
Trajectories of Post-Communist Transformation: Myths and Rival Theories about Change in Central and Southeastern Europe¹

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Abstract

The collapse of communism in Central and Southeastern Europe has given rise to various myths and debates. This article undertakes to examine and debunk two myths and to summarise and assess four debates. The two myths are, first, that no one foresaw the collapse of communism or offered any clear prediction of that eventuality in the decade preceding 1989, and, second, that what occurred in the region between 1989 and 1991 could not be described as a revolution since, allegedly, it was masterminded by the communist authorities themselves; this article refutes these two myths. The four debates concern whether to describe the processes of change since 1989 as a transition or a transformation, what to count as democratic consolidation, and what to understand as the reasons for differences in paths of transition (or transformation), and as reasons for differences in the level of success with democratisation. The article includes some comparative measures of regional progress since 1989.

Key Words

Transformation, transition, democratisation, communism, post-communism, myths.

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Introduction

The collapse of communism in Central and Southeastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union were a long time coming, but once these processes were underway, they were completed relatively quickly. If one counts the most visible period of collapse as starting with the round-table talks in Poland, which began in February 1989 and ending with the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, this period may be said to have been contained within 35 months. Taking a longer view, however, the collapse of communism in the region may be said to have begun with the formation of the Independent Trade Union 'Solidarity' in Poland in the summer of 1980 or with the establishment of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia in January 1977 or, pushing the inception of the collapse further back in time, with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, with the revolt in the German Democratic Republic in

June 1953, or perhaps with the very establishment of the communist regimes in Central and Southeastern Europe at the end of World War II and in the Soviet Union in 1917, if one believes that the communists never solved the problem of legitimation. The problem which lay at the root of the long collapse, indeed, was the failure of legitimation, since, as I have argued elsewhere, '[t]he fundamental problem of politics is the creation and maintenance of a legitimate political order'.² Political legitimacy in the twentieth and twenty-first century hinges, among other things, on the public feeling that it can play a meaningful role in the political system (typically through free and fair elections, in the first place) and the given regime's respect for the rule of law and human rights, as well as its observance of a general policy of tolerance.³

From the very beginning, however, there have been several myths and debates surrounding the collapse of communism and the region's post-communist political course. The first myth is the claim that *no one* foresaw the collapse of communism or offered any indicative predictions in the decade preceding 1989.⁴ This claim, however, involves the implicit further claim to have read and remembered everything relevant written in any language during that decade – surely an achievement

beyond the capability of even the most energetic of scholars. The second myth is that what happened in Central and Southeastern Europe was not a revolution at all, but rather a case of 'self-destruction by the apparatus – the cadres and the bureaucrats' who collaborated in 'destroying the [communist] political system' with the intention of subverting subsequent privatisation for 'personal gain'.⁵ Promoted by a small group of self-described 'dissenters', this myth holds that the post-communist transition in Central and Southeastern Europe 'is actually a backward- regressive- process pushing the region back to its pre-modern institutions'.⁶

The fundamental problem of politics is the creation and maintenance of a legitimate political order.

In addition to these two myths, there are four debates in which scholars have engaged concerning political change in the region. The first is a curiously overheated debate about vocabulary, focusing on whether the processes of change might best be described as *transition* or *transformation*. The second debate highlighted here addresses the questions of what counts as democratic consolidation, when is consolidation

over, and when is transition- if that is what it is- over? The third and fourth debates, closely related but distinct, revolve around accounting for differences in the political paths taken by the states in the region since 1989, and for differences in the level of success with democratisation.

In the rest of this article, I shall examine these assorted myths and debates, and endeavour to suggest that at least some of them have been answered by more recent developments in the region, focusing on the following states: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and the Yugoslav successor states. Russia is included in Table 2 [figured later in the article] by way of comparison, but is otherwise mentioned only in passing. I shall also advance the argument that democratic consolidation depends on a combination of factors, including a favourable international environment, economic stabilisation, and marginalisation and de-legitimation of extremist political views. In the final part of this article, I shall discuss the myth and a related debate concerning the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia. At the outset, it is perhaps worth emphasising that the all-encompassing transformation that has occurred in the Central and Southeast European region did not occur independently of developments in the Soviet Union. As is well known, Mikhail

Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991 and the President of the Soviet Union from March 1990 to December 1991, advised Soviet bloc states to make their own decisions about their futures in what came to be known as ‘the Sinatra Doctrine’ (inspired by Frank Sinatra’s song, *My Way*). At the same time, it is clear that the roots of the ‘great transformation’ were primarily indigenous, which is why ‘strong societies’, such as Slovenia, Croatia, Poland and Hungary, moved more quickly than ‘weak societies’, such as Bulgaria and Romania (or, for that matter, Macedonia and Kosovo)-especially at the beginning of the transformation.

The First Myth

The persistence of the myth that ‘nobody knew’ that communism was in danger is puzzling, given the records of rather concrete predictions by various scholars. As early as March 1980, Ernst Kux had suggested that, if Poland and other countries in the region failed to deal effectively with their economic problems, the result could be social unrest and ‘upheavals [...] in a number or all of the East European countries more or less simultaneously’.⁷ Bringing a somewhat different emphasis to bear, but with

the same ultimate conclusion, George Schöpflin argued, in a 1985 publication, that the communist systems were in an advanced state of decay.⁸ Again, J. F. Brown speculated in 1984 that ‘the Polish experience may have begun a gradual shift in power relationships within the communist system’.⁹ Looking at the Hungarian context in 1987, Ivan Volgyes understood that that country was already moving into a political ‘storm’.¹⁰ Where Romania is concerned, Anneli Gabanyi assessed in a September 1988 publication that Nicolae Ceaușescu’s days at the helm of power were numbered.¹¹ Again, Zbigniew Brzezinski declared confidently in early 1989, ‘It is almost a certainty that at some point in the relatively near future, given some major economic or political upheaval, politics as the expression of authentic social aspiration for multiparty democracy will return to the life of Eastern Europe’.¹² Other observers, such as Vladimir Tismăneanu,¹³ also sensed that the end was near; but the most famous publication on the subject was probably Francis Fukuyama’s often misunderstood essay, ‘The End of History?’. The whole point of Fukuyama’s essay was to forecast ‘the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy’, indeed ‘the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’.¹⁴ Whether or not Fukuyama will be proven right

about liberal democracy, it is clear enough that he foresaw the imminent collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It is indicative that in the summer of 1990 Robert Conquest published an article about the work of certain scholars, focusing on political change in Eastern Europe, entitled ‘Who was right, who was wrong, and why?’¹⁵

In tracing the origins of this myth, one may note that it was not merely a question of scholars not keeping up with the field that produced this myth. Another root was selective perception originating in the ‘realist’ perspective which held, in the words of its most formidable champion, that ‘Communist totalitarian states and Western liberal states both belong generally in the category of effective rather than debile political systems’¹⁶ and, further, that communist states had ‘demonstrate[d] high levels of political stability and institutionalisation’.¹⁷

This suggests, in turn, that the reason that these repeated warnings and predictions of eventual collapse were ignored was twofold: firstly, it conflicted with the dominant but erroneous paradigm which emphasised political order rather than legitimacy as the principal factor making for system stability; and secondly, predictions of dramatic change always come up against

the reluctance of people in general (not just scholars) to imagine anything but a continuation of the *status quo*. (This is also why only a very few people have paid any attention to those who have been warning against a looming water crisis, an exhaustion of oil supplies, the imminent collapse of the U.S. economy, and the ways in which the continued destruction of the environment and of other species will also affect the human species. People find it difficult to imagine dramatic change, and therefore are naturally disposed not to believe it possible.)

The Second Myth

The second myth, which holds that nothing revolutionary happened in 1989 or thereafter, is inextricably linked with debates about how best to define the word *revolution*. Some scholars, such as Huntington,¹⁸ Roper,¹⁹ and Poznanski,²⁰ have emphasised the centrality of violence, making violence part of the definition of revolution. For Roper, this means that only the Romanian events may qualify as a revolution, while Poznanski specifically rules out that anything revolutionary occurred in Romania on the grounds that the violence there did not last long enough to qualify; Poznanski further excludes Yugoslavia on the grounds that, in his view, Yugoslavia dissolved because

Slovenes, Croats, and others were yearning for ‘national independence’.²¹ But, in fact, Poznanski extends his argument to further deny that there was any revolutionary transformation either, insisting, as already noted, that it was the communist managers who orchestrated the collapse of the communist system in order to profit from it. Communism was, he thought in 1993, ‘a viable system’ which, with the changes that took place after 1989, had evolved into ‘a more advanced’ form.²² But eight years later, Poznanski was not so confident that this ‘effort by the cadres to convert political power into economic strength’²³ had succeeded, since he wrote in 2001, that ‘only dysfunctional markets’ had emerged in the region.²⁴ Instead of the smooth evolution to a ‘more advanced’ stage of communism, what Poznanski saw in the region in 2001 was that the collapse of the communist organisational monopoly had ‘unleashed everywhere mostly forces that have destroyed what already existed, but are seemingly unable to replace it with anything functional’.²⁵

The alternative view is to construe revolution not so much as a Big Bang, but rather as a process of transformation associated, as Alexis de Tocqueville understood it, with ‘a period of intense social, political, and economic change’.²⁶ Along similar lines, Michael McFaul defined revolution as ‘a sweeping,

fundamental change in political organisation, social structure, economic property control and the predominant myth of social order'.²⁷ Again, Howard Kaminsky defined revolution as 'the sudden substitution of one social and intellectual world for another'.²⁸ Further, if one considers social order to be based on identifiable moral, political, and economic principles (such as secular theocracy, one-party rule, and a planned economy vs. consequentialism, democratic governance, and economic free market), then, according to this way of thinking, change in any of these principles would qualify as revolutionary, whether or not accompanied by violence, while change in all three dimensions would qualify as a *comprehensive* revolution.²⁹ Here, Poznanski's observation that comprehensive change may be advanced over years (or, I would add, over decades) is germane, and is buttressed by the argument developed by Bertram Wolfe in his classic history of revolutionary processes in Soviet Russia.³⁰

Poznanski was, of course, correct in noting that the events of 1989-91 did not mean the death of communist parties. One may note, for example, the electoral success of post-communist parties in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland and Romania in the 1990s, and of the

post-communist parties in Macedonia, Bulgaria and Slovenia in elections held in 2002, 2005, and 2008, respectively. But these transformed parties involved new people and new programs and, in any event, do not seem to be driven by the desire to make economic profit from electoral success. In the Czech Republic, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) remains electorally relevant, winning 12.8% of the vote in 2006.³¹ Serbia stands out as an exceptional case in that the League of Socialists of Serbia (as its communist party was called) transformed itself into a nationalist party with an expansionist program. Serbia, thus, is the clearest example of the kind of hijacking which Poznanski had in mind and, although the party president, Slobodan Milošević, seems not to have derived any particular wealth from this hijacking, many of his cronies benefitted.³²

The First Debate

The first debate, which was probably driven in part by confusion or disagreement about the meanings of the terms at hand, concerned whether it makes more sense to describe the change in the region as *transition* or as *transformation*. This debate was well underway by the mid-1990s.³³ As summarised by Petr Pavlínek, the

argument was between those who believed that the region was undergoing a *transition* towards a definite goal, such as modern capitalism- a view which Pavlínek considered 'teleological', which is to say, apparently something bad- and those who believed, on the contrary, that the countries of the region were not heading towards any clear goal or in any definite direction, so that the *transformation* should be considered (to have been) complex.³⁴ Writing at the end of the 1990s, Ben Fowkes stated the case in this way: 'A transition implies both a starting point and an objective, an ultimate goal. The starting point can be defined with a fair degree of clarity. It is the communist regimes and systems in what turned out to be their dying days - the late 1980s. The final goal, however, is extremely hazy'.³⁵ Like Pavlínek, Fowkes considered that those who believed that the elites in the region had a clear goal were guilty of teleological thinking.³⁶

For the purposes of this article, I will define *transition* as a 'passage or change from one place, state, or action to another', as per *Cassell's Dictionary*.³⁷ Thus in my understanding and in my use of the word 'transition', there is no hint of anything teleological, let alone any assumption that the change designated thereby is necessarily in a desirable direction (whether to the observer or to those affected). The literal meaning

of the word 'transition' is that things end up different from what they were before. I do not believe that there are any observers of the post-communist region who would assert, at this point in time, that nothing substantial has changed.

The word *transformation* has a different meaning. As given in *Cassell's*, a transformation is 'the act of transforming; [...] a metamorphosis; a transmutation'.³⁸ It is, thus, the process of change itself, and clearly any transition will involve transformation, even though one can imagine transformations which would merely be a perpetuation of chaos, without leading to any definite or even partially stable equilibrium. Transition, thus, entails transformation, while transformation does not necessarily entail transition.

Thomas Carothers, in an article published in *Journal of Democracy*, attributed five assumptions to what he called the transition paradigm; I would join him in rejecting all five assumptions, even while I continue to believe that, among other things, those post-communist states which left the Warsaw Pact and joined NATO and the EU have effected a 'passage or change from one place, state, or action to another', as *Cassell's* puts it. The five assumptions Carothers lists are: (1) that every country where a dictator is

overthrown should be assumed to be moving towards democracy; (2) that democratisation must always follow the same formula in the identical sequence; (3) that elections are a guarantee of stable, liberal democracy; (4) that such things as level of economic development, political history, and legacies of various kinds are irrelevant to the course or prospects of democratisation; and (5) that the so-called 'third wave' democratic transitions have been taking place in coherent, functional states.³⁹ These assumptions, if indeed anyone actually made them, strike me as ridiculous. Unfortunately, whether for reasons of delicacy or for some other reasons, Carothers did not name the guilty parties. What I would emphasise, however, is that there is *no reason* why anyone who believes that politics in Central and Southeastern Europe has ended up different from the way it was before 1989 should make *any* of these assumptions.

Anyone who had any knowledge of what followed the overthrow of the Shah of Iran (in 1979) or the collapse of the Soviet Union (in 1991) could hardly give any credence to the first assumption, while students of democratisation have noted variations in the building of democracy, involving, among other things, the choice between a presidential and a parliamentary system, the choice between proportional representation and first-past-the-post elections, and

the sequencing of reform legislations. Moreover, concerning elections, I am not alone in having pointed out that elections are no guarantee of liberal democracy and that rushing forward with elections, before inter-ethnic hatreds have been tamed and the rule of law established, is a recipe for dysfunctionality, not for liberal democracy.⁴⁰ Where variables such as the legacies of the past are concerned, there is a rich literature pointing out how they may impact on political evolution.⁴¹ And finally, it is unlikely that any specialist in Central and Southeast European affairs has failed to notice the emergence of new states which resulted from the dissolution of the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and socialist Yugoslavia, or the troubles which some of the Soviet and Yugoslav successor states have experienced; this makes it rather unlikely that anyone has *really* viewed the post-communist transitions as involving 'coherent, functional states', although admission to the European Union clearly signifies that, within the council of the EU, those admitted have been judged to have reached a sufficient level of functionality to qualify for membership.

In a brilliant article for *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Jordan Gans-Morse reviewed the arguments about post-communist evolution in 131 articles published in 10 leading area studies journals and journals of comparative politics. He found that,

while many scholars have attacked a supposedly hegemonic model of ‘transitology’ (a term of abuse), ‘analysts of post-communism have rarely expressed the opinion that liberal democracy (or any other regime type) is the singular, natural, inevitable, or even probable outcome of transitions’.⁴² Kopstein confirms this analysis, noting that students of post-communism have ‘never claimed that democracy was inevitable’.⁴³ Moreover, while unnamed scholars stand indicted for having imagined that developments in Central and Southeastern Europe would necessarily mirror what had happened previously in Latin America, Gans-Morse found that scholars focusing on Central and Southeastern Europe based their analyses not on reading about Latin America but on studying the region of their speciality and, accordingly, identified various factors which distinguished the region from Latin America.⁴⁴

Gans-Morse also looked at repeated claims (citing those making such claims) that there was a significant contingent of scholars guilty of naïve forms of teleological thinking.⁴⁵ He quoted Katherine Verdery’s warning that ‘to assume that we are witnessing a transition from socialism to capitalism, democracy, or market economies is mistaken’.⁴⁶ One wonders whether, in viewing the evolution of politics in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia,

Slovenia and Croatia, Verdery would be prepared to reiterate that warning today.

The willingness of local elites to commit to fulfilling the challenging conditions entailed in the EU’s *acquis communautaire* demonstrates convincingly that entry into the EU has figured as a clear goal for the post-communist states.

But where teleology is concerned, one may well ask, are there any analysts who subscribe to the contrary notion that, after 1989, the people of Central and Southeastern Europe had no particular hopes, or that the elites of the countries that comprise the region had no idea - if that is the point - about what they wanted to achieve? Moreover, while teleology sounds as though it must be a mortal sin, one should stand back and ask: what is wrong with believing that political elites might have certain objectives in mind? And, in fact, as Milada Vachudova points out, ‘[e]ven before the street demonstrators had gone home in Prague in November 1989, incoming democratic leaders of Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary had singled out joining the EU as their most important foreign policy goal’.⁴⁷ Casting our eyes further back in time, we may note that,

already in the early 1980s, opposition activists in Poland were consciously building a parallel society in which, as Wiktor Kulerski put it, ‘the authorities will control empty stores but not the market; the employment of workers but not their livelihood; the official media, but not the circulation of information; printing plants, but not the publishing movement; the mail and telephones, but not communications; and the school system, but not education’⁴⁸ and their ultimate goal was nothing less than the reestablishment of a pluralist political system.⁴⁹

In Czechoslovakia, the independent activists associated with Charter 77, the Committee for the Unjustly Persecuted, the Jazz Section, and the Catholic Church were struggling, among other things, to achieve the rule of law (in which the authorities would respect their own constitution and laws), freedom of information and culture, an end to repression, and a restoration of religious freedom, including the self-governance of the Catholic Church.⁵⁰ One may also point to currents of independent activism in the 1980s in the German Democratic Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, as well as, to a lesser extent, in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia.

Once the communist organisational monopoly had collapsed, the new elites set about to dismantle the old political structures and, consulting the Central and East European Legal Initiative (of the American Bar Association) and setting up committees to study the constitutions of various states both in Western Europe and elsewhere, they passed new constitutions and laws, set up new institutions, and promoted change in the direction of pluralism. The elites also sought to privatise the economy and revive production. While the process of deconstruction and reconstruction

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opened up possibilities for corruption, which assumed serious dimensions in some societies of the region, the changes were complex not because they lacked clear purpose, but rather because at least two rather different purposes were being pursued by some local elites: on the one hand to build pluralist systems, to revive the economy, and to gain entry into the European Union; and on the other hand, as Poznanski noted, to line their own pockets and pass control of lucrative properties into the hands of relatives and cronies. This latter motivation was especially serious in the Yugoslav successor states in the war zone, as well as in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and

Romania. Furthermore, the willingness of local elites to commit to fulfilling the challenging conditions entailed in the EU's *acquis communautaire* (the total body of EU law passed to date) demonstrates convincingly that entry into the EU has figured as a clear goal for the post-communist states.⁵¹ To my mind, thus, what the countries of Eastern Europe undertook at the end of 1989 was a transition, which inevitably involved the transformation of the political, legal, economic and media systems.

I have dwelled on this first debate at some length because of the fury with which it was argued, especially in the first decade following the collapse in 1989. This suggests that the participants in the debate felt that something important was at stake; I have tried my best to clarify what was at stake and what was not at stake. Nonetheless, I offer one final observation here, *viz.*, that the *status quo* in the region is a fragile one and not a final endpoint, not merely because of political pressures, but also because of the environmental crisis, which includes global warming and its ramifications, as well as of the potential future corrosion of the U.S. economy traceable, above all though not exclusively, to the fiscally irresponsible policies of the George W. Bush administration. Environmental crisis and economic crisis should be expected to have political consequences. This brings us to the second debate.

The Second Debate: When is Transition Over and When may Democracy be Considered to have been Consolidated?

While acknowledging the wisdom of Berger and Luckmann's observation about the precariousness of all social reality,⁵² I find myself in sympathy with Kornai's suggestion that transition is over when the communist party no longer enjoys an organisational monopoly and power monopoly, when the largest part of the economy is in private hands, and when the market is the dominant determinant in the economy;⁵³ still, rather than claiming that the transition is over with the achievement of those tasks, I prefer to think that these represent (only) an important milestone along the road to stable liberal democracy (and membership in the European Union). Along similar lines, Alan Gelb wrote (in 1999) that '[t]ransition is over when the problems and the policy issues confronted by today's "transition countries" resemble those faced by other countries at similar levels of development'.⁵⁴ In this connection, it is of some interest that Ermelinda Meksi, the then deputy prime minister of Albania and the minister of state for European integration, and Auron Pasha, the executive director of

the Institute for Development Research and Alternatives, came to the conclusion in 2003 that, while a country could be considered to have completed its transition and yet not be a member of the European Union, membership in the EU served as a clear signifier that economic, if not also political, transition had been completed.⁵⁵ For political transition to be considered over, it is also important that the government exercise effective sovereignty over its entire territory.

The corollary question- when may we say that democracy has been consolidated? - is a question about criteria. Here I suggest the following criteria, offering that a democracy may be considered to have been consolidated when:

- corruption is down to a level where the country obtains a score of 4.0 or better on Transparency International's corruption perception index,

- the number of major political parties has stabilised at two or three, and the number of parties able to elect deputies to the parliament has stabilised at eight or fewer,
- the education system promotes liberal values,
- and the electoral laws are stabilised.

In this respect, the fact that each of the first six parliamentary elections held in Croatia after 1989 (1990, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2000 and 2003) was conducted according to a different electoral law⁵⁶ suggests, at a minimum, that a stable democratic system had not been consolidated in Croatia prior to 2003.

Table 1 (below) shows which countries have been admitted to the EU, how press freedom in the countries of the region have been ranked by Reporters Without Borders, and corruption perception index scores as reported by Transparency International:

Table 1: International measures of regional progress since 1989

EU membership	Press Freedom (2011/12)	Transparency International (2009)*
<i>Members since 2004:</i>	<i>States rated in the top forty:</i>	<i>CPI scores better than 4.0:</i>
Czech Republic	Czech Republic (14 th)	Czech Republic (4.9)
Hungary	Poland (24 th)	Hungary (5.1)
Poland	Slovakia (25 th)	Poland (5.0)
Slovakia	Slovenia (36 th)	Slovakia (4.5)
Slovenia	Hungary (40 th)	Slovenia (6.6)
		Croatia (4.1)
<i>Members since 2007:</i>	<i>States rated between 41st - 80th place:</i>	<i>CPI scores between 3.5-4.0:</i>
Romania	Romania (47 th)	Romania (3.8)
Bulgaria	Bosnia-Herz. (58 th)	Bulgaria (3.8)
	Croatia (68 th)	Macedonia (3.8)
	Serbia (tied for 80 th)	Montenegro (3.9)
	Bulgaria (tied for 80 th)	
<i>Acceding country:</i>		<i>CPI scores between</i>
Croatia		<i>3.0-3.5:</i>
<i>Anticipated soon:</i>		Serbia (3.5)
Montenegro		Bosnia-Herz. (3.0)
		Albania (3.2)
	<i>States rated lower than 80th (for press freedom)</i>	
<i>Others:</i>		<i>Not listed in 2009:</i>
Albania	Kosovo (86 th)	Kosovo
Kosovo	Macedonia (94 th)	
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Albania (96 th)	
Macedonia	Montenegro (107 th)	
Serbia		

Sources: Reporters without Borders (ratings for 2011/2012), at <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html> [last visited 9 September 2012]; and * Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2009, at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table [last visited 23 August 2010]. CPI = Corruption Perceptions Index.

What this table shows is that the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (listed alphabetically) were ranked in the highest category across each of these three measures, with Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania close behind. Among the remaining states, Montenegro may be best situated to join Croatia in accession to the European Union, in spite of its extremely low rating for press freedom; meanwhile Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are saddled with serious economic problems, problems of corruption, and, in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the failure of the local elites to overcome the division of the country into two entities, as determined in the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995.

The current Serbian political team subscribes to a revanchist agenda and has, at best, an ambivalent attitude towards the West.

Serbia looked favourably poised to be admitted to EU candidate status as long as Boris Tadić was president and Mirko Cvetković was prime minister⁵⁷- provided only that Belgrade recognise the independence of Kosovo. However, in the course of 2012, Tomislav Nikolić (Serbian Progressive Party) displaced

Tadić as president (in May) and Ivica Dačić (Socialist Party), in coalition with the Progressive Party, succeeded Cvetković in the prime minister's office (in June). Nikolić's party has 73 deputies in the Serbian parliament, against the 45 seats held by Dačić's party.⁵⁸ (Nikolić conceded the prime minister's office to Dačić in order to outbid Tadić, whose party had come second, with 68 deputies in the parliament.)

The newly elected Serbian president and the new Serbian governmental team have already signalled a new direction by signing an EU association agreement on 28 June 2013⁵⁹ even while trying to delay any recognition of Kosovo's independence.⁶⁰ In fact, Nikolić has stoked fears of genocide of Serbs in Kosovo, even while denying that what took place in Srebrenica in July 1995 can be characterised as genocide. As for NATO, with Nikolić and Dačić at the helm, Serbia has been strengthening its military ties with Russia.⁶¹ The current Serbian political team thus subscribes to a revanchist agenda and has, at best, an ambivalent attitude towards the West.

To this list of problems one may add that both Serbia and Macedonia recently adopted controversial legislation in the area of media and communications- in both cases being challenged in the respective Constitutional Court⁶²- while

private security companies have been a problem in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia, having been linked to espionage (in the RS), fraud and murder (in Macedonia), and organised crime in Bosnia and Serbia.⁶³ Nor should one omit organised crime from the list of problems with which the region is confronted. While organised crime is the most serious in Southeastern Europe, no country in the region is entirely free of its effects.

Indeed, even Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina aside,⁶⁴ there have been disquieting developments in several other countries of the region. In this context, some discussion of the deterioration of democracy in Hungary is warranted. Elections held in April 2010 in Hungary gave Fidesz, a right-wing party, 52.76% of the vote.⁶⁵ Under the election law valid at the time, this entitled Fidesz to 227 seats in the parliament (68% of the total); Fidesz's coalition party, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) won 36 seats, giving the coalition a bloc of 263 seats in the 386-seat parliament. With the support of the neo-Nazi Jobbik Party, which elected 47 deputies to the Hungarian parliament,⁶⁶ Fidesz's leader Viktor Orbán- now enthroned as prime minister- proceeded to scrap the constitution which, in taking office, he had pledged to uphold. By the end of the year, the Fidesz-dominated parliament had replaced the constitution

and passed 213 laws- a record in Hungarian history- and, of that number, 63 were modified subsequently. Under the new constitutional-legal order, both the independence and the jurisdiction of the country's highest court have been reduced, the legal supervision of elections has been changed (placing five Fidesz members in charge), and the independence of the media has been seriously compromised. In addition, the previous agencies entrusted with the protection, respectively, of human rights, data, and minority affairs have been consolidated into a single agency with lesser competence. The constitution itself has taken on the role of a *dictionary*, defining marriage as a union between a woman and a man- by way of terminating the previously liberal law on same-sex registered partnerships. The constitution also initially deregistered 348 religious associations, leaving only 14 with legal status. Under international pressure, the number was subsequently increased to 32. Moreover, even as the country's economic troubles have increased the number of the homeless, the Hungarian parliament addressed this problem in November 2011 by criminalising homelessness, exposing an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 homeless persons to the risk of incarceration on charges of poverty!⁶⁷

As if that were not damaging enough, the far-right Jobbik Party has pledged to

fight for the retrieval of the lands lost as a result of Czechoslovak, Romanian and Serbian military annexations in 1919 – annexations sanctioned by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920⁶⁸ – has demanded that Hungary exit the European Union,⁶⁹ and has staged anti-Roma marches in Roma-inhabited areas, in which participants have shouted murderous slogans.⁷⁰ Remarkably, the Fidesz government, which has been engaged in the posthumous rehabilitation of Hitler's collaborator, Miklós Horthy,⁷¹ did not see fit to ban Jobbik's anti-Roma march in Devecser village on 5 August 2012, even though it had banned a gay pride parade the previous April. As it stands, it is impossible to characterise Hungary as pluralist, much less as democratic in the usual sense of that word; at the time of this writing, the Hungarian government, supported by a large proportion of the population, is clearly on an authoritarian track, already displaying clearly illiberal tendencies.

The newly elected Serbian president and the new Serbian governmental team have already signalled a new direction by signing an EU association agreement on 28 June 2013 even while trying to delay any recognition of Kosovo's independence.

The Third Debate: What Accounts for Differences in the Transition?

In some ways, this third debate is both the most interesting and the most complex. In a survey of available theories which have been presented by various scholars, Paul Lewis lists the following:

- historical-cultural theories (stressing the legacy of the Ottoman rule *versus* the legacy of the Habsburg rule)
- the history of opposition in the Northern Tier countries (symbolised by the outbreaks in 1953 in the GDR and in 1956 in Hungary and Poland, as well as the emergence of Solidarity and associated independent organisations in Poland in 1980) *versus* the more stable authoritarian patterns in the Southern Tier countries
- the relative strength of civil society and independent activism in each country
- the modes of exit from communist rule (e.g., round-table negotiations, as in Poland and Czechoslovakia, *versus* palace coups, as in Serbia and Bulgaria)
- the level of socio-economic development⁷²

For Munck and Leff, the emphasis is on the mode of transition, and they contrast: the Polish model (transaction), the Hungarian model (extrication), the Czechoslovak model (rupture), the Bulgarian model (revolution from above).⁷³ Helga Welsh, by contrast, wants to de-emphasise modes of transition, preferring to place the emphasis instead on how practices of conflict resolution changed during the transition.⁷⁴ Yet another approach is offered by Elena Prohnițchi who, after a close comparison of Hungary and Poland's transition modes, concludes that differences in paths and outcomes were affected largely by two factors: 'the initial conditions of transition (level of communist legitimacy, level of social mobilisation, relationship of opposition and incumbents) and the strategic behaviour of elites involved in the transformation process'.⁷⁵ Looking to cultural factors, Darden and Grzymala-Busse investigated variations in the timing and content of mass literacy in the region and concluded that 'mass literacy explains more of the patterns of the communist exit than do structural, modernisation, or communist legacy

A variety of factors have played a role in determining the relative success achieved through the democratisation and development of a liberal culture in the region.

accounts, and it provides a clear and sustained causal chain'.⁷⁶ Again, Vachudova, in a brilliant analysis of the transition paths of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, argues that the two factors which proved to be the most conducive to the establishment of a stable democracy in the region were the strength (in terms of both organisation and participation) of the anti-communist opposition in the 1980s, and the presence of a reformed communist party.⁷⁷ The latter contributed to the development of a healthy competitive political environment and, Vachudova continues, 'the quality of political competition determined whether states embarked on [...] a liberal or an illiberal pattern of change after 1989'.⁷⁸ Ten years before the publication of Vachudova's book, Ishiyama pointed to 'the promotion of political moderation within the principal political parties' as a key determinant of the success of democratisation.⁷⁹ Finally, Bohle and Greskovits trace differences in transitional pathways to alternative models of capitalist transformation adopted in the region. They distinguish

between: the 'state-crafted neoliberalism' of the Baltic states; the 'embedded liberalism', which they believe has been practised since 1989 in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia; Hungary and Slovenia's neo-corporatism; and the later privatisation and delayed economic recovery characteristic of Southeastern Europe.⁸⁰

The Fourth Debate: What Accounts for Differences in the Level of Success with Democratisation?

The activity of the PHARE program (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies), which pumped € 582.8 million into Hungary alone between 1990 and 1995⁸¹ and additional funds for Poland, certainly has given an advantage to its beneficiaries (later expanded to 10 EU accession countries), while the entire process of EU accession is clearly of deliberate design. However, beyond these factors, there are a host of other factors which have been offered as having had an impact on the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe, including: the choices and strategies of the elites in power;⁸² levels of modernisation and economic development and historical experience with democracy;⁸³ the choice

of executive structure (presidential, semi-presidential, or parliamentary system), legislative structure (unicameral or bicameral) and electoral system (majoritarian, proportional, or mixed);⁸⁴ whether nationalist mobilisation occurred early or late in the transition process;⁸⁵ and the survival of forms of totalitarian consciousness, manifesting itself in a nostalgia for communist authoritarianism, a phenomenon which is less pronounced in Eastern Europe than in Russia.⁸⁶ Where this last factor is concerned, Petr Macek and Ivana Marková warned (in 2004) that patterns of thinking formed during communist times, including levels of distrust, uncertainty and scepticism, continue in varying levels from one society to another.⁸⁷ Bunce, by contrast, has suggested that 'the most successful democracies in the post-Socialist world- Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and the Baltic states- share one commonality: a comprehensive political rejection of the socialist past and socialist elites in the founding years of democratic governance.'⁸⁸

For my own part, I am inclined to stress that a variety of factors have played a role in determining the relative success achieved in democratisation and development of a liberal culture in the region. Among these factors, I would include not only the exit strategies and

conditions noted by Vachudova and Bunce, as well as the relevance of literacy and educational levels, as noted by Darden and Grzymala-Busse, but also the crucial role played by the European Union with its *acquis communautaire*, and the contents of and political messages communicated in history textbooks used in schools.⁸⁹ To these factors one may add also the impact of corruption, organised crime, elite-stoked nationalist hatred,⁹⁰ and whether the country in question was able to avoid war or not.

After reviewing the track records of 10 post-socialist European countries, Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink concluded that the four key political determinants

of success with democratisation in the region have been the absence of war, the absence of foreign peacekeeping forces, the presence of a parliamentary system operating with a proportional electoral system, and the active engagement of civil society in the early phase of transition.⁹¹ Their argument is convincing.

But could demographic and cultural factors also play a role? Table 2 shows the percentage of urbanisation in the region's countries for 2008, the average years of schooling for 2006 (with 2004 data for Albania and 2005 data for Macedonia), and expenditures on education as a percentage of GDP (with majority of data from 2002-2005).

Table 2: Cultural and demographic factors

% urban* (2008)	Average No. of years of schooling (2006)	Expenditures on education as a % of GDP (2005)
Czech 73	<i>15-17 years</i>	5.5-7.1%
Russia 73	Slovenia	Montenegro
Bulgaria 71	Hungary	Slovenia
Hungary 68	Poland	Hungary
Macedonia 67	Czech	Poland
Poland 61	Slovakia	
Montenegro 60		4.4-4-5%
Croatia 57	<i>14 years</i>	Croatia
Slovakia 56	Croatia	Bulgaria
Romania 54	Romania	Czech
Serbia 52	Bulgaria	
Slovenia 48	Russia	3.5-3.9%
Bosnia-H. 47		Slovakia
Albania 47	<i>11-12 years</i>	Serbia
Kosovo 10	Macedonia	Russia
	Albania	Romania
		Macedonia
	<i>No data</i>	
	Serbia	<i>Below 3.0%</i>
	Kosovo	Albania
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	
	Montenegro	

Sources: For 'percentage urban' (except Kosovo) and average numbers of years of schooling, see, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *The World Factbook*, at www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/ [last visited 24 January 2013]; for percentage urban in Kosovo, www.citypopulation.de/Kosovo.html [last visited 24 January 2013]; for expenditures on education for Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, and Slovenia, CIA, *The World Factbook*; for expenditures on education in Serbia (1998) and Montenegro (2000), 'Serbia- Administration, Finance, & Educational Research', at education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1326/Serbia-ADMINISTRATION-FINANCE-EDUCATIONAL-RESEARCH.html and 'Montenegro – Administration, Finance, & Educational Research', at education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1010/Montenegro-ADMINISTRATION-FINANCE-EDUCATIONAL-RESEARCH.html [both last visited 24 January 2013]. Due to heavy international subsidies, educational expenditures in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1998 accounted for 10.8% of the GDP, while educational expenditures in Kosovo in 2001 accounted for 14% of the GDP. More recent figures for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are not available. See 'Bosnia- Administration, Finance, & Educational Research', at education.stateuniversity.com/pages/180/Bosnia-Herzegovina-ADMINISTRATION-FINANCE-EDUCATIONAL-RESEARCH.html [last visited 24 January 2013]; OECD, *Reviews of National Policies for Education: South Eastern Europe, Vol. 1: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo* Paris, 2003; reprinted 2004, p. 330.

Two things are immediately apparent from the data in Table 2. Firstly, that there is no correlation between the raw data on urbanisation presented in the table and any of the measures of regional progress towards stable democracy, as reflected in Table 1. Secondly, that Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, which ranked in the highest categories in Table 1, are also ranked highest on the two measures of education, while Albania and Macedonia, which have performed less well in terms of democratic consolidation and combating corruption, also rank at the bottom of the scale of measures of educational investment and attainment. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, data for the average number of years spent in school are not available for Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Montenegro; nor are recent data for expenditures on education in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Yet even the incomplete data shown in Table 2 serve to reinforce the suggestion by Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink that ‘no single factor is sufficient for [a full explanation of] a successful transition and the consolidation of democracy’.⁹²

Other factors may also enter into the equation, such as the extent to which liberal intellectuals are able to play a meaningful role in public dialogue about issues of the day or, conversely, are estranged from important public

forums and even subjected to occasional attacks in the mainstream media. Or, to take a more readily quantifiable factor, the extent to which journalists who investigate governmental corruption or write reports critical of the government are silenced. In Slovenia, to take as an example a country generally regarded as doing about as well in terms of building democracy as any in the region, there have been ongoing controversies about the media ever since the communists were voted out of power in 1990, focusing on government manipulation and ownership issues, among other things.⁹³

And finally, it is worth keeping in mind that corruption, to which this article has repeatedly alluded, not only entails giving private gain priority over public interest in the decision-making of corrupt office-holders, but also creates an organic bond between corrupt office-holders and organised crime – a bond which severely compromises efforts to consolidate the rule of law.⁹⁴ Not even Slovenia has been immune to organised crime.⁹⁵

When it comes to the Yugoslav meltdown, the most notorious myth was the claim, registered by Robert Kaplan,⁹⁶ that the fighting which erupted in the early 1990s had – in Kaplan’s view – nothing to do with any contemporary

problems. Promoting the illusion of ‘ancient hatreds’, Kaplan traced the conflict in the 1990s, improbably, to problems pre-dating the Fall of Rome in 476 (which is the standard date demarcating the end of the ancient era)- to a time when the ancestors of the South Slavs had not yet arrived in Southeastern Europe and were still polytheists. One wonders what Kaplan was thinking about. That Kaplan’s thorough misunderstanding and misconstrual of both past and present was profoundly misleading was completely obvious to all serious students of the region. Henry R. Cooper, Jr., spoke for most, if not all, in the field of Slavic studies when he described Kaplan’s book as ‘a dreadful mix of unfounded generalizations, misinformation, outdated sources, personal prejudices and bad writing’.⁹⁷

The myth of ‘ancient hatreds’ nonetheless exerted an unhealthy influence over public thinking when sales of *Balkan Ghosts* put the book on the *New York Times* bestseller list. British Prime Minister John Major was, for a while, taken in by the myth,⁹⁸ and, to the extent that policymakers were inclined to attribute contemporary conflicts to ancient sources, that, *ipso facto*, rendered them intractable and made any diplomatic or military response appear irrelevant. The myth thus provided an excuse for Western inaction in the face

of a war that eventually claimed at least 100,000 lives.⁹⁹

But if ‘ancient hatreds’ were not the reason for the Yugoslav meltdown and Wars of Yugoslav Succession (1991-1995), then what *were* the sources of that ‘Time of Troubles’? The Serbian regime itself promoted two mutually reinforcing myths on this score, sometimes blaming Slovenia for the outbreak of the war – a myth which seems to have influenced Warren Zimmermann’s thinking on the subject, even if he did not blame the Slovenes for more than self-absorption, accusing them of “‘Garbo nationalism’- they just wanted to be left alone”¹⁰⁰- and sometimes casting the blame on Germany for its allegedly ‘premature’ recognition of Slovenia and Croatia. This improbable myth, that the diplomatic recognition of these two countries somehow made war in Bosnia-Herzegovina vastly more likely, ignores the fact that the Serbian political elite had already developed ‘plans and projects’ involving annexation of as much as 60% of Bosnia-Herzegovina, long before Slovenia or Croatia achieved diplomatic recognition¹⁰¹ - as has been documented by intercepts of telephone conversations among Slobodan Milošević, Dobrica Ćosić and Radovan Karadžić.¹⁰² In spite of the fanciful nature of this myth, it was picked up by Beverly Crawford¹⁰³ and may have influenced the thinking of other observers as well.¹⁰⁴

In fact, Germany's recognition was not at all 'unilateral' as Crawford has alleged, but was closely coordinated within the European Union¹⁰⁵ and was followed, immediately, by a truce in Croatia.

Although one can also find some tendencies in certain quarters to try to equate Croatian and Serbian culpability for the war, increasingly there is recognition that, in terms of the players, Milošević and his coterie (among whom, Čosić, Karadžić and Borisav Jović stand out as leading figures) were clearly the prime movers in the meltdown, insofar as they planned the war, armed and trained Serbian militias in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1990s, confiscated most of the weaponry entrusted to the Slovenian Territorial Defence Force and all of the weaponry entrusted to its Croatian and Bosnian counterparts, and even moved arms factories out of Bosnia-Herzegovina and into Serbia.¹⁰⁶ And yet, although Milošević and his associates were the prime movers, they were able to take the country to war because of the presence of certain preconditions. This is why I wrote in 2005 that 'the central systemic factors in the decay of socialist Yugoslavia were (1) problems associated with system illegitimacy, (2) economic deterioration, and (3) the ethnic-based federal system, while (4) human agency (Milošević especially, but not solely) played a central

role in taking the country down a violent path'.¹⁰⁷ The notion that Slovenia bore any particular responsibility for a war in which it was barely involved is too absurd to bear scrutiny.

Other theories have also been put forward in the endeavour to explain the Yugoslav meltdown. These have included efforts to trace the War of Yugoslav Succession to Serbs' national character formed during the 'Ottoman occupation',¹⁰⁸ to emphasise unemployment as the key factor which generated discontent and the willingness to take up arms,¹⁰⁹ and to highlight long-term political decay as having pushed the Yugoslav state towards crisis.¹¹⁰ But when all is said and done, the catastrophe which befell Yugoslavia was, as Dennison Rusinow has argued, avoidable- at least until 1989 or 1990.¹¹¹ By 1990, however, the sorcerer and his apprentice were making active preparations for what they envisaged as a war of conquest to expand the borders of the Serbian state.¹¹²

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have endeavoured to show that there is sufficient evidence to refute the myth that supposedly 'no one' foresaw that the illnesses afflicting the communist systems were to prove fatal, as well as a second myth alleging that the communists

supposedly collaborated in bringing down the socialist system, thereby, according to this myth, initiating ‘a backward- regressive- process pushing the region back to its pre-modern institutions’.¹¹³ I have also undertaken to engage in the discussion of four interrelated debates. Where the debate over terminology is concerned, we may have surpassed this, since few, if any, scholars really doubt that the systems of the region have been transformed, one way or another, and few, if any, scholars doubt that membership in the EU and/ or NATO has been or become the goal of political elites in all the countries discussed here (though not for Russia). Even in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where some elites oppose membership in these international organisations, there are also Western-oriented elites who favour joining the EU and NATO.

The second debate- when is transition over, and when is democracy consolidated- turns, in part, on self-perception, at least where ‘transition’ is concerned. For those elites that have viewed EU/NATO membership as the paramount goal, said membership represents the symbolic completion of transition from socialist/post-socialist economy to inclusion in the Western global market, and from a place in the Soviet sphere of influence to inclusion

under the Western collective security umbrella.

The states of Central and Southeastern Europe must still cope, with the consequences of the global recession which began in autumn 2008, while confronting challenges posed by global warming, the destruction of natural habitats, and the extinction of species.

The third debate revolves around the roots of differences in transition, while the fourth debate focuses more specifically on reasons for the different levels of success with democratisation. The two debates are interrelated but distinct. The scholars whose work I have cited have drawn attention to a variety of factors affecting trajectories of transition, including the relative strength of civil society and independent activism, the mode of exit from communist rule, practices of conflict resolution during the immediate years of transition, the presence of a reformed communist party, and the choice among alternative models of capitalist transformation. While I would discount theories which attempt to trace present trajectories back several centuries, I believe that all of the aforementioned factors relating to the

situation and practices and activities since 1980 should be seen as relevant, to one extent or another.

Where the fourth debate is concerned, I am struck by the fact, noted by Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink, that a complex of variables should be seen as operative, and agree with their prioritisation of factors. It is worth mentioning too that the countries which rank lowest on most of the measures in tables 1 and 2- in alphabetical order: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia- were all affected, directly or indirectly, by the fighting in the region during the years 1991-1999.

Now, even while still struggling with corruption and, in most cases, consolidating still-young democratic systems, the states of Central and Southeastern Europe must still cope, as I have already noted, with the consequences of the global recession

which began in autumn 2008, while confronting challenges posed by global warming, the destruction of natural habitats, and the extinction of species- challenges with consequences which even now cannot be fully anticipated.

And finally, turning to the Yugoslav meltdown, I have revisited the threadbare myth of 'ancient hatreds', noting its poisonous consequences, and reviewed, in brief, some of the competing theories offered as explanation.¹¹⁴ Today, a decade and a half since the Dayton Peace Accords brought the War of Yugoslav Succession to a close- I consider the War for Kosovo a separate war- many in the region have at least begun to move beyond absorption with 'the apocalyptic beasts of hate and anger'¹¹⁵ and to undertake processes of reconciliation. And a part of reconciliation is a serious effort to appraise, or reappraise, the recent past objectively and fairly, and to accept the consequences of that (re)appraisal.

Endnotes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was published in Slovenian translation under the title “Krivulje postkomunistične transformacije: miti in konkurenčne teorije o spremembah v Srednji in Jugovzhodni Evropi”, in Vlasta Jalušič and Lev Kreft (eds.), *Vojna in Mir: Refleksije dvajsetih let*, Ljubljana, Mirovni inštitut, 2011, pp. 125-155. The original English version is published here, in updated and revised form, by permission of the author as well as of the editors of the volume. I am grateful to Professor György Péteri for comments on an earlier draft of this article.
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