidiaries. While one respondent stated that “there are projects in Germany (…) the headquarters are not pushing action here” (Company 1 interview) in the Czech Republic, three companies stated that there’s a focus on female participation in management (Company 3, 4 and 5 interviews), which is also fostered by the German headquarters at home. The Czech subsidiary of Company 5 is also encouraged to align its practices with the MNCs long-term diversity and inclusion strategy, however specific measures are not demanded or actioned. The main focus lies on gender opportunities.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

As we’ve demonstrated, Western MNCs shape the CEE institutional macro-context quite actively by means of the promotion of EDI values in diversity charters. The fact that domestic signatories increase over time, shows that the institutional work of foreign MNCs is fruitful on the normative level, even if, compared to Western European contexts, those charters are of lesser gravity. However, looking at the organizational level, we find that German MNCs engage much less actively in EDI measures in their Czech subsidiaries apart from the Gender dimension. This creates the notion that Western corporations in CEE “talk the talk” but don’t “walk the walk” on EDI and don’t follow the normative guidelines as consequently themselves. Despite their intentions of change on the macro-level, implementing such changes within the subsidiaries seems to be more challenging. This may be due to the fact that in day-to-day business, the cross-national differences, and local sensitivities, hinder an unaltered transfer of EDI practices as suggested in the literature (Hennekam et al., 2017; Tsui-Auch and Chow, 2019; Erdur, 2020). The pressures to comply with institutionalized expectations within the workforce and general business environment (Küskü et al., 2021) still hinder more action to drive EDI, which may require more creative and invested attempts as shown by Miah et al. (2022).

Ultimately, we enhance the understanding institutional work on EDI as well as the transfer of EDI within MNCs. We thus contribute to the academic discussion and provide practical implications for organizations in diverse international settings.

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