Belated Transitions in South Eastern Europe

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Introduction

When communist regimes began falling in the autumn of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, this wave also included Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Albania, the latter two of which were outside the Soviet sphere of influence. However, strikingly, the countries of the region were late-comers in comparison to Central Europe and the process was protracted and difficult. Bulgaria and Romania overthrew long-ruling dictators in November and December 1989, just a few weeks after East Germany and Czechoslovakia. However, in Yugoslavia, there were no mass protests against communist rule, with the partial exception of Slovenia, and the ruling party fractured along republican lines, organising multi-party elections throughout 1990, without surrendering power in some republics until much later (especially Serbia and Montenegro). In Albania, the mass protests began only in 1990, and it would take nearly two years for free and fair elections that would see a defeat of the incumbent socialist Party of Labour.

Even after the first multi-party elections in South Eastern Europe, semi-authoritarian rule persisted for most of the 1990s to a greater extent than in Central Europe. Some of these semi-authoritarian rulers were part of the communist nomenclature which had managed to transition into the post-communist period, such as Ion Iliescu in Romania or Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, whereas in other countries the new “democratic” leaders (usually also belonging to the communist nomenclature at some point) displayed authoritarian tendencies, such as Franjo Tudjman in Croatia or Sali Berisha in Albania. In the context of the Yugoslav disintegration, these authoritarian systems were closely intertwined with the wars beginning in 1991 and the instrumental use of nationalism.

A second wave of democratic transitions took place between 1996 and 2000 in Romania, Serbia, and Croatia, which brought opposition candidates to power who pursued a clear policy of democratic reforms and European Union (EU) integration. This delay in comparison to Central Europe has translated into a delayed accession process to the EU. Slovenia was able to join with the big bang enlargement of 2004, whereas Romania and Bulgaria joined only in 2007, followed by Croatia in 2013. The other countries of the so-called Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo) remain at varying stages of the integration process.
Since the mid-2000s, there has been a wave of democratic reversals, as a new generation of semi-authoritarian rulers has come to power, from Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia in 2006 to Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska (the predominately Serb entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina). Thus, the process of democratisation appears reversible and all indicators suggest that most countries in South Eastern Europe remain examples of unconsolidated democracies.

This chapter will explore the nature of this difficult transition and examine key explanations offered in the literature. An important preliminary observation is that the different trajectory of communism in Yugoslavia and Albania (compared to the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe), plus the delayed and partially violent nature of the transitions, has resulted in the countries of the so-called Western Balkans (a term first used to describe former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia, plus Albania) being analysed and studied separately from other post-communist countries, including Romania and Bulgaria. Furthermore, the different paths to EU accession have entrenched this particular configuration of the region, and this has resulted in a paucity of cross-regional comparison. Thus, there is less of a unified literature on South Eastern Europe, but often a focus on the post-Yugoslav countries, including Albania. For instance, neither the two post-communist countries of the region (Bulgaria and Romania) nor the two non-communist South Eastern European countries (Turkey and Greece) tend to be included in comparative studies. Slovenia’s relatively peaceful path towards independence, devoid of authoritarian episodes, has also meant that the country is often considered together with the Central European states that entered the EU in 2004, and not with its former fellow Yugoslav republics.

This chapter focuses on the post-Yugoslav republics, but also considers the wider post-communist South Eastern European context and thus seeks to identify not just post-Yugoslav particularities of transition, but also highlights commonalities with other countries. In order to capture the particular nature of the transition in South Eastern Europe, this chapter will address three questions:

1. What explains the later end of communist rule in South Eastern Europe as opposed to Central Europe?
2. What caused the persistence of semi-authoritarian rule during most of the 1990s?
3. What explains the structural and long-term difficulties in the consolidation of democracy in South Eastern Europe?

In answering these questions, the main approaches in the scholarly debate will be considered. The chapter will conclude by identifying directions for future research.

Explaining the late end of communist rule

It is hard to identify a single unifying explanation for the delayed collapse of communist rule in South Eastern Europe, as the four communist regimes of the regions displayed a large degree of variety. Albania and Romania constituted probably the most repressive types of communist rule in Europe, whereas Yugoslavia had been, with a few exceptions, the most liberal communist system. On the other hand, both Yugoslavia and Albania were not under Soviet control, thus Soviet policies of glasnost, perestroika and the renouncement of the Brezhnev Doctrine by Gorbachev in 1989 had little direct impact on the two countries.

The delay in the fall of communism in Albania and Yugoslavia thus could be explained in part by the lack of dependency on the Soviet Union. However, the communist regimes struggled with similar challenges as elsewhere, such as decreasing economic productivity, grievances among the population (as far as they could be visible in a country such as Albania), a growing
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legitimacy deficit, the death of dominant long-time rulers (Tito in 1980, Hoxha in 1985), and persistent economic crisis, expressed in shortages and a decline in citizens’ quality of life. The survival of the regimes in Albania and Yugoslavia, however, did not rest on an external power for military and economic support. Protests and opposition could similarly not direct their grievances towards an external actor, which had closely linked anti-communist protest and anti-Soviet and anti-Russian sentiment elsewhere and facilitated a powerful combination of nationalist and democratic grievances.

Indeed, late communist rulers in both Yugoslavia and Albania could brush aside the Soviet reform movement as irrelevant for their countries. However, by early 1990, Yugoslavia and Albania were the only countries of Central and Eastern Europe which had not committed themselves to multi-party elections. As such, the system of government appeared increasingly anachronistic. In the case of Yugoslavia, the pressure for political liberalisation came from Slovenia, which had been a more liberal republic within Yugoslavia, with a well-developed civil society and critical public by the late 1980s. Here, critical media (Mladina), artists (Neue Slowenische Kunst), and intellectuals lobbied for a political opening and a reform of the Yugoslav system (Silber and Little 1996).

A unifying feature of all four South Eastern European countries under communist rule was the relative weakness of dissident groups. In Albania and Romania, this was largely due to the particularly repressive nature of the regime. In Bulgaria, the regime was less oppressive, but opposition to communist rule was nonetheless marginal and had fewer prominent members than in countries of Central Europe, such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Poland. In Yugoslavia, the relatively liberal nature of the regime provided a ‘safety valve’, thus criticism of the government was possible and widespread, yet organised dissent was curtailed. However, by the late 1980s, there had been rising dissident movements in Slovenia and Serbia, although the different priorities prevented the emergence of a unified Yugoslav dissident movement. Thus, critics of communist rule in Serbia focused on criticising the decentralisation of the country and disadvantages Serbs were perceived to experience, whereas in Slovenia, the authoritarian nature of the Yugoslav system was the main rallying point of opposition.

Persistence of semi-authoritarian rule

Questions of stateness and the status of minorities facilitated new or old governments to mobilise nationalism and retain authoritarian practices. This pattern was particularly pertinent in the post-Yugoslav space, but also identifiable in other cases, such as Romania and Slovakia (Fisher 2006, Stroschein 2014).

In Romania, as in Slovakia, the Hungarian minority was instrumentalised by authoritarian leaders as a threat that helped justify authoritarian rule. The Iliescu government in Romania also drew on the communist nomenclature. In Serbia and Croatia, the state of war between 1991 and 1995, and for Serbia in 1998–1999, allowed not only for more repressive policies towards the opposition; it also resulted in the public space being dominated by war, atrocities (real and invented), and nationalist propaganda that benefited the incumbents.

In Romania, the defeat of the Iliescu government in 1996 was based on a broad democratic coalition challenging the incumbent and the decreasing salience of the perceived threat from the Hungarian minority (Gallagher 2005). A similar transition occurred in Slovakia in 1998, and in Croatia and Serbia in 2000. In Croatia, the death of the dominant figure of the 1990s, Franjo Tudjman, deprived the ruling Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) of their leader, and the end of the wars and the peaceful reintegration of the last Croatian territory by 1998 robbed the government of the ability to mobilise along nationalist lines as had been the case at earlier
elections. Instead, corruption and mismanagement prevailed in the electoral campaign (Gagnon 2004). Serbia followed suit the same year. Following the lost war in Kosovo in 1999, economic hardship, and increasing authoritarianism, Slobodan Milošević was overthrown in mass protests following contested elections with considerable Western support for the opposition (Spoerri 2014, Bunce and Wolchik 2011).

Authoritarian patterns were not limited to countries with significant majority-minority contestation, as Albania highlights. Here, the authoritarian rule of the first Berisha government (1992–1997) emerged despite the absence of any significant minorities or nationalism as an important political force. Weak state institutions and the high level of polarisation between the dominant Democratic Party and the Socialist Party (the former Communist Party of Labour) enabled authoritarian rule to go largely unchallenged. The mass exodus of Albanians to Italy and Greece and the near anarchical conditions of the mass protests highlighted the consequences of the paranoid and isolationist communist rule and the shallow roots of statehood – Albania existed barely two decades as an independent country prior to communist rule (Abrahams 2015).

The second wave of democratic revolutions included elements of popular protest or even uprisings (as in Albania) via the ballot box to trigger protests or confirm the loss of power of incumbents. They often relied on unified opposition coalitions (as in Romania, Croatia, or Serbia) and outside support. The relative isolation of these semi-authoritarian regimes vis-à-vis other Central and South Eastern European countries also mattered as EU integration gathered pace in the late 1990s and they became laggards in that process (Boduszyński 2010).

The rise of new semi-authoritarian regimes

The early 2000s witnessed a considerable improvement of democratic governments in South Eastern Europe, and all governments at least nominally shared the goals of EU integration and democratic rule. However, institutions had often been considerably weakened during the 1990s, and the state capture of the 1990s was not easily undone as former elites often retained formidable forces, or alternatively sought new patrons in political systems that had become patrimonial (Cohen and Lampe 2011). In some cases, semi-authoritarian rulers of the 1990s returned to office, such as Ion Iliescu in Romania in 2000 and Sali Berisha in Albania in 2005. However, here, the structural changes and the EU integration process prevented a relapse into the semi-authoritarian patterns of the previous decade. Instead, a new generation of semi-authoritarian rulers came to power, based on the promise of EU integration and reform, while relying on patronage and populism.

In 2006, the conservative International Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) took office and under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski instituted a nationalist semi-authoritarian regime which systematically undermined independent institutions and built a robust patronage network. Similar patterns could be found in Republika Srpska, where Milorad Dodik and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) has been dominant since 2006, and in Serbia, where the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Aleksandar Vučić, a former extreme nationalist, has dominated since 2012. In Montenegro, there has been no transfer of power through elections since 1990 with the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) as successors to the Communist Party retaining power uninterrupted. By 1997, the party had shifted under the leadership of Milo Đukanović from a Serb nationalist policy that supported Milošević to a pro-independence party committed to EU integration and reform. These new semi-authoritarian governments combine formal commitment to EU integration and reforms with informal mechanisms of control and patronage, thus resorting to undemocratic strategies to retain power. Populist parties with an authoritarian penchant
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have been similarly successful in Bulgaria, with Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) led by Boyko Borisov, and in Romania with Victor Ponta of the Social Democratic Party (PSD). An overarching feature is the support for EU integration, while resorting to populist messages, including nationalism, and securing political control through the use of informality and patronage. Unlike comparable tendencies in Hungary since the election of Viktor Orbán as prime minister in 2010, these regimes have not fundamentally altered the legal and constitutional structure. They have exercised control largely through the informal party and personal control. Thus, they are characterised by a democratic façade and gradual adaptation of the EU’s *aquis communautaire*, while ensuring that rule of law and institutional safeguards can be bypassed (Pula 2016). Thus the illegal recordings of the Gruevski government, revealed by the opposition in 2015, suggest that the inner circle used the police and the judiciary to punish political opponents, direct control over both public and private media, and use ethnic Macedonians from Albania in voting fraud, among others. Relentless campaigning, the use of state resources to dominate the public agenda, frequent early elections, and a weak and fragmented opposition characterise the pattern of rule in Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro. Unlike Vladimir Putin, they inherited imperfect, yet largely democratic institutions and a multi-party system. Furthermore, the goal of EU integration is widely held among citizens and not disputed by the semi-authoritarian rulers. Unlike Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey or Viktor Orbán, they lack a strong ideological commitment or basis, even if some, like the VRMO-DPMNE in Macedonia, do draw on nationalism.

These regimes are characteristic of countries that have experienced ‘stateness’ issues, that is, challenges to the nature and structure of the state and delayed and weak democratisation in the early 2000s (Džihić and Segert 2012). The delay of the 1990s meant that institutions functioned under democratic governments for a shorter period of time and these often maintained and used the authoritarian patterns and structures they inherited. For example, the Serbian president Boris Tadić (2004–2012) remained president of the ruling Democratic Party, even though this arguably contravened the Serbian constitution and thus transformed a constitutionally weak president into a factually strong presidency.

The pattern of democratisation in South Eastern Europe since 1990 highlights the non-linear nature of process. It is marked by a delay in comparison to other countries in Central Europe, a longer period of semi-authoritarian rule in the 1990s and a number of important reversals since the mid-2000s. However, considering comparable semi-authoritarian experiences in Slovakia and setbacks since 2010 in Hungary and Poland, it would be too simplistic to overemphasise a pattern of successful democratic consolidation in Central Europe and one of failed and late democratisation in South Eastern Europe.

**Explaining the delayed transition**

Next, we will examine different debates and explanatory approaches to explain one or several of the features of the delayed democratic transition in South Eastern Europe, including historical legacies, the particularities of the nature of the transition, the role of nationalism and conflict, state weakness, and the particular type of economic transformation.

**Historical institutionalism**

The argument of historical legacies draws on the particularities of the past in South Eastern Europe as an explanatory factor for the nature of transition in the region. This perspective was reflected in often crude Balkanist stereotyping that viewed the region as backward, tribal, and violent (Todorova 1997).
However, more sophisticated scholarship of South Eastern Europe does note the specificities of the region. Sundhaussen (1999), for example, has noted particular historical characteristics that mark South Eastern Europe, including a high level of ethnic diversity, a Byzantine-Orthodox and Islamic-Ottoman heritage, a developmental delay in the modern era, and a strong role of great powers, among others. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2005) has argued that South Eastern Europe is characterised by a high level of particularism, that is, low levels of trust in the state and abstract institutions and instead reliance on informal networks. However, such arguments easily fall into a deterministic trap and often fail to explain the origins of such patterns. In particular, the Ottoman origins, often claimed, are hard to map over such long periods of time.

A different strand of the historical institutionalist approach focuses less on the pre-Socialist legacies, such as the Ottoman heritage or late and incomplete state-building, but rather on the institutional structures of socialism. Jović (2008) argues that late socialist Yugoslavia was ideologically committed to the gradual erosion of state structures, the “withering away of the state” wherein most decisions are taken by local units of self-management (both in the economic and administrative sense) or the republics, with the Yugoslav state acting only as the final arbiter. Thus, the disintegration of the state was not so much an unintended consequence, but part of the ideological vision of Yugoslav communists, even if they did not plan or desire the violent breakup of the country. While not explicitly examining the delay in democratisation, the text speaks to the importance of socialist legacies. The variety of communist regimes in South Eastern Europe, as noted earlier, however, cannot explain regional patterns, but rather only country-specific pathways.

**The nature of transition**

As discussed earlier, the nature, timing, and trajectory of the transformation process or “transition” differed between South Eastern and Central Europe. In addition to occurring later than in most Central European countries, the transition in South Eastern Europe also featured fewer mass protests against the communist regimes with the notable exception of Slovenia and Romania. In addition, there was considerably more violence during the transition in South Eastern Europe, in particular in Yugoslavia and Romania. However, as noted earlier, there was considerable variation in both the regimes and their downfall in South Eastern Europe, so much so that one cannot speak in terms of a distinctly South Eastern European path. Nevertheless, most are characterised by the persistence of communist incumbents after the first round of multi-party elections. The success of renamed communist parties occurred when the opposition was weak and the regime could pre-empt a strengthening opposition through early election, as has been the case in Romania and Serbia. Alternatively, in some cases, the parties replacing them emulated authoritarian policies and often drew heavily on the communist nomenclature, as in Croatia, Albania, or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, opposition and dissident groups had been weak, and nationalism provided a convenient ground for political mobilisation. Some scholars have focused on the nature of communism in South Eastern Europe to explain the transition: the greater level of personalised authoritarianism and clientelist control resulted in a more serious institutional crisis and weaker challengers than in Central Europe (Gallagher 2003, 11–12).

On the other hand, Koinova (2013) and Bieber (2008) locate the key moment in terms of historical institutionalist legacies as being in the early phase of transition. They suggest that the pattern of majority-minority interaction established then shaped the relationship and thus the nature of transition in the subsequent period. Thus, the new institutional set-up of the country shapes the subsequent transformation, whether this pertains to interethnic relations or the structures
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of democracy. Thus, the sequencing of the transition process matters and often occurred to the disadvantage of establishing democratic structures in South Eastern Europe (Đžihić and Segert 2012). In Serbia, for example, the new constitution was drafted and ratified by referendum prior to the first multi-party elections. The constitution had strong authoritarian features and favoured the Milošević regime.

The next crucial moment during the transition process is the holding of the first multi-party elections and whether there are strong parties advocating reform and democratisation or whether the main parties focus on issues such as nationalism. Vachudova (2005, 35–48) argues that it was in regimes without a strong anti-communist opposition that allowed either incumbents to retain power (Romania and Bulgaria) or for new parties to use nationalism to build patronage networks (Slovakia). This argument could be extended to most post-Yugoslav states, with the partial exception of Slovenia.

Furthermore, the presence of mass protests at the beginning of transition matters, as this signals popular support for change. For Bunce (2003, 171), this sets apart the most successful from the delayed transitions. While Albania and Romania witnessed large anti-communist protests in South Eastern Europe, Serbia saw protests, but they were not anti-systemic; rather they focused on improving living conditions of workers and later turned nationalist, but not inherently anti-communist. The victory of illiberal nationalists at the first elections either through use of communist regimes (Serbia) or by the opposition (Croatia) (Bunce 2011) subsequently sets the stage for delayed democratisation, as these regimes are reluctant to reform and more likely to seek confrontation with minorities.

Altogether, this line of argument suggests that the particular nature of the transition, popular or pre-empted by incumbent elites and the associated parties and structures, determines the nature of the transition and the likelihood of democratic consolidation.

The instrumental use of conflict and nationalism

Looking beyond the transition itself, it is important to consider the impact of war and nationalism in delaying democratic transition. One of the weaknesses in the literature on democratisation during the 1990s and early 2000s has been the relative neglect of the post-Yugoslav space. The wars and crisis made them anomalies rather than exemplifiers of failed or delayed transition (Vladisavljević 2014).

One important argument made to explain the delay of transition in the post-Yugoslav space is the disintegration of the country and the ensuing wars. Thus, violence and nationalism created a context in which democratisation would be suspended or reduced to majoritarianism. Here, we find two strands of argument. The dominant argument has been that nationalism is a strong mobilising tool and easily available in times of political transition (Oberschall 2000). Thus, Snyder has argued that young democracies are particularly vulnerable to a takeover by nationalists. His argument and that of others is that in the time of democratic transition, the political system needs to be renegotiated which increases fears of minorities of exclusion and desires of majorities to reassert their dominance. In addition, weak institutions and suddenly open public debate without limitations can give an audience to nationalist arguments and provide little structural and symbolic restraints (Snyder and Ballentine 1996, Snyder 2000).

This argument has been challenged in the Yugoslav context, with Caspersen showing that radicalisation took place as part of a post-election intra-party competition and not in order to maximise voter support (Caspersen 2010). Instead, both Gordy and Gagnon have made the argument that the use of war and nationalism served incumbent elites to preserve and secure power (Gordy 1999, Gagnon 2004).
A third approach draws on the ‘prisoners’ dilemma’ argument to explain the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other cases. This explanation seeks to explain why voters support nationalist parties when survey data indicates their support for moderate or cross-national options instead. The argument here is that voters make a reluctant choice for their ‘own’ nationalists for fear that others would vote for theirs and they would be left without protection (Mujkić and Hulsey 2010, Stojanović 2014). Thus, democratic competition becomes a security dilemma where nationalism offers protection and at the same time escalated fear of the other. Consequently, democratic processes are undermined and either fail or lead to delayed transition.

Finally, Bunce argues that the effect of nationalism is modified by the timing, suggesting that early nationalist mobilisation is more likely to lead to an escalation between titular majorities and minorities that can lead to conflict and delayed transition, whereas late nationalist mobilisation allows for mobilisation around liberal democratic goals. She notes that the Baltics and Slovenia fit the latter pattern, while Serbia, Armenia, Croatia, and Slovakia better fit the former (Bunce 2003, 177–178). However, this argument difficult to uphold, as there was not much nationalist mobilisation in Croatia for nearly two decades prior to the first elections, and in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we similarly do not find an important nationalist mobilisation prior to 1989. Thus, it is not clear how timing explains variation between Slovenia – where nationalism appeared before Bosnia or Croatia on the political agenda of the 1980s – and Serbia.

What appears important is the direction of nationalism and salience of it for domestic political contestation. Thus, while in Slovenia the ‘erased’ were a group of residents who were eliminated from the official registers in country after not applying for citizenship within a narrow time window, there was no systematic mobilisation against minorities and the main target of nationalism as directed at the outside, that is, Serbia and Yugoslavia. In Croatia, Serbia, or Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, a key actor against which nationalist mobilisation took place was within the republican boundaries, allowing for nationalist polarisation within the republics, rather than just between republics. Once nationalist mobilisation is not just used against an ‘outsider’, but also within a polity, as the republics of Yugoslavia were, this led to polarisation and subsequently enabled the use of force.

While these approaches differ in the assessment of the mechanisms through which nationalism and war delay democratisation, they clearly identify a similar causal link.

**State weakness and capture**

One common argument is that the incomplete process of nation state construction delayed transition. Thus, more heterogeneous and contested states could not focus on democratisation, but were instead distracted by questions of how to define polity, citizenship, access to institutions, and so forth. However, as Bunce points out, this does not help explain why some very homogenous countries like Albania struggled, while diverse countries such as Estonia or new countries like Slovenia managed to establish fairly robust democracies (2011).

A striking and consistent feature of most Balkan states, however, has been weak state capacity, especially when it comes to the equal and consistent enforcement of norms, and the strong role of patronage and other aspects of informality (Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2013). This control of resources and institutions through informal structures often benefits a small elite, based on a close nexus of political and economic influence, often empowered through structures emerging in the early 1990s during the first phase of transformation and the wars (Džihić and Segert 2012). These have been aspects accentuated by the Yugoslav wars in most of the successor states, but are also shared to varying degrees in Albania, Romania, and Bulgaria. Ethnonationalism is thus a tool of state control, but necessarily a cause. Instead, these mechanisms operate on the basis of party
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loyalty, kinship, and personal ties, not on the grounds of ethnicity or such markers of identity (Koutkova 2015).

Balkan neoliberalism

In recent years, there has been a rise in neo-Marxist analysis of the transition process in South Eastern Europe. The rise of this approach is closely linked to the persistent economic crisis in Europe since 2008 and a broader increase of studies critical of the hegemony of neoliberal economic thought since 1989. Štiks and Horvat (2015) argue that the economic liberalisation and privatisation empowered predatory elites and led to widespread impoverishment and persistence of nationalist and undemocratic governments. This is part of a wider debate, more developed in ethnographic studies of post-socialism which outline the insecurities, impoverishment, and vulnerability of many citizens in the post-Socialist period (Humphrey and Mandel 2002, Kideckel 2008, Bajić-Hajduković 2014).

The general model of neoliberal capitalism, however, cannot explain the delay of democratic transition in South Eastern Europe, as this model was broadly implemented from the Baltics to South Eastern Europe. However, as Bohle and Greskovits (2012) have argued, the types of capitalism vary greatly in Central and Eastern Europe. They argue that in three of the four Balkan cases examined – Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania – weak states and patronage structures that partly originate in Socialism stood in the way of managing relations between labour and new capitalists, resulting in a particular predatory type of capitalism (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, 194). However, their argument suggests that it is not the particular variant of capitalism that led to a delay in democratisation, but rather the other way around. A particular feature of the transformation during the 1990s was the limited degree of economic liberalisation. They included less liberalisation and privatisation than in Central Europe during the 1990s, especially in the first half of the decade, closely coinciding with the persistence of late communist nomenclature in office (Åslund 1996). Others have pointed out that the economic trajectory of the 1990s, in particular the wars, positioned South Eastern Europe in a European “super-periphery” with weak states, high unemployment, and large disparities (Bartlett 2009). Again, these are not causes, but rather consequences of persistent semi-authoritarianism of the 1990s, and might have been contributing factors – compounded by the global economic crisis after 2008 – to the rise of new forms of semi-authoritarianism.

Assessment and further research

The study of democratic transition in South Eastern Europe has long been overshadowed by research on war and nationalism, which in itself has been isolated from other research in post-communist Europe (Gagnon 2014). There has been sporadic comparative research that has bridged the divide between post-Yugoslav and other post-communist countries (Koinova 2013, Fisher 2006, Dawson 2014), highlighting that it is fruitful to cross this invisible divide.

The focus on Central Europe and the ‘successful’ cases of democratic transformation has resulted in a research bias that often results in looking at South Eastern Europe as merely the case of failure or incomplete democratisation, often shaped by Balkanizing perspectives on the region. The debates on the particular democratisation path in South Eastern Europe highlight that there is no singular cause for the variation to Central Europe and within the region itself. The research has highlighted the importance of legacies, while avoiding historical determinism, the particularity of the transition itself, and the debilitating influence of nationalism and weak state structures to the process.
There are two large themes in the literature that have just begun to be explored and merit further attention: the role of informality and the return to semi-authoritarian forms of government. While informality has been subject to research in recent years, its dynamics and in particular its interrelationship with democratisation processes remains ill-understood. Some research on the subject is beginning to emerge from political scientists (Dolenec 2013) and anthropologists (Kutkova 2015). Closely connected is a fairly limited understanding of political parties, as the understanding of parties remains shaped by Western European perspectives. While they have been discussed somewhat in the literature (see Lewis 2000, Stojarová and Emerson 2009), the dynamics of patronage and their symbiotic relationship with state institutions remains only partially understood (Bértoa and Taleski 2016). This is in large part due to the difficulty of measuring informality and illicit activities and misconceptions about the role of parties based on research in Central and Western Europe.

The link between the different ‘crisis of democratisation’ in the 1990s and since 2006 also remains under-researched, to identify both continuities and differences. Closely linked is the question of the causes of informality. Whereas they are often attributed to the 1990s and the particularities of the delayed transition, there are origins in the Socialist period. However, the informal practices and politics of patronage of late Socialism remain a subject meriting further research. Finally, the classification of the post-Yugoslav space (or the Western Balkans) as distinct from other countries already in the EU, such as Bulgaria and Romania or for that matter Greece, persists with the danger of inbuilt bias, assuming that EU integration creates a distinct form of democratisation and transformation. Instead, understanding similarities might be more fruitful and challenge these biases (Dawson 2014, Bieber and Ristić 2012). Similarly, the understanding of democratisation processes still remains often steeped in assumptions about the progression from illiberal to liberal democracy, rather than either a back and forth or a stagnation and relatively stable form of unconsolidated democracy, as widely used measures of democracy, such as Nations in Transit of Freedom House\(^4\) or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index suggest.\(^5\)

Notes

1 With Croatian EU accession in 2013, the country is no longer included in political structures associated with the Western Balkans, but usually remains included in academic discussions.

2 There is no overarching study of this phenomena.

3 This argument has been made not in the case of elections, but for minority-majority violence in Croatia and Romania (Roe 2005).


5 www.bti-project.org/en/home/.

Bibliography


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