

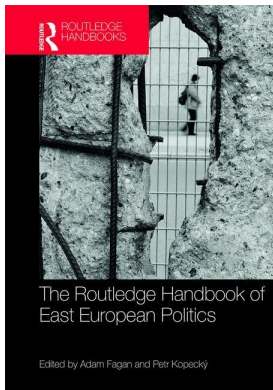
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PART I

The state of democracy



1

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATISATION IN POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE¹

Andrew Roberts

Few areas of post-communist politics have been studied as intensively as the fate of democracy and in few areas has the conventional wisdom shifted as radically – from initial joy at the fall of communism, to pessimism about the legacies of the past, to optimism again with entry into the European Union, and finally to more qualified assessments today. As Kitschelt (2003) points out, no other region in the world has as diverse and I would add shifting regime outcomes. Whenever things seem to stabilise, new events inevitably shake up received understandings.

Given the diversity of outcomes and the amount of research on the region, this review will inevitably be partial.² Nevertheless, I will attempt to cover what I consider the seminal and most influential theories of the collapse of communism, regime outcomes, and the consolidation and quality of democracy.

I will start with a brief description of the key facts about democracy which include the dramatic and unpredicted shift in politics in 1989 and the subsequent “return to diversity”. I then turn to explanations for the fall of communism where I discuss both the standard account which emphasises a loss of legitimacy and the power of civil society as well as more complete theories that outline the micro-mechanisms of collapse and put weight on tipping points and organisational bank runs. I briefly digress to address allegations that scholarship on the region failed for not being able to predict the collapse.

The heart of the chapter discusses theories of regime outcomes – why some countries became democratic and others authoritarian. Many of the early responses to the changes emphasised proximate factors related to the course of the transition such as elite bargaining, the outcomes of initial elections, and external influence. However, recently a consensus has started to emerge that these factors have deeper roots in communist and pre-communist legacies including socio-economic modernisation, education, religion, and ethnic divisions.

I consider separately recent shifts in regime outcomes – particularly the colour revolutions as well as democratic backsliding – and whether their causes are different from the causes of the initial transitions. I also discuss the appearance of hybrid regimes that have found an equilibrium in between democracy and autocracy.

After considering these regime outcomes across the region, I turn more specifically to the countries of East Central Europe. Here I assess the multiple dimensions of democratic consolidation and the finding that democratic endurance coexists with weak civic engagement and institutional shortcomings. Finally, I turn to the various conceptions of democratic quality and

the contrast between the surprisingly positive evaluations that have emerged from scholars and the negative perceptions of most citizens. The chapter concludes with research frontiers.

Simple facts

To set the stage for the following sections, I begin with a few simple facts about democracy in the post-communist region. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 present these facts graphically. They show the Freedom House and Polity ratings of democracy in the region from the late 1980s to 2014. For new countries, their scores are linked to the scores of the countries from which they declared their independence. Three facts stand out.

First, countries in the communist bloc were among the most undemocratic in the world up to nearly the moment of transition. They shared more or less the same political system led by a communist party that held all power in politics and the economy. Human rights existed in name only and elections were always a charade. Despite retreating from the brutality of the Stalin era, few had truly liberalised. Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia were the states that stood out as somewhat more permissive in their treatment of civil society and independent economic initiatives, but even they still outlawed genuine opposition and fell short on standard measures of democracy.

Second, there was a swift, radical, and unpredicted shift in the politics of the satellite states in 1989 as the individual communist parties surrendered their monopoly on power. Poland was the

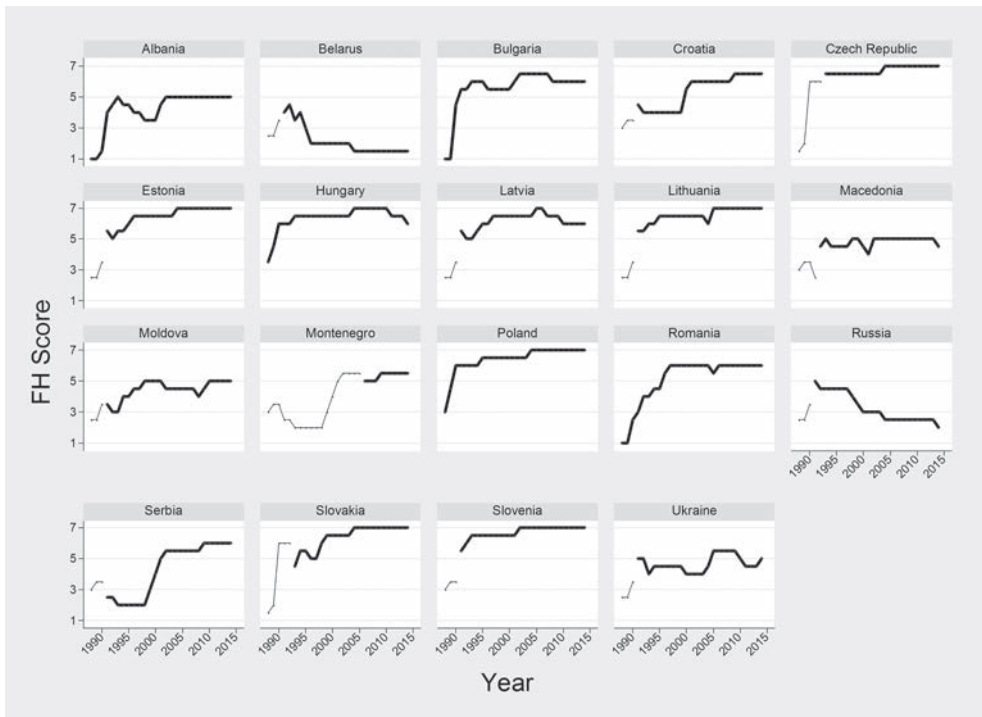


Figure 1.1 Freedom House scores

Note: These scores represent the average of Freedom House’s political rights and civil liberties scores. I have reversed the direction of the scores so that 7 represents most free and 1 least free. Thin lines indicate scores for the predecessor country and thick lines the successor country.

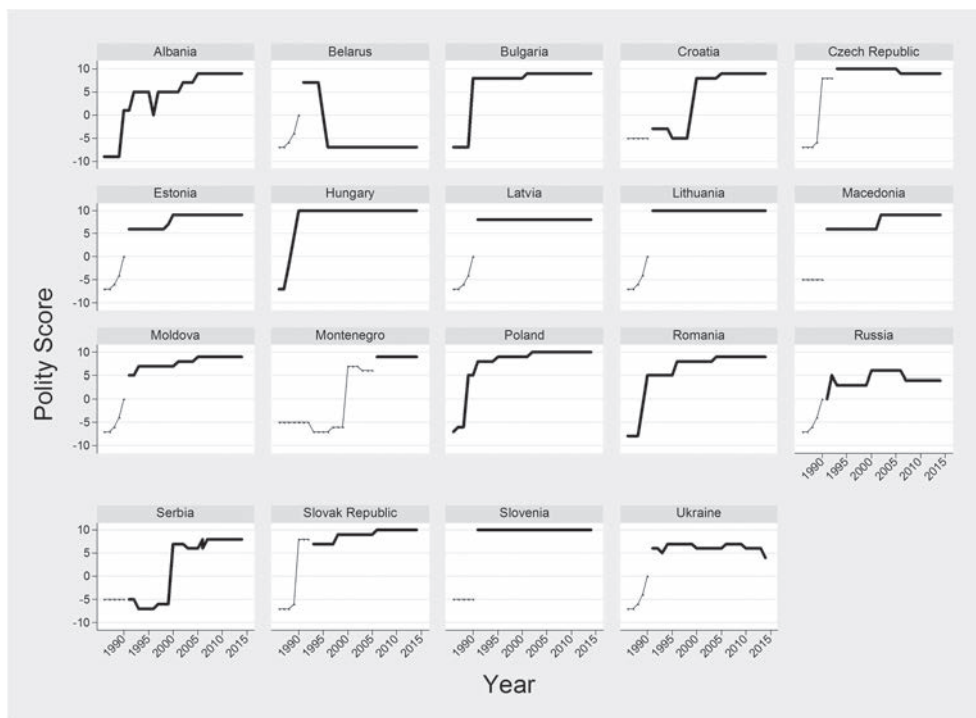


Figure 1.2 Polity scores

Note: Polity scores range from +10 (most democratic) to -10 (most autocratic). Thin lines indicate scores for the predecessor country and thick lines the successor country.

leader, holding semi-free elections in June 1989. Their example was quickly followed by the end of communist hegemony in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, with Yugoslavia and Albania joining along the way. Communist rule gave way soon afterward in the Soviet Union, which broke apart in 1991. Given the dismal status quo in the region, these changes almost always led to substantial democratisation with the exception of the new Central Asian states, which are not covered here.

Third, after this rapid change, the outcomes of these transitions were widely divergent. Indeed, the regime outcomes are arguably the most diverse of any region in the world. A number of states in the region very quickly became almost complete democracies, meaning that they received nearly the highest possible assessments from organisations like Freedom House and Polity. These states were largely on the western border of the region and include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia. Another group, largely on the eastern side of the region, barely budged from their undemocratic heritage; this group includes just about all of Central Asia (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan). Meanwhile, a number of countries had bumpier paths. Some experienced substantial problems but ultimately joined the first group, a pattern that describes Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, and Romania. A few of these – Albania, Macedonia, Moldova, and Ukraine – settled at a lower level of democracy or as hybrid regimes. Another group meanwhile looked to be democratising early in the transition but then fell back into a resolutely non-democratic equilibrium. This path applies to Belarus, Russia, and the Caucasus. In short, democracy has evolved in different ways across the region.

The fall of communism

Why did communism fall?³ The conventional wisdom about mechanisms goes something like this (see, for example, Chirot 1990–91; Dallin 1992): economic decay in the 1970s and 1980s undermined the legitimacy of the regimes which was premised on providing better living conditions. This in turn prompted leaders, particularly Gorbachev, to engage in reforms like *glasnost* and *perestroika* (Brown 1996; Almond 1999). These reforms failed because they did not address the fundamental problems of the economy (Kornai 1992). Their failure undermined the confidence of the regime and encouraged civil society. It was at this point that people power brought down the regime (Tismaneanu 1992). Interestingly, very few scholars mention the explanation most common among the lay public: Reagan’s military build-up.

But as Kalyvas (1999) points out, there is a large difference between decay – which can last for a long time – and breakdown. More specifically, dissatisfaction by itself could not overthrow the regime; genuine civil society as opposed to mass demonstrations played a small role in the actual revolutions (Solidarity in Poland would be the exception), and reformers like Gorbachev believed in communism to the very end. Indeed, while external observers were acutely aware of stagnation, most saw more important sources of stability.

A number of scholars have thus tried to propose stronger mechanisms for the collapse. Most prominent has been Bunce (1999). Her argument is that communist institutions were subversive – they at once created a unified public and divided elites. The institutions of communism homogenised citizens by giving them similar socio-economic positions and thus similar interests. For Bunce, it is no surprise that communism gave birth to a movement calling itself Solidarity. This explanation, however, only goes halfway because it does not account for the timing of the collapse. Bunce thus turns to a second process – borrowed from social movement theory – changes in the political opportunity structure. During the 1980s, a number of events combined to give the public the space to overthrow the regime. Specifically, leadership succession crises, the introduction of “great reforms” like *perestroika*, and the opening up of the international system gave citizens the opportunity to make 1989 an *annus mirabilis*.

A number of scholars have gone even deeper into the micro-mechanisms of these dynamics. On the elite side, a key work is Solnick’s (1999) *Stealing the State*. He argues that Gorbachev’s reforms exacerbated the weakness of bureaucratic control in the Soviet Union. As central direction declined, bureaucrats began to appropriate organisational assets for their own purposes, and this theft hollowed out the regime. Feedback effects accelerated the process as insiders grabbed what they could, lest they be left with nothing. Solnick calls this an “organisational bank run”, and it undid the power of the communist regime over the economy and the country. Roeder’s (1993) *Red Sunset* shows further how the form of the Communist Party made adaptation difficult. Reforms forced the party into competition, but it did not know how to compete. Members were so used to obeying orders from above that they had difficulty responding to criticisms from new actors.

But the elite side does not provide a full explanation. Even a weakened communist party overawed the small and disorganised dissident groups that existed; the dissidents more than anyone were aware of this power differential. Somehow a push from the public at large would be needed.

It is hard to ignore the role of nationalism in providing this push. Most of the transitions in the region involved some form of national liberation – whether it was escaping from the yoke of external domination in the case of the satellite states, or breaking free from a perceived dominating nationality in the case of the non-central republics of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Beissinger (2002) focuses on the process of collective mobilisation in the Soviet Union that led to declarations of sovereignty. He argues that structural features mattered – nationalities with better institutions, more resources, and larger grievances were more likely to mobilise – but, after

studying some 6,000 events, he finds that these events created their own momentum. There were tides of protest and early movers influenced later ones, so that by the end even the least well-situated groups were carried along on the wave.

These theories still have trouble explaining the individual-level calculations leading to the collapse because active protest carried significant risks and coordination was difficult. The main solution here is to invoke tipping point dynamics. Kuran (1991) argues that in deeply repressive regimes like the Soviet bloc, citizens are fearful of expressing their true opinions; they engage in preference falsification. While dissatisfaction with the regime may have been widespread, citizens never knew what their neighbours were thinking, and the regime exacerbated the problem by forcing citizens to publicly express their support for communism and exerting strict control over the media. Kuran argued that such situations are likely to lead to cascades and tipping points – when enough people gathered on the streets, others would follow (see also Lohmann 1994). So what was necessary was for enough people to go out without being arrested or shot. This happened with the loosening of controls and one-off focal events like the attack on a regime-sponsored parade in Czechoslovakia.

These effects played out equally at the international level. Once the opposition in Poland was able to secure relatively free elections without a crackdown or Soviet intervention, this emboldened the Hungarians, whose success in turn inspired the East Germans and so on. Garton Ash (1990: 78) memorably described these demonstration effects or snowballing in a remark to Václav Havel: “In Poland it took ten years, in Hungary ten months, in East Germany ten weeks: perhaps in Czechoslovakia it will take ten days!” His prediction was more or less correct, and Bulgaria and Romania completed the process about as quickly.

The unpredicted and unpredictable collapses

Were these revolutions inevitable and thus predictable? Few scholars saw the fall of communism coming and of those who arguably did, none thought it would come as early as 1989. Despite widespread acknowledgment of stagnation and decay in the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant emphasis in the literature, even as Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* and *perestroika*, was on the stability of these regimes.

The failure of the scholarly community to foresee the revolution has been used to criticise political scientific approaches to the region and to politics in general. Some argued merely that it reflected a widespread inability of experts to predict (Tetlock 2006), while others saw it as an indictment of the methods of normal social science (Gaddis 1992/93; Hopf 1993).

However, while the pre-revolution study of the region surely had its problems, the failure to predict these revolutions is not necessarily a symptom of the failures of social science or area studies. The reasons are both theoretical and practical.

Theoretically, although prediction is an important goal of social science and theories should ultimately be judged by their predictive accuracy, social science should not be held to the standard of making predictions of the form: event X will happen at time Y. Social scientists are not soothsayers. Popper pointed out that even physics makes very few predictions of this type (the exceptions are events like solar eclipses). Instead, social science theories will typically make conditional predictions of the form: if X occurs, then Y is likely to follow.

The second reason is that we have good explanations for why the regime collapse came so suddenly and unpredictably. These are the “tipping point” and “bank run” explanations described in the previous section. Kuran (1991) thus argues that the timing of such revolutions are almost inherently unpredictable.

This is not to say that scholars were blameless. Hanson (2003) and Almond (1999) have argued that Sovietologists were too much in thrall to either totalitarian or revisionist theories which blinded them to the importance of ideology and left them unable to understand a reformer like Gorbachev who could both believe in and undermine communist ideology, the essential glue holding the system together. Nevertheless, these arguments are less about the failures of social science than the specifics of pre-1989 debates in the field.

Explanations of regime outcomes

Though the communist regimes fell throughout the region, the outcomes of the collapse were extremely varied. King (2000), quoting Rothschild, calls it a “return to diversity” and Kitschelt (2003) adds that no other region in the world features as much diversity of regime types. The obvious question then is why some countries became democratic and others did not, and why there were subsequent exits and entrances to the democratic and authoritarian categories. Explanations for this diversity focus alternatively on events and decisions that took place in the wake of communism’s fall and those that emphasise the influence of communism and even the pre-communist era (Kitschelt 2003). I will consider each of these approaches in turn.

Proximate factors

Proximate explanations emphasise the break that took place in 1989 and 1991. While few argue that these events created a tabula rasa, many do point to the openness of this period. Thus, Bunce and Csanádi (1993) highlight the high degree of uncertainty as both interests and institutions were in a great deal of flux. Elster et al. (1998) use the metaphor of rebuilding a boat at sea. Offe (1991) meanwhile describes the simultaneity of tasks confronting politicians – the triple transition of creating democratic institutions, a market economy, and a new state – which put large burdens on their capabilities.

Other scholars took as their jumping-off point the transitology approach which emphasised the importance and agency of elite actors. These arguments saw transitions as proceeding from negotiations between the regime and opposition, as had arguably happened in Latin America and Southern Europe (for contrasting perspectives on these comparisons, see Schmitter and Karl [1994] and Bunce [1995]).

The most influential version of this approach was Przeworski (1991), who argued that democratisation began with splits in the regime but then required moderates in the regime to unite with moderates in the opposition to isolate regime hardliners and radicals in the opposition. Together they could agree on compromises or pacts which would not provoke hardliners to repress. In this spirit, Roeder (1994) claimed that a balance of power between the regime and opposition was key for democratisation in the post-Soviet states since it induced both sides to compromise (see also Bova 1991). The presence of successful roundtable talks in many countries seemed to confirm this theory (Elster 1996).

Most scholars of the region, however, ultimately came to reject this approach. They maintain instead that compromise was the wrong strategy and that real progress came through mass mobilisation and uncompromising demands (Bunce 2003; King 2000). Fish (1998a, 1998b) found that the best predictor of democracy and reform was the outcome of the first relatively free elections – if the opposition won, then democracy was highly likely, while a victory for the former communists meant continued authoritarianism.

McFaul (2002) echoes and expands on this argument. He argues that the best path is for the opposition to dominate and dictate a democratic outcome along with radical economic reforms.

Conversely, balanced transitions typically lead to “partial democracy or protracted and oftentimes violent confrontations” (his main examples are Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine), while imbalances in favour of the regime lead to autocracies (McFaul 2002: 223). Anomalies to these patterns can be explained by controversies over borders which propelled nationalist leaders to power and set back democracy in Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Croatia, and proximity to the West which helped Bulgaria and Romania.

Other studies have made claims for the effect of the type or mode of transition.⁴ Munck and Leff (1997) thus contend that whether the fall of the regime took place through negotiation, extrication, or rupture affected the transition and the consolidation of democracy (for another account see Huntington [1991]). It is not clear, however, that the expectations of these theories have been borne out or that these factors can be separated from others. Linz and Stepan (1992) meanwhile argue that in ethnically diverse societies the correct sequencing of regional and national elections was paramount in order to develop national identities before regional and ethnic ones.

An important implication of many proximate approaches is that democracy can be crafted by elites provided they make the correct choices (Di Palma 1990). Besides willingness to compromise or press demands, a key place where democracy could be crafted is in the choice of new institutions. Many scholars have noticed that countries that chose parliamentary regimes were more democratic than those who chose presidential or even super-presidential regimes (Commander and Frye 1999; Ishiyama and Velten 1998; Lijphart and Waisman 1996).⁵ Parliamentarism, particularly when combined with proportional representation, gave representation to more groups, encouraged coalition-making, and limited the power of executives to act unilaterally.

Others put weight on the decision to engage in market reforms. Early accounts, drawing on the Latin American experience, predicted that reforms would undermine democracy because of their unpopularity (Przeworski 1991). After the fact, it became apparent that reform actually supported democratisation and vice versa in the post-communist region at least in part because of the economic failures of the *ancien régime* (Bunce 2001).

A number of scholars have emphasised international factors. Indeed, in many statistical analyses proximity to a Western capital is the strongest predictor of democracy. Kopstein and Reilly (2000) have provided the most sophisticated version of these explanations. They distinguish between stocks (a country’s neighbours) and flows (the movement of resources and people between countries). They find that both good neighbours and interaction with the West have a positive effect on democracy. Shleifer and Treisman (2014) concur in emphasising how countries have converged to the non-communist countries closest to their borders: Central Europe towards Germany, the Baltics towards Finland, and the Caucasus towards Turkey.

An additional mechanism for these effects is the efforts of external actors, particularly the EU, to promote democracy. Vachudova (2005), for example, distinguishes between the passive leverage described earlier and the active leverage of conditionality (also Grabbe 2006). Schimmelfennig and Scholtz (2008) provide statistical support for the idea that the political conditionality of EU membership has strong and positive effects on democracy even controlling for transnational exchanges and development. Kelley (2004) shows how external efforts were often effective in improving minority rights. Jacoby (2006) adds that these external influences almost always require some level of domestic support and so coalitions between external and domestic actors are more likely to bear fruit than either non-engaged inspiration or external fiat. The best conditions for external influence are thus divided governments in countries that are plausible candidates for membership in international organisations. Because of the importance of conditionality, some predicted backsliding once EU accession was achieved, but Levitz and Pop-Eleches (2010) argue that this did not occur, at least in the early stages.

These proximate explanations have been criticised in a number of ways. Kitschelt (2003) believes that they tell us too little. The key independent variables are too close to the outcomes. How much are we learning if we say that democracy emerged because democratic actors were more powerful? We want to understand why those actors were stronger, which leads us deeper into the past. Further, the results of the transition seem to be too ordered for them to be purely the result of choice. There must be structural forces at work for the democratic gradient to be as strong as it is with democracies on the Western side of the region and autocracies further east. Proximate factors may not be as associated with agency as one might expect.

Historical factors

These criticisms led many scholars to look for deeper roots of democracy. Some of the earliest reactions to the fall of communism took this view and were characterised by a sense of gloom. Thus, Jowitt (1992: 304, 293) pointed to a Leninist legacy characterised by “fragmented, mutually suspicious societies with little religio-cultural support for tolerant and individually self-reliant behavior” which would favour “an authoritarian, not a liberal democratic capitalist, way of life.” Sztompka (1993) referred to “civilisational incompetence” in the region, and Janos (1991: 111) saw military societies leading to democracy as “a dream, or mere façade”.

Contrary to these cultural approaches, those focusing on social and economic factors were more optimistic. Countries in the region were among the richest and most educated in the world which had not yet democratised, and modernisation theory predicts that countries with higher incomes, more educated citizens, and greater urbanisation are more likely to become or remain democratic (Przeworski et al. 2000; Boix and Stokes 2003). This explanation also appears to fit the democratic gradient across the post-communist region: richer countries have performed better (if one accounts for oil wealth as a hindrance to democracy, the fit is even better). Kurtz and Barnes (2002) find evidence of a more class-based version of modernisation theory: a large agricultural sector appears to hinder democratisation.

Pop-Eleches (2014) challenges this explanation. He notes first of all that post-communist countries democratically underperformed relative to their high incomes. Moreover, in his statistical analysis, GDP per capita and education have little effect on democratisation in the post-communist region. He attributes this to the distortions in centrally planned industrialisation. As a consequence, not only did post-communist countries suffer a deficit in civil involvement and political participation, but the deficits had a unique class bias. The middle classes, who are the strongest democrats, tend not to participate in politics, while the lower classes, who are less enthusiastic democrats, are more likely to participate.

While there is still debate over the influence of modernisation, many scholars have turned to other historical legacies that explain democratic outcomes. Some look back to the pre-communist era and isolate religious and cultural factors. The most successful cases of democratisation have Protestant and Catholic traditions which arguably lead to more individualism, tolerance, and separation of Church and State – all factors that encourage peaceful competition and alternations of power. Conversely, a number of scholars have noted the negative impact of Islam, which according to Fish (2002) is due not just to the absence of the aforementioned factors, but to subordination of women.

Ethnic diversity is another demographic factor that appeared to impede democracy, not just in countries wracked by civil war like Yugoslavia or the Caucasus, but also in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia where it gave impetus to nationalist parties. The Baltics faced a more distinct problem in dealing with a Russian minority and they sometimes pursued illiberal policies in a generally democratic framework (Roeder 2004). Fish and Kroenig (2006), however,

challenge this conclusion and argue that diversity per se does not impede democracy although conflict does.

Kitschelt and his collaborators (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Kitschelt 2003) emphasise the bureaucratic legacies of these countries. He argues that the early adoption of a formal-rational bureaucracy was a key precondition for later democratisation. Others emphasise stateness issues, in particular the problems that brand-new countries faced in having to create institutions from scratch (Linz and Stepan 1996; Ganev 2005). Fortin (2012) in fact names state strength as close to a necessary condition for democracy in the region.

Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006) put forward one of the more rigorous accounts of pre-communist legacies. They focus on the amount and content of pre-communist schooling. Countries where most of the population was literate before communism and where education was imbued with nationalist content were much less hospitable to communism and more supportive of the anti-communist opposition in 1989. This sort of schooling gave citizens values and ideas of legitimacy at odds with communism and made communism appear as a step backward, an alien and anti-modern imposition. Horowitz (2003) takes a similar tack in arguing that countries with “frustrated national ideals”, that is those with high levels of pre-communist economic development and political independence, are more likely to embrace democracy.

Pop-Eleches (2007) provides one of the most systematic tests of these varied theories (though to be fair almost all of these works do include multivariate statistical tests). He uses time-series cross-national models to compare the effects of cultural/religious heritage, social conditions/modernisation, and economic legacies with more proximate explanations like initial elections, institutional choices, and external influence. His findings, however, are nuanced. Legacies as a whole have a considerable effect (much greater than the effect of proximate variables which are typically favoured in tournament of variables set-ups) and this effect actually becomes stronger over time, but no one legacy has universal effects.

Instead, he claims that different legacies have effects on different aspects of democracy. Thus, the adoption of democratic institutions (measured by Polity scores) is related to urbanisation, a non-Muslim heritage, longer statehood, and less distorted economies. By contrast, the move from formal institutions to actual civil and political rights (proxied by Freedom House scores) is related to Western Christianity, ethnic divisions, interwar statehood, and urbanisation. Finally, democratic deepening (which includes vibrant intermediate institutions and a responsive bureaucratic apparatus and is represented by the Nations in Transit scores) is related again to Western Christianity and ethnic diversity.

These deeper accounts are typically criticised for lacking mechanisms or for not adequately testing their mechanisms (Kitschelt 2003), though some suffer from this problem more than others. It is also difficult to separate individual legacies, many of which are highly collinear. The statistical methods used to make these claims, moreover, rely more on association than any stronger inferential tools like instrumental variables or natural experiments, a problem which applies equally to proximate explanations (Frye 2012). Nevertheless, something like a consensus has emerged on the importance of legacies, though questions remain about exactly which legacies and how they function.

The colour revolutions, hybrid regimes, and backsliding

By the late 1990s, many scholars believed that there were two types of transitions (Vachudova and Snyder 1996) leading to two sorts of outcomes (Kitschelt 2003) – the consolidated democracies and the autocracies. The middle category seemed to be emptying out as countries gravitated to one equilibrium or another. The strongest support for this thesis came from places like Russia,

Belarus, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which looked liberal and democratic early in the transition, but then evolved in an authoritarian direction. Yet, events along with theoretical innovations have called this view into doubt.

In the first case, a number of countries that had seemed to have settled into the authoritarian category moved out of it. Slovakia, admittedly a softer form of authoritarianism, was the pioneer in 1998, but it was followed by similar transitions in Croatia and Serbia, and then later by Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. These so-called colour revolutions have provoked a considerable amount of theorising.⁶

Bunce and Wolchik (2011) describe a new form of transition which they call the electoral model. They argue that where opposition groups are able to unify, run an ambitious campaign, conduct voter registration and turnout drives, collaborate with civil society, and oversee parallel vote tabulations, they can force out authoritarian leaders at election time. This model is modular and has been transferred from one country to another (for another modular model see Beissinger 2007). The question is whether these electoral revolutions have been real transformations. Arguably they have in Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia; the cases of Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan are less clear (Kalandadze and Orenstein 2009; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2014).

A more sceptical view has been put forward by Hale (2015), who describes a general patronal politics syndrome in many post-Soviet states. These states are characterised by presidents with significant formal powers as well as informal powers based on patronage. He argues that such states are prone to regime cycles. Most of the time it behoves elites to unite behind the president, but at certain moments – a leader's death, planned successions, or elections – a lame-duck syndrome induces contestation among elites. When this contestation is resolved – typically in accord with the incumbent's popularity – the winner then consolidates their rule with the considerable resources at their disposal. We thus see cycles of consolidation and contestation within a generally authoritarian setting.

While Hale focuses on the collective action incentives among elites – whether to line up behind the incumbent or defect – Tucker (2012) emphasises collective action among the public. He argues that electoral fraud lowers the cost of participating and raises the likelihood of success by providing a focal point for action. This approach emphasises the fragility of these regimes, but it is cautious about expecting democracy to follow once a new regime is put in place.

Other scholars have challenged the twofold division of democracy and autocracy by developing a third regime type, which has alternatively been called a hybrid regime or competitive or electoral authoritarianism. Levitsky and Way (2010: 5) define competitive authoritarian regimes as those where “democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents.” The problems are less electoral fraud than unfair distribution of state resources, biased media coverage, and harassment of the opposition. Bribery, co-optation, and subtle forms of persecution are more common than out-and-out prohibitions of the opposition. There are tensions within this regime type because democratic rules remain in place and can serve as a focal point for protest, leading to the revolutions or cycles described earlier. The strength of links with the West along with the organisational power of the government are other key factors determining the trajectory of these regimes.

A final issue here is the explanation for countries once counted clearly in the democratic camp who appear to have regressed. Part of this issue – whether even the acknowledged democracies are functioning well – will be considered in the next sections. Here the challenge is to explain the undemocratic and illiberal practices which have taken root in Hungary after Orbán's election in 2010 (Bánkuti et al. 2012), but have also recently been seen in Poland and Slovakia. They include attacks on constitutional courts and the rule of law, violations of civil rights, restrictions on the

independence of the media, and policies designed to weaken opposition parties and strengthen the executive. These problems have been linked with the economic crisis, European integration, and migration and are arguably emerging in Western Europe as well. This regression may well be the key issue for the future of democracy in the region, but it has not yet received the sustained scholarly attention that it deserves.

Democratic consolidation in East Central Europe

In the following sections, I focus on the more democratic countries of East Central Europe – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, which are widely seen as the democratic leaders of the region. Given the relative success of these countries, scholars have focused their attention on the questions of consolidation and quality. Are these democracies consolidated and are they of high quality?

The basic idea of consolidation is that a democracy is consolidated when it becomes the only game in town. This could be interpreted most simply in terms of the survival or duration of democracy, famously in the two-turnover test – a democracy is consolidated when power is transferred from government to opposition twice. The countries considered here have easily passed this test. Indeed, some argue that they pass it too easily – elections are close to a lottery (Innes 2002) and incumbents almost always lose (Roberts 2008).⁷

Most scholars, however, have focused on lower-level indicators of consolidation such as attitudes (citizens believe in democracy and hold democratic attitudes), behaviour (citizens act democratically by participating in politics and forgoing violence), and institutions (countries have a functioning economy and state apparatus) (Schedler 2001; Linz and Stepan 1996).

Rose and collaborators (Rose et al. 1998) have been the most prolific writers on the attitudinal dimensions of consolidation thanks to their New Democracies Barometer series of surveys in the region. Rose argues in favour of the Churchill hypothesis, that what is important is support for democracy relative to authoritarian rule (following Churchill's claim that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others). He finds that there is little endorsement of non-democratic alternatives, whether a return to communism or rule by the army, a strong leader, or a monarch. Citizens further typically do not expect democracy to be overthrown or parliament to be suspended anytime soon.⁸

Recent and comprehensive work by Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2014), however, reveals that support for democracy is significantly weaker in the post-communist region than elsewhere and that this weakness is connected with communist legacies. Even Rose et al. (1998) find that citizens throughout the region are very dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and have little trust in institutions, producing a phenomenon that they call “broke-backed democracy”.

Others focus on behavioural measures of consolidation, which include such phenomena as violence, rejection of elections, and transgressions of authority. Overt political violence and intimidation are relatively rare in East Central Europe. The same applies to opposition parties rejecting elections, though little research has explored these indicators. Anti-system parties do exist in these countries, but the communist successor party in the Czech Republic is one of the few that has consistently polled well enough to affect politics and it does so mainly by complicating coalition formation. This problem, however, may be becoming more widespread, considering parties like Jobbik in Hungary or Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia in Slovakia.

More attention has been paid to civil society which Putnam et al. (1993) have linked with the functioning of democracy. Howard (2003) has demonstrated the weakness of civil society in the region – citizens join voluntary associations to a much lower extent than other regions of the world. Bernhard and Kaya (2012), however, reject this blanket characterisation and argue that the

picture is more diverse, particularly if one considers actual protests instead of survey responses. Conversely, Kopecký and Mudde (2003) find something worse – manifestations of uncivil society which includes skinheads in Hungary and the Self-Defence party in Poland.

The region also scores poorly on other more directly political aspects of participation. Voter turnout has declined substantially from high levels after the transition, but Páček et al. (2009) and Kostadinova (2003) argue that voters are aware of the importance of different elections and act accordingly. Other forms of direct participation like signing petitions or participating in boycotts are also low (Bernhard and Karakoç 2007). Pop-Eleches (2014) finds further that well-situated individuals are less likely to participate, which is worrisome given that social status correlates with support for democracy.

A third aspect of consolidation is institutional or structural. Schedler (2001) sees levels of development and poverty as important because citizens need a minimal level of well-being to participate effectively. Though countries in the region suffered extremely severe transitional recessions, most have recovered since then and improvements in standards of living are often obscured by measured data (Schleifer and Treisman 2014). Nevertheless, poverty and inequality have increased dramatically since 1989 and suffered another blow with the recent economic crisis. Linz and Stepan (1996) emphasise rule of law, a functioning state apparatus, and economic society. All three areas have received extensive attention from scholars with most criticism highlighting corruption and weak rule of law.

Stepping away from standard indicators, a number of authors have pointed to illiberal trends in the region. Krastev (2007) delivered an early warning about political polarisation, rejection of consensual politics, and organised intolerance across the region. He saw these trends as a reaction to democracy without choices where liberal reforms were introduced without public support. Dawson and Hanley (2016) similarly argue that liberalism rests on a narrow base and observe that leaders are bending democratic rules in addition to acting in illiberal ways.

Given these problems, however, it is an open question why these countries are as democratic and stable as they are. Schneider (2009) argues that not only has the region reached high levels of consolidation, it has done so far more quickly than any other recently transitioning region. Perhaps values trump behaviour and institutions. International institutions like the EU and NATO have likely played a consolidating role through conditionality, aid, and advice (Vachudova 2005; Whitehead 2001). Economic growth has arguably helped, as has the absence of alternative ideologies.

While consolidation was a fashionable topic at the turn of the millennium, it has since lost much of its appeal. One of the problems is the absence of a standard definition of consolidation and an accompanying set of indicators. Many of the elements of consolidation described earlier have received considerable attention, but there are few larger comparative studies of consolidation that have identified the relative degree or even the causes of consolidation (for an exception see Schneider 2009). Scholars instead have turned to either explanations of the persistence of democracy or to the quality of democracy.

The quality of democracy

Even for countries that fit well into the democratic category, scholars and citizens have expressed doubts about how well democracy is functioning. In a textbook treatment, Sakwa (1999: 116–117) argued that the “gulf between formal and substantive democracy is in most places the defining feature of post-communist democratization”. These doubts have recently been summed up in the concept of democratic quality. Nevertheless, scholars have not come to an agreement either on the right way of defining democratic quality or on their assessments of the quality of democracy in post-communist Europe.

In some ways these studies overlap with work on democratisation and democratic consolidation. Thus, it is common to use Freedom House or Polity scores as a measure of democratic quality. There are two concerns with this practice. First, quality of democracy should arguably be different from democracy itself. Second, some post-communist countries have received perfect scores on these measures, while they clearly do not have perfect democracies. Several elements of democratic consolidation like support for democracy and participation are also frequently included in studies of democratic quality, blurring the distinction there as well.

A number of scholars have attempted to develop comprehensive assessments of democratic quality. The Democracy Barometer considers three elements of democracy – freedom, control, and equality – which are formed out of a large number of lower-level indicators (Bühlmann et al. 2011). According to these measures, the post-communist region has shown the most improvement of any region between 1990 and 2007 and receives higher ratings than Latin America and Asia, but less than the established democracies (Bühlmann 2011). The largest improvements are in transparency, while the region performs poorly in rule of law and participation.

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014) considers a broader set of categories – stateness, political participation, rule of law, stability of democratic institutions, and political and social integration – using 18 different indicators. They similarly find that the post-communist region performs relatively well, with all the countries in East Central Europe except Hungary receiving their highest ranking of “democracies in consolidation”, and the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia figuring in their top 10 of 129 countries. Berg-Schlosser (2004) also finds relatively high quality among the countries of East Central Europe, using off-the-shelf measures of governance quality, spending priorities, socio-economic performance, social inequalities, and political unrest.

The Nations in Transit index is Freedom House’s attempt to go beyond their standard political rights and civil liberties scores by considering the seven areas of national democratic governance, electoral process, civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, and corruption (Freedom House 2016). Although these assessments do not allow comparisons outside the post-communist region, they do deliver the disturbing news of a substantial decline in democratic quality in East Central Europe since its peak in 2006, with much of the decline driven by Hungary. Specific worries about the region include illiberal leaders and rising xenophobia.

While most assessments of quality are based on multiple criteria, Roberts (2009) has developed a concept that focuses entirely on citizen rule. He argues that the purpose of democratic institutions is to give citizens power, but it is often unclear if they actually do so. He finds that citizens in these countries do have a reasonable level of control – they hold politicians accountable for poor performance at elections and governments mostly respond to public opinion – but parties often present ambiguous programs and do not follow through on their promises.

Surprisingly, the main attempts to produce comprehensive assessments of democratic quality in the region deliver relatively positive results. This contrasts with domestic perceptions which are almost entirely negative. These differences might be explained by comparison effects – countries in East Central Europe are doing better than most other new democracies, but citizens compare their countries to Western Europe – or by the different criteria used by scholars and citizens. The gap may also be due to a number of negative phenomena considered later in this volume such as weak parties (Sikk in this volume), populism (Mudde in this volume), corruption (Kostadinova and Spirova in this volume), and inequality, which are not always included in assessments of democratic quality. More disturbingly, there is growing evidence that quality is declining in the region and so these positive assessments may be out of date.

Research frontiers

Discussions of regime type have been the dominant form of writing on the post-communist region, but they have arguably run their course.⁹ Few scholars are still writing about the reasons communism fell and the causes of initial regime outcomes. In fact, it is hard to see where new hypotheses, methods, or data would come from. This is a well-tilled field and arguably new insights are more likely to come from historians excavating the details of the transition (for an example, see Krapfl 2013) than from multivariate methods where the cause is overdetermined and leverage for separating legacies and choices is hard to come by.

Work will continue on current regime trajectories. One mystery is the seeming backsliding of countries like Hungary and Poland that appeared to have achieved democratic consolidation. Is it simply a perfect storm of economic problems, government party scandals, and EU ineffectiveness that have produced these problems, which are in any case fleeting? Or are there deeper causes and more long-lasting effects? (Kraev 2007; Dawson and Hanley 2016). In short, how worried should we be about democracy in East Central Europe?

Conversely, is there any light at the end of the tunnel in autocratic regimes like Russia, Belarus, and the Caucasus? Celebrations about the colour revolutions in this part of the region appear to be premature, but some like Motyl (2016) see cracks in the edifice of Russian authoritarianism. What would have to happen for these regimes to move in a democratic direction? Are Russia's attempts to destabilise its neighbours a sign of strength or a last gasp to divert attention in the face of a declining economy?

More positively, there is much work to be done on how these regimes function. There is considerable divergence here between scholars studying the democratic and authoritarian parts of the region. For more authoritarian states or hybrid regimes, the frontier is on the multiple ways that leaders keep themselves in power (Hale 2015). How do they deploy resources through political organisations, the state apparatus, and the media in order to keep opposition weak and divided while fighting off external influence?

For the more democratic countries, the frontier is representation – who governs and with what results. Much of this work can be put under the heading of democratic quality with the caveat that undemocratic practices like corruption (Kostadinova and Spirova in this volume), discrimination against minorities (Stroschein in this volume), politicisation of the bureaucracy (Meyer-Sahling in this volume), and inequality threaten this quality. In this sense, understanding politics is converging with research traditions on the established democracies.

This raises a final question of whether there are actually two Europes (Western and Eastern or EU and non-EU) or even three (Western, good Eastern, and bad Eastern). Donald Rumsfeld saw the new NATO members from the East as bringing a new and better perspective on democracy and democratisation. The recent immigration crisis, however, has shown a different and less tolerant face to post-communist democracy. Hanley (2014) claims interestingly that it is now Western Europe which is converging with the practices of Eastern Europe rather than the other way around. Developments starting in 1989 would have thus come full circle.

Notes

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- 2 Gans-Morse (2004) found 131 articles on post-communist transitions in only ten journals over the years 1991–2003.
- 3 An excellent summary of theories can be found in Holmes (1997).

- 4 For details on the transition process in individual countries, see Dawisha and Parrot (1997a, 1997b, 1997c).
- 5 See Zielonka (2001) for a series of excellent country studies on the adoption of new institutions. Given the strong tendency of former Soviet countries (except for the Baltics) to adopt presidential and semi-presidential systems and the satellite countries to adopt parliamentarism, this choice might be viewed more as a structural force than a choice. See Frye (1997) for more on the origins of presidential institutions.
- 6 The term “colour” comes from the fact that the events in Ukraine were called the Orange Revolution, those in Georgia the Rose Revolution, and those in Kyrgyzstan the Tulip Revolution.
- 7 A caveat is that recent events in Hungary have caused some observers to downgrade its democratic status.
- 8 Miller et al. (1998) confirm these conclusions in a separate survey where they find that support for liberal and democratic values the region (as opposed to nationalist ones) was almost indistinguishable from the UK.
- 9 In an early review of literature on the region, Kubicek (2000) finds that about 15 per cent of articles focused on the democratic transition.

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