CHAPTER 2

The Political Transition

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The collapse of the communist regimes and communist states from 1989 to 1992 produced a number of remarkable changes in the political and economic landscape of Europe's eastern half. In particular, during the brief span of three years, authoritarian regimes gave way to political orders that were, albeit to quite varying degrees, more competitive and more respectful of civil liberties. In addition, twenty-two new states arose from the rubble of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, while one communist state, the German Democratic Republic, merged with its neighbor, the German Federal Republic, to reconstitute a single Germany. As a result, a region once composed of nine states featured by the end of the Cold War twenty-nine—if we include all of the successor states of the former Soviet Union, together with Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. At the same time, open market economies, again to varying degrees, replaced state-owned, centrally planned, and highly protectionist economies. Finally, the post–World War II separation of Europe into two halves ended, not just because of the economic and political liberalization of the east, but also because of the eventual eastward expansion of three international institutions: the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU). In short, 1989–1992 constituted a revolution in Central and Eastern Europe—in state boundaries, in the organization and practice of politics and economics at home and abroad, and, finally, in elite and mass identities and political preferences.

This chapter assesses the political side of this revolution. In particular, I compare patterns of regime transition in Central and Eastern Europe since the dramatic events of 1989, draw some generalizations about what has transpired and why, and place these changes in the larger context of the global spread of democratic governance. My discussion is divided into two parts. In the first section, I focus on the short-term political consequences of the collapse of communism, or the forms of governance that came into being during the early years of the transition from 1989 to mid-1996. Of interest here are such questions as the following: Did the end of Communist Party hegemony lead, as many expected, to the immediate rise of democratic politics, or do we in fact see a more complicated political story? To what extent were the early political dynamics of postcommunist Europe typical or distinctive when compared with the collapse of dictatorships and regime change in other parts of the world? Finally, what factors seem to provide the most compelling account of the first stage of the political transition in postcommunist Europe?

In the second part of this chapter, I shift my focus to developments beginning in the latter part of 1996 that continued through mid-2017. Here, the discussion addresses three notable trends. The first is the remarkable ability of the new states in the region to endure (and several more to form), and the second is the expansion of democratic polities since the mid-1990s. This expansion represents two convergent developments: the fact that most of the first democracies in the region stayed the political course, coupled with the failure of the remaining and more authoritarian regimes in the area to maintain their political momentum. In this sense, there have in fact been several waves of democratization in postcommunist Europe, with the first occurring immediately after the fall of state socialism and the second occurring roughly a decade later. The final trend is less reassuring about the future of democracy in the region. Several countries long thought to be the most durable democracies in Central and Eastern Europe—that is, Poland and especially Hungary—are experiencing major challenges to democratic politics from right-wing populist politicians and parties.

Postcommunist Political Diversity

By 1996, one could identify three types of political regimes in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe.[1] The first, which included Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Lithuania, and, less perfectly, Estonia and Latvia (because of some political discrimination against their Russian minorities), was a democratic order, characterized by political arrangements that combine free, fair, and competitive elections that are regularly held; representative institutions that convert public preferences as expressed through elections into public policy; rule of law, or rules of the political game that are accepted by both elites and publics and applied consistently across time, space, and circumstances; and extensive civil liberties and political rights guaranteed by law. Because of all these features, democracy in general, and in these cases in particular, can be understood as a way of organizing politics that rests on accountable government.[2] What is striking about Poland, the Czech Republic, and the other countries listed above at this time, therefore, was that they managed to move quickly to full-scale democracy.

The second type of regime in the region at this time was authoritarian. In authoritarian states, political arrangements lack the characteristics noted above, thereby producing governments that have neither the incentives nor the capacity to be accountable to their citizens. Authoritarian regimes, in particular, lack the institutionalized competition, individual rights, and procedural consistency that translate individual preferences into public policy through elections and representative government. This combination of traits describes the politics during the period under discussion in two of the successor states of Yugoslavia (Croatia and Serbia-Montenegro). Here, it is interesting to note that, despite the efforts of their dictators, Franjo Tuđman in Croatia and Slobodan Milošević in Serbia-Montenegro, some political pluralism was in evidence—most notably in the capitals of Zagreb and Belgrade, where oppositions had a presence and where publics, even in the face of fraudulent elections, still managed to deny their dictators decisive electoral support.

Photo 2.1. Remembering Václav Havel, Prague, Czech Republic. (Davidlohr Bueso)

Finally, the remaining countries in the region, Albania, Bosnia (but only after the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 had demilitarized the country and provided a skeletal form of government), Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine—a group of countries roughly equal in number to the full-scale democracies at this time—fell between the extremes of dictatorship and democracy. They were what can be termed "hybrid regimes," that is, political arrangements that feature some of the formal characteristics of democracy, such as representative institutions and political competition, but fall short of the liberal standard as a result of unfair elections, extensive corruption, irregular recognition of civil liberties, significant biases in the media, opposition parties that are poorly organized in comparison with parties in power led by authoritarians, and weak ties between political representatives and the citizenry. Also common in this category are several other characteristics that undermine the development of accountable government—in particular, rapid turnover in governments (a characteristic that Poland also shared), an inability of citizens to counteract the power of the state through associational ties with each other (or what has been termed "civil society"), and a sharp divide between urban and rural politics, with the latter more consistently supportive of authoritarian rule.[3]

In short, in the first stage of the transition from state socialism, we find three characteristics. The first is political diversity. Put simply, the deregulation of the political, economic, and social monopoly of the Communist Party that occurred throughout Central and Eastern Europe from 1989 to 1991 was not followed necessarily by the rise of democratic politics. In this sense, the Central and Eastern Europe of this period presented an important lesson. There can be a substantial lag, and even no relationship, between two developments that are often assumed to be tightly intertwined: the decline of authoritarian rule and the rise of democratic politics. Second, regime change in this region was largely peaceful but sometimes violent. The Baltic states' attempts to separate themselves from the Soviet Union invited a short-term violent response on the part of the Soviet leadership. The merger in Yugoslavia between two issues—the future of the regime and the future of the state—produced very different political trajectories among the republics that made up the state and a war from 1991 to 1995 that left 140,000 people dead (according to the International Center for Transitional Justice) and undermined democratization in those successor states that served as the major site of this conflict, Croatia and Bosnia, while in the process shaping developments in their neighbors, particularly Macedonia and Serbia-Montenegro. The fall of Nicolae Ceauşescu in Romania in 1989 was also violent. These contrasts aside, however, it is striking that where regime transition was accompanied by violence, the result was either a hybrid regime or a dictatorship. Thus, democracy and a peaceful adjudication of conflicts—with the latter often serving as one definition of democratic governance—were closely associated with one another in the Central and East European transitions.

Finally, there were significant differences across the region in the resources, cohesion, and political goals of both the communists and the opposition. For example, while the communists were quick to embrace the liberal political and economic agenda of the opposition in the Baltic countries, Poland, and particularly Hungary and Slovenia, they were more resistant in the remaining cases. Serbian political dynamics under Milošević are the most extreme example of this resistance. At the same time, oppositions varied greatly. Whereas in the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia, the opposition was large, sophisticated, relatively cohesive, and committed to liberal politics, in the remaining countries, the opposition tended to suffer from a number of problems. For example, Bulgaria saw divisions over the best way to build capitalism and democracy and become an effective political force, and in both Serbia and Slovakia, elite struggles over political power and manipulation of national tensions in order to maintain authoritarian control and stave off demands for democracy demobilized and often marginalized the liberals.[4] Elements of this pattern can also be seen, more recently, in Macedonia.

Comparative Perspectives: The Puzzles of Diversity

Was the diversity of postcommunist political dynamics and political pathways in the first half of the transformation surprising or predictable? The answer is that for many analysts, the political patterns of postcommunism, as summarized above, were in fact unexpected. This was the case whether we refer to specialists on comparative democratization or specialists on postcommunist Europe.

At the time that communism collapsed, there had already been a clear trend, in evidence since the mid-1970s, suggesting that the decline of authoritarian rule led invariably to the rapid and peaceful rise of democratic politics. This was precisely what had happened, for example, in one state after another in both Latin America and southern Europe (though the Portuguese case was an exception). In addition, the dichotomous thinking of the Cold War, which had framed political dynamics and therefore political assumptions in the international order for forty-five years, made it easy to presume that

Photo 2.2. General and former president Wojciech Jaruzelski and former president Lech Wałęsa at a debate on Poland's past. (*Rzeczpospolita*)

there were only two political choices in the world: democracy or dictatorship. Thus, if the hegemony of the Communist Party was challenged and dictatorship rested on this hegemony, and, just as importantly, if the Soviet Union failed to back up communist rule in its client states and at home and, indeed, failed in the more profound sense of being able to continue functioning as a regime, a state, a regional hegemon, and a superpower, then in the wake of its collapse, it was widely thought, democratic revolutions would follow both within the Soviet Union and throughout the Soviet bloc. As we have seen replayed in reactions to the Arab "spring" from 2010 to 2011 and in US debates about Iraq from 2002 to the present, moreover, many assumed not just that the political world offered only two regime options but also that if dictators and dictatorships were subtracted from the equation, publics would necessarily rise up to embrace the democratic cause—and be able to translate these preferences in relatively quick order into well-functioning democratic institutions and procedures. Democracy, in short, was natural and easy, and these characteristics would be revealed once the distorting effects of dictatorship were removed.[5]

From these perspectives, therefore, the assumption was that the end of dictatorship constituted the beginning of democracy—and full-scale democracy at that. Such an optimistic reading of the future was unusually tempting in the wake of 1989, given the rapid and region-wide character of the collapse of Communist Party control and the dependence of these regimes and their specific economic and political features on that control. This position, however, was as flawed in the postcommunist world as it would be a decade later in Iraq and Afghanistan and several decades later in Egypt.[6] Oppositions can be fractious, dictatorships invariably have supporters, constructing democratic institutions in weak states can be difficult, and publics can care as much about their personal circumstances as about governmental forms. Moreover, the fall of dictatorships can be partial, not complete.

Scholars specializing in the postcommunist region had different expectations—though these were also inaccurate in some respects.[7] For some scholars, the emphasis had long been on the striking similarities among the communist states—similarities that spoke not just to common ideological texts but also to the foundational role of the Soviet Union as the "inventor" and then the "exporter" of state socialism. In all of these cases, communist regimes were governed by a single Communist Party that enjoyed a monopoly on power, money, and social status and was committed to rapid socioeconomic development through control of the allocation of both labor and capital. It is puzzling, therefore, that the structural and ideological similarities across this region—similarities far greater than those found, for example, among dictatorships in Latin America or southern Europe during the 1960s and 1970s—could have translated so quickly into such differences, not just in political regimes, as already noted, but also in economic regimes. Thus, capitalism replaced socialism very quickly in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, and Slovenia, whereas socialist economics, especially with respect to state control over the economy, remained in place to varying degrees in the other countries in the region. Commonalities, therefore, in the most basic building blocks of politics and economics—for example, state control over politics and the economy—gave way very quickly to diversity.

For other specialists, there was widespread recognition that these countries entered the transition with variable mixtures of assets and liabilities, such that postcommunism would not produce, especially in the early stages, identical political dynamics—the similarities in the institutional "skeletons" of these systems notwithstanding. In this sense, diversity was expected. Not expected, however, was the range of regimes that appeared, with the most improbable group comprising those countries that made a quick and thoroughgoing transition to democratic politics. As some observers were quick to note, of the many countries in Central and Eastern Europe that had experimented with democratic politics during the interwar era, only one—Czechoslovakia—had managed to survive until World War II with democratic institutions and procedures intact. Even in that case, however, the inclusiveness of the polity and the extent of political and certainly economic equality among the nations that shared that state at the time were both in some question.[8] In short, little of the political past could be recycled to support democratic change. As a result, democracy was assumed to be, at best, an uphill struggle—in direct contrast, for example, to the Latin American transitions to democracy that occurred in the 1970s and 1980, where the norm was redemocratization, not building democracy from scratch.[9]

Many analysts also recognized the considerable costs of the state socialist brand of authoritarian rule due to its unusually penetrative and despotic character. These were dictatorships that, while less and less brutal over time in most cases, were nonetheless extraordinarily ambitious. By owning and planning the economy, monopolizing political power, sealing borders, and atomizing publics, these dictatorships seemed committed to the destruction of some of the most elementary building blocks of democratic life—for example, interpersonal trust, respect for the law, confidence in political institutions such as political parties, and participation in associations independent of the state, such as labor unions, clubs, professional associations, and the like. The autonomy of individuals and groups, so important for countering the power of the state in a democratic order, therefore, had been severely limited by the communist experience. Economic decline during the last years of state socialism, moreover, would also seem to have constrained the rise of democracy, especially since the political regime transition in question would be tied to an unusually costly economic transition. Indeed, it is not just that Central and Eastern Europe featured—and still features—a much lower level of economic development than Western Europe, which many have read as undermining democratic governance, but also that citizens in Central and Eastern Europe experienced a far greater decline in living standards in the first half of the 1990s than one saw during the Great Depression, when nearly half of Europe's democracies, we must remember, had collapsed.[10]

When we compare the perspectives of specialists in the postcommunist region and those of specialists on recent democratization in other regions, therefore, we find a clear contrast. Whereas the former tended to underpredict democracy, assuming, in effect, that many more regimes would fall into either the hybrid or authoritarian camp, specialists on comparative democratization had the opposite problem: they overpredict democratic rule. In both cases, the political diversity of the region—at least by the mid-1990s—was puzzling. How then can we explain why some countries in Central and Eastern Europe moved decisively in a democratic direction, while others moved less decisively and thereby combined elements of democracy and dictatorship, and still others remained authoritarian but in forms different from the communist model?

Explaining Early Political Pathways

A number of plausible factors would seem to be helpful in accounting for the differences among postcommunist regimes during the early stages of the transition. One could suggest, for example, that a key consideration would be the age of the state. As a number of studies have suggested, in the West, states were built long before the possibility of democratic politics either entered or could enter the political agenda. State building is a nasty process, wherein political leaders, wanting to secure their access to people and economic resources and to deny that access to their competitors, use their militaries, local allies, and rudimentary bureaucracies to solidify their political and economic control over a spatially defined group. Rather than negotiate each time they need money and troops, they prefer to create more permanent arrangements—or what subsequently became known as states. The essence of state building, therefore, to borrow from Charles Tilly, is that wars make states, and states make wars.[11]

The demand for democracy in the West, therefore, took place after state building. Once people have lived together for some time in a common state and operate within an increasingly integrated and interactive political and economic context, they can learn to define themselves as members of a common political community, or nation. In the process, they can also embrace a common political project that redefines the relationship between citizens and the state by arguing that states cannot just be coercive or just provide citizens with security. Instead, they are expected to do more—by recognizing citizens as equal, by guaranteeing political rights, and by creating accountable government.

The necessary sequencing of these developments—or spatial consolidation of political authority followed by growing pressures for accountable and legitimate governance—would seem to suggest that the key difference in Central and East European political trajectories after communism is whether the state is new—and thereby committed to the draconian politics and economics of state building—or better established and, because of prior integration of the economy and settlement of borders and membership in the nation, more responsive to political demands for equality and rights. Indeed, precisely this contrast led Dankwart Rustow to argue more than forty years ago that democracy can only enter into the realm of political choice when issues involving membership in the nation and the boundaries of the state have been fully resolved.[12]

The problem here, however, is that the variations in postcommunist political trajectories are not predicted by the age of the state. Just as some of the long-standing states in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Bulgaria and Romania, were hybrid regimes in the first half of the 1990s, some of the newest states in that period—Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states—were in the group of early and robust democracies. Even more interestingly, in the cases of Slovenia and the Czech Republic, the states were in fact completely new formations—in contrast to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which had been independent states during the interwar years as a result of the Russian Revolution and the breakup of the Russian empire.

Might the differences be explained by ethnic and religious diversity? Again, it is logical to assume that democracy is harder to construct when many nations share the same state, when national differences coincide with differences in economic resources and political power, when previous governing arrangements play diverse groups off one another, and when national minorities spill over into neighboring states, thereby generating tensions about the legitimacy of existing boundaries. However, this factor does not distinguish well among the Central and East European countries either. Both Poland and Albania, for example, have national homogeneity despite their very different political pathways immediately after communism, and the robust democracies of Estonia and Latvia have unusually high levels of diversity, defined here as the size of the second largest ethnic community.

This leaves us with two remaining hypotheses. One is that variation in democratization reflects differences in the mode of transition. Put succinctly, transitions engineered by bargaining between opposition and incumbent elites are more likely to produce democratic government than transitions that occur in reaction to mass protests—a contrast that has been used to explain differences in democratizing dynamics in Latin America and southern Europe. The problem here is that most of the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe involved mass—indeed massive—mobilization, and all of the most successful transitions, except in Hungary, took place in response to mass protests. The other hypothesis targets differences in the nature of politics during communism. Here, the argument is that the more liberalized regimes during communism would have laid more of the groundwork for democracy after communism—for example, because their communists were reform-minded and because opposition forces had more opportunities to expand their support and develop sophisticated political strategies for winning power.

However, the strong democracies within our group are in fact divided between those that experienced more hard-line communist rule—Czechoslovakia and the Baltic countries—and more reformist regimes—Slovenia, Poland, and Hungary.[13]

Explaining Diversity

How, then, can we explain the early patterns of postcommunist politics? We can begin to answer this question by recognizing the importance of the age of the state and the difficulties introduced by what was for many states in this region a simultaneous transition to a new regime and a new state. For states that were already defined at the time of the transition from communism, the key factor that shaped subsequent political pathways seems to have been the outcome of the first competitive election. In particular, where the opposition won handily (Poland and Hungary), we see quick and sustained democratization. By contrast, where power was more equally divided between the communists and the opposition (as in Romania and Bulgaria), the result was a hybrid regime.

But is this argument in fact a tautology, in that when communists win, dictatorships follow; when the opposition wins, democracy follows; and, finally, when they are neck and neck, a synthesis of the two options materializes? Despite the logic of this observation, there are in fact several reasons to be more confident that the argument about initial electoral outcomes is illuminating. One is that this line of explanation also captures variations in economic reform, with rapid reforms following a clear victory of the opposition, resistance to such reforms when the communists win, and a pattern of "fit-and-start" reforms when electoral outcomes are more evenly divided. Another is that there is no particular reason to assume that, if the opposition wins, it will necessarily embrace democratic politics—though in every one of the established states it did. Oppositions, after all, can want many things. Third, it is notable that this argument flies in the face of the generalization in the literature on Latin America and southern Europe that "balanced transitions"—or those in which the opposition and the authoritarians are evenly balanced in their power and form political pacts with each other as a result—lead to the most successful transitions to democracy. With this type of equality, it has been argued, both sides feel secure enough to proceed with regime change. Thus, what seems tautological in Central and Eastern Europe is in fact counterintuitive in other regional contexts.[14]

This leads us to a final point, which helps us deal with the problem of what "causes the cause." Initial electoral outcomes in the contest between authoritarians and opposition forces correlate in turn with patterns of protest during the communist era. To put the matter succinctly, one can conclude that, at least in Central and Eastern Europe, rapid progress toward democracy seems to have depended on a dynamic wherein the development of a strong opposition during communism translated, with the end of the party's monopoly, into an unusually strong political showing in the first elections, which augured well for the future and quality of democratic governance. In this sense, the proximate cause, or variations in electoral outcomes, alerts us to a more distant cause, or variations in opposition development during communism.

We can now turn to the new states in the region—or the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia-Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

(Because of the war and its subsequent development as an international protectorate, Bosnia is left out of the comparison.) Here, a key issue seems to be whether the nationalist project connected with a liberal or illiberal political project—or whether defending the nation was understood to require, or at least be consistent with, democracy or dictatorship. For those countries (then republics) that had nationalist demonstrations or movements during communism (Croatia in the early 1970s, Serbia-Montenegro in the early 1980s, and Slovakia in the late 1960s), the resulting dynamics divided the opposition into democrats and nationalists while weakening public support for the communists and pushing them to bear down on nationalism and to resist any political and economic reforms that might expand opportunities for nationalism to reinvigorate itself. As a result, when communism collapsed, either communists became nationalists in order to maintain dictatorial power (as in Serbia-Montenegro and Slovakia), or the nationalists, facing discredited communists, rejected liberal politics in order to take power (as in Croatia). In either case, democracy was poorly served, whether the communists, the nationalists, or some combination of the two emerged triumphant. By contrast, where nationalist mobilization materialized only when communism began to unravel (as in the Baltic countries, Macedonia, and Slovenia), the nationalist ideology was defined in a liberal way such that nationalist and liberal forces came together to form a powerful opposition, and communists, not as politically isolated or as compromised as in the first set of cases, had little choice, in terms of either personal preferences or self-interest, but to defect to the liberal cause. Ukraine is also an example of late mobilization. However, because of the east-west divide in Ukraine with respect to identity, history, and economic interests, there were more obstacles to democratic change in that country than the others.

In short, we find two pathways. In the older states, regime change was a product of the balance of power between the communists and the opposition forces and, to push the causal process further back in time, the development of a capable opposition during the communist era, whereas in the new states, the key factor seems to have been varying combinations of nationalism, liberalism, and communism, with the particular combination strongly affected by when nationalist mobilization took place and the effects of this timing on the preferences and popularity of both the communists and the nationalists. Put more simply, one can suggest that patterns of political protest during communism, albeit playing out in different ways in republics versus states and introducing different political options, seemed to play a critical role, once the communists lost their political monopoly, in either ushering in democratic politics or compromising the democratic political agenda.

Durability of New States and New Democracies

If many observers were surprised by political outcomes in Central and Eastern Europe in the first phase of the transition, they were even more surprised, given these early developments after the fall of communism, by what transpired in the second phase. From 1996 to 2016 we find three political trends, with the first two both indicating and contributing to greater stability in the region and the third one having the opposite effect. First, while the new states that formed in the region from 1991 to 1992 have remained, much to the surprise of many analysts, they have been joined in recent years by several other new states. Thus, in the late spring of 2006, Serbia-Montenegro divided into two separate states, Kosovo (once a part of Serbia-Montenegro) became an independent state in 2008–2009, and the Russian Federation expanded in size at the expense of its neighbor, Ukraine, as a result of its annexation of Crimea (a peninsula in southeastern Ukraine) in the spring of 2014.[15] While the international community recognizes the new states of Montenegro and Kosovo (though the Russian government and a few others have objected to the latter) and, thus, Serbia's new name and boundaries, it views the sudden boundary changes of Russia and Ukraine as illegitimate. Several aspects of the Crimean case make it very different from the other two. One is that the key international actor involved in the reformulation of boundaries gained territory as a result of its engagement. Russia, in short, was a far more "interested" observer with respect to Crimea than were the United States or the EU in the cases of Montenegro and Kosovo. Second, in contrast to Kosovo, the citizens of Crimea did not need to be protected from attacks launched by their own government. Finally, the hastily held referendum that purportedly legitimated Crimea's secession from Ukraine was not a referendum on independence (as had been the case for Kosovo and Montenegro) but rather a choice about whether to remain in Ukraine or join the Russian Federation. That referendum, moreover, took place with Russian troops already in control of the peninsula and in the absence of any international monitors.

The relative stability of borders in this region since 1992 speaks to several factors. One is that opportunities for redefining boundaries tend to be fleeting, occurring primarily during the unusual circumstances of a conjoined shift in domestic and international regimes, as had happened from 1989 to 1992 when communism collapsed, the Soviet Union was dismembered, and the Cold War ended. Another is that state dissolution during the earlier tumultuous period succeeded to some degree in providing a closer alignment of national and state borders and, with that, an expansion in the legitimacy of both the regime and the state. Finally, powerful actors in the international community tend to resist border changes because they see an opening up of the question of borders as highly destabilizing for both domestic and international politics. To question existing borders is to invite minority communities throughout the region—and certainly their leaders—to demand states of their own. Such demands are tempting in many cases, because they empower minority leaders, while allowing them to ignore other, more pressing issues that might challenge their political influence—for example, rising corruption, poor economic performance, and a decline in the quality of democratic life.

Recent developments in both Montenegro and Kosovo, however, remind us that the borders in southeastern Europe remained in some flux for many years after the collapse of communist regimes and states. Indeed, in sharp contrast to their words and deeds in other parts of the world, including the Caucasus and Russia, major players in international politics, such as the United States and the EU, grew increasingly unwilling and unable to support the borders of Serbia-Montenegro as established during the wars that accompanied the dissolution of the Yugoslav state from 1991 to 1995. Thus, beginning in 1997, the Montenegrin political leadership began to question the value of its federal relationship with Serbia. In 2003, the EU, eager to keep borders intact, brokered a deal whereby Montenegro agreed to stay within the larger, but quite decentralized, state until 2006, when a referendum would be held on the question of Montenegrin independence.

In the spring of 2006, this referendum did take place, and a majority (though not an overwhelming one) of Montenegrins expressed their desire to establish their own state. Quickly following the referendum, Serbia and Montenegro went their separate ways.

The situation in Kosovo has been different. Following the US-led NATO bombing campaign in 1999 to protect Albanian inhabitants in Kosovo from the increasingly repressive actions of the Milošević regime, the United States, with EU support, defined Kosovo as an international protectorate. When it became increasingly clear that Kosovo could not be reintegrated with Serbia, because of the institutional precedents set by its postwar status, the strong support of the majority within Kosovo for independence, and continuing tensions between the Serbian and Albanian communities coinhabiting the province, the United States took the lead, with EU support, in providing verbal, economic, and technical support for a gradual transition in Kosovo to sovereign statehood.[16] This culminated in a February 2008 declaration of independence. For Serbian publics and politicians, the departure of Kosovo has been a good deal more controversial than the exit of Montenegro. Moreover, widespread poverty, the dearth of state institutions that could be recycled from the past, and continuing tensions between the Serbian and Albanian communities living in Kosovo have also rendered the state-building project there a more difficult and prolonged venture than in Montenegro. Thus, while the establishment of the Montenegrin state took place relatively smoothly and quickly, the same has not been the case for Kosovo.[17]

The second trend in the region since the mid-1990s is the growing homogenization of the regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, given the expansion of democratic orders (albeit of varying quality). This development reflected two trends: on the one hand, nearly all of the first democracies stuck and indeed deepened, an outcome one cannot necessarily have expected, especially in view of the constraints on democratization, noted earlier, as a result of the authoritarian past and the stresses of economic reform; on the other hand, the hybrid democracies of the first stage have, in virtually every case, shifted to the democratic camp in the second stage, while the regimes that were initially dictatorships all moved in a liberal direction, thereby joining the hybrid category and sometimes moving in an even more liberal direction (see table 2.1). It is safe to conclude, therefore, that the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, all EU members, are very likely to continue as democratic regimes in the future. At the same time, Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro have all made significant progress since 2000 in building more democratic polities.

There are, however, three important exceptions to this “happy” pattern of democratic progress throughout the region. One is Ukraine, which had made some strides in building democracy in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution in 2004 but experienced continuing problems with corruption and, following the election of Viktor Yanukovych as president in 2010, a decline in democratic performance. Following widespread popular protests in Ukraine against Yanukovych’s unexpected turn away from the EU in the late fall of 2013, the government collapsed and Yanukovych fled to Russia (which had been a close ally), Russia annexed Crimea, and Russia launched a covert campaign to destabilize eastern Ukraine. In May 2014, a new president, Petro Poroshenko, was elected, and in October of the same year, a new parliament was elected. Despite their commitment to economic and political reforms, however, the new government has made limited progress,

Table 2.1. Freedom House Rankings for Central and East European States, 2006–2017

Country	*2006*	*2008*	*2010*	*2011*	*2012*	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*
Albania	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3	3.5	3	3.5	3.5	4
Bulgaria	1.5	1.5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Croatia	2	2	1.5	1.5	1.5	2	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
Czech Republic	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Estonia	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Hungary	1	1	1	1.5	1.5	1	1.5	2	2	2.5
Latvia	1	1.5	2	2	2	1.5	2	2	2	1.5
Lithuania	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Montenegro		3	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	3	3	3
Poland	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.5
Romania	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Serbia	2.5	2.5	2	2	2	2.5	2	2	2	2.5
Slovakia	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Slovenia	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Ukraine	2.5	2.5	3	3.5	3.5	2.5	2.5	3	3	3

Source: Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" (http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world).

Note: The cumulative average of political rights and civil liberties scores is based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 considered free and 7 considered unfree.

especially with respect to reducing corruption. The ability of the government to carry through on reforms, of course, has been severely compromised by the continuing crisis in eastern Ukraine.

The remaining exceptions are Hungary and Poland—two countries that, from the early 1990s onward, were widely viewed as the front-runners in the race to democracy and capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe. In both cases, democracy has eroded following the sweeping victories of right-wing nationalist parties in parliamentary elections—the Civic Alliance, or FIDESZ, in the case of Hungary in 2010, and the Law and Justice Party in the case of Poland in 2015. The leaders of both parties have used their parliamentary majorities to wage a war on democracy by, for example, undercutting civil liberties and political rights, purging the judiciary and the bureaucracy, exerting more state control over the media and civil society groups, and using extremist rhetoric and policies—for example, in response to the refugee crisis—to carry out their culturally conservative and nationalist agendas. Prime Minister Victor Orban's attack on Hungarian democracy, however, poses the greater threat, in part because he is far more corrupt than his Polish counterpart, in part because he has been more aggressive in changing the Constitution and taking on issues of personal and academic freedom, and in part because his assault on democracy has been going on longer, that is, seven years.[18]

The recent developments in Poland and especially Hungary and backsliding under Yanukovych in Ukraine notwithstanding, it is fair to conclude that a democratic Central and Eastern Europe has finally come into being. In this sense, the pessimists have been proven wrong, whereas the optimists seem to have been validated—with one important qualification. As the division of this chapter suggests, democratization in Central and Eastern Europe has come in two stages. The first wave, as already outlined, featured an immediate and sharp break with the communist past, or a process wherein massive demonstrations, a large and unified opposition embracing liberal politics, and communists who were marginalized (as in the Czech Republic), ideologically sympathetic to the goals of the opposition (as in Hungary and Slovenia) or sufficiently self-interested in the face of a powerful opposition to recognize the logic of defecting from dictatorship (as in the Baltic countries), combined to end the old order and lay the groundwork for competitive elections, which the forces in support of democratic politics then won handily. Although this scenario describes what happened with most of the "early democratizers" in the region, some variations on these dynamics should be noted. Thus, in both Poland and Hungary—the two countries that, in effect, jump-started the collapse of communism in 1989—the critical political turning point was in fact a roundtable between the communists and the opposition forces (with the roundtable following significant protests in Poland in the fall of 1988 and the roundtable in Hungary strongly influenced by the surprising political outcome of the Polish precedent). In both cases, the roundtable set the stage for subsequent elections, which were semi-competitive in Poland and fully competitive in Hungary. In both cases, noncommunist governments were formed and predictably fueled the democratic momentum.

The second wave, or developments that took place in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine from 1996 to 2014, has entailed one overarching similarity. Founding elections in all of these cases had compromised the transition to democracy—either through the victory of the ex-communists, who were divided in their commitments to democratic politics, or through the victory of nationalist oppositions, who were often more illiberal than their ex-communist counterparts. However, subsequent elections changed the political balance in ways that, in contrast to the earlier period of transition, better served a democratic outcome. In this sense, a key issue in all of these countries was the growth of political competition during the transition—a pattern that we also find in the first democracies and that, because it produced turnover in governing parties and coalitions, contributed to the deepening of democratic politics.

The dynamics of the second round of democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, however, varied in detail. In Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, the key issue was the eventual rise of a more effective liberal opposition that was able to win power and, for the first time, form a durable and effective government. We find a different dynamic in Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Here, the key issue was the growing incentives for the ex-communists, reacting to an opposition that was either liberal or illiberal but in both instances highly competitive, to embrace the liberal cause as a means of weakening the incumbents, differentiating themselves, and thereby accumulating political power.

The final dynamic was in Serbia, where we see a replay, in effect, of the first transitions to democracy in the region, albeit a decade later—a process that also took place, three years later and informed by the Serbian precedent, in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004. In Serbia, mass protests in the fall of 2000 in reaction to an attempt by the increasingly corrupt and politically repressive ex-communists to steal the election,

Welcome
Bulgaria
Romania
to the
European
Union
European
Commission

Photo 2.3. Berlaymont building with "Welcome Bulgaria Romania to the EU." (European Commission)

enabled the opposition—a coalition as broad as that seen, for example, in Czechoslovakia in 1989—to win power over the long-governing ex-communists. This sharp break with the past, however, was not so sharp, as the subsequent instability of Serbian politics indicated—consider, for example, the continuous squabbling between the Serbian president and the prime minister, the inability of elections to reach the constitutionally required level of turnout, the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in the spring of 2003, and the continued popular support for the antidemocratic Radical Party by a substantial minority of Serbian citizens. The outcome of the presidential elections held in June 2004 and thereafter; the acceptance of Montenegro's declaration of independence in 2006; the use of the International Court of Justice to challenge Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 significant progress in both economic reforms and economic performance; the impressive Serbian record since 2000 with respect to civil liberties, political rights, and free and fair elections; and, finally, the commitment of once antidemocratic parties to the democratic project, however, suggest that Serbia is indeed on the road to democracy.

These details aside, all of these "second-wave" democracies are interesting in that the shift from either dictatorship to democracy or from hybrid to full-scale democracy took place in response to elections that brought to power governments with the incentive and the capacity to change the country's political course.[19] But this leaves two obvious questions. Why did the "laggards" in stage one all move in a more democratic direction in stage two? And how can we explain, more generally, the recent convergence in regime types in Central and Eastern Europe?

Explaining the Second Wave: Domestic Factors

In contrast to the explanations offered with respect to the first stage of the transition, the explanations of the second stage are much less parsimonious. Indeed, the importance of both domestic and international factors, both of which pushed in a similar liberalizing direction, is striking. On the domestic side, we can point to two influences. One is suggested by the fact that if we look at postcommunist Eurasia as a whole (or add to our Central and East European group the remaining twelve Soviet successor states), we find a high correlation between contemporary political arrangements and the duration of Communist Party rule. All of the states of interest in this volume are democratic, and they all became communist after World War II. By contrast, the record of democracy in those Soviet successor states where communism had been in place since World War I is far more mixed, featuring, for example, clear-cut dictatorships, such as in Belarus and Uzbekistan, low-quality democracies, such as in Ukraine, and formerly relatively democratic orders that have moved decisively in a dictatorial direction, such as in Armenia and Russia. The durability, albeit continued fragility, of democracy in Moldova—the only Soviet successor state, aside from the Baltic countries and the western part of Ukraine, to have been added to the Soviet Union after World War II—makes this comparison even more instructive. Just as strikingly, given the Armenian, Russian, and Belarusian cases, there have been no cases of democratic breakdown in Central and Eastern Europe since the end of Communist Party hegemony (though the period of Vladimír Mečiar's rule in Slovakia after the breakup of the Czechoslovak federation certainly compromised Slovak democratic performance in the short term, and the same can be said about Poland since 2015 and Hungary since 2010).

Why is the length of Communist Party rule so important? Two plausible factors come to the fore. First, a longer experience with communism means deeper penetration by communist ideology, institutions, and practices—penetration secured in part by the number of generations that lived under communist rule. This could make a transition to democracy more difficult, because of the absence of democracy-supporting institutions and values and because of the constraints on the development of a viable political opposition. The second reason is also historical in nature but asks us to think in broader terms about what this correlation means. The countries of concern in this volume all have a long history of close connections with Western economies, cultures, and political ideas—a history abruptly ended by the rise of communism during and immediately after World War II. The geographical proximity to the West, therefore, may have been important in laying the groundwork, once opportunities for political change presented themselves, for subsequent democratic development. The ability of these countries to withstand the challenge of communism, of course, was aided by the brevity of the communist experience—especially, for example, the unusually brief duration of Stalinization, when the most antidemocratic aspects of state socialism were imposed.[20]

The second domestic factor focuses particularly on those countries where illiberal nationalists came to power after the deregulation of the Communist Party's monopoly, that is, Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia. In all three cases, the liberal opposition, having been divided and demobilized by the struggle over the national question, finally managed to regroup and remobilize and thereby win elections. The literature on both nationalism and democratic transitions is in fact silent about when and why once successful illiberal nationalists lose power and politicians with a more liberal agenda take their place, focusing far more on the question of why some transitions to democracy feature a central political role for illiberal nationalists. In response to the first and largely unexplored question, we can identify two striking commonalities in our three cases: the opposition was able to focus on the threats and costs of one leader in particular (Mečiar, Tuđman, or Milošević), and international actors, including the EU, the United States, and transnational networks of nongovernmental organizations, played an important role in providing support to the opposition—for example, training them in the art of resistance, providing electoral monitors, and helping them organize campaigns to increase voter registration and electoral turnout. International influences, in short, were critical—a dimension that I will now address more systematically.

International Influences

As noted above, geography played a role in the second wave of democratization. However, its impact was also expressed in international dynamics. If the events of 1989, or the region-wide collapse of Communist Party hegemony, indicated the power of diffusion when neighboring states have similar domestic structures, similar historical experiences, and similar external constraints (such as Soviet control), then diffusion, we might suggest, can still operate after these momentous events. Here, it is important to remember that there was in fact a great deal of interaction among the states of concern in this volume during the communist era. For example, oppositions in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were in contact with each other during communism; the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980 influenced opposition development in the Baltic states and in Bulgaria before the dramatic developments at the end of the decade; and protests in Central and Eastern Europe during the communist era invariably called for adoption of some features of the Yugoslav alternative model of communism. While this pattern did not guarantee by any means that these countries would all follow identical pathways once the hold of the communists weakened, it did mean that developments in one country had the potential to influence developments elsewhere in the region—for example, demonstrating that democracy was possible in the first stage of the transition and, later, helping weaker opposition forces in, say, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia to acquire the strategies needed to move their less democratic countries in a more liberal direction. Indeed, changes in Slovak politics in the second half of the 1990s influenced subsequent political changes in Croatia and Serbia—and Georgia and Ukraine, for that matter. In this way, over time the region converged in both its political and economic forms—as it had in the past, only in an illiberal way and then with the additional nudge of a hegemon, the Soviet Union, committed for reasons of security and ideology to dictatorship.

The importance of geography, or the spatial side of politics, also alerts us to several other international factors. One is the global wave of democratization. By the turn of the twentieth century, a majority of the world's population lived in democratic orders—an unprecedented situation and one that contributed to developments in Central and Eastern Europe by rendering democracy perhaps the "only game in town." That the countries under discussion are in Europe, of course, also mattered, especially given the role of the Helsinki Process, beginning in the 1970s, in solidifying a European norm of democracy and human rights and, indeed, in providing the opposition in Central and Eastern Europe during the communist era with greater resources to question their regimes' legitimacy and performance.

This leads to a final international variable: the EU. As numerous scholars have argued, the EU has had two effects in Central and Eastern Europe.[21] It has provided a clear standard for democratic politics (and capitalist economics) by which both publics and elites in this region can measure regime performance, and it has provided powerful incentives for those countries to meet (and continue to meet) EU standards—for example, by offering advice on the construction of liberal orders and by holding out the promise of markets, financial support, and the legitimacy that comes from being coded as European and, therefore, part of a prosperous, stable, secure, and, to use the language of many Central and East Europeans, "normal" community. Many scholars and Central and East European citizens, of course, debate whether the EU has been such a powerful force for democracy. Does the EU, for example, make democracy both possible and doable, or has it merely courted those countries that were already on the road to democratic government? Does the EU secure sovereignty for the postcommunist countries or undermine their newly won sovereignty by reducing domestic policy control? Do the economic benefits of joining the EU outweigh, especially in the short term, the costs of preparing for membership—which include not just meeting a huge number of expensive conditions but also facing the constraints imposed by EU markets, the protectionism of older members, and the EU's commitment in recent years to austerity measures in the face of the global economic crisis? Has the EU encouraged competition or merely strengthened those already in power, thereby contributing to inequalities in power and money? Finally, does EU membership produce equality among countries through the creation of a single Europe, or has the eastward expansion of the EU effectively created a hierarchy, sundering the rich western members from their poor eastern cousins and dividing the east, in turn, into countries designated as either current or possible future members and those countries that, because of geography, have no hope of joining and may, as a result, be isolated and thereby locked into authoritarian rule?

While insightful in certain respects, these concerns must be placed alongside two incontrovertible facts. First, all of the countries that have recently joined the EU (though contemporary Hungary and Poland are exceptions, and the EU is currently considering ways to make them pay for their declining democratic performance) or applied for candidate status evince clear improvements over time in democratic assets. Second, there is a clear correlation between prospects for joining the EU and the breadth of the domestic political spectrum. Put simply, we have witnessed in Central and Eastern Europe a sharp decline in most countries (though, again, Hungary and Poland are recent exceptions) of extremist political voices and the convergence of political parties around support for the EU (though public support of the EU, it must be recognized, varies over time within countries as well as among them). For example, after returning to power in 2003, the Croatian Democratic Union, a party that had formerly ruled over Croatia as a dictatorship, went further than its more "moderate" predecessor in embracing EU membership as its primary policy goal. Similarly, Tomislav Nikolić, the president of Serbia from 2012 to May 2017, has done the same, despite a long record of opposition to the EU and support for illiberal Serbian nationalism. We can, of course, debate whether political moderation, as in most of the second-wave democracies, is a consequence of the EU's influence or a function of purely domestic developments. However, the fact remains that political leaders in Central and Eastern Europe, either early in the transition or later, have come to believe that joining the EU is critical for their own political futures and for concerns about identity, money, stability, and security that are critical to voters.

However we construe this dynamic, improvements in democratic performance in such areas as rule of law, state provision of civil liberties and political rights, and moderation in the political values and attitudes of citizens and politicians alike are associated with EU membership. In the rush to embrace the EU, other ways of meeting goals, such as international security and economic growth, as offered by the extreme right and especially the extreme left, have lost political support, either during the accession process or in the years immediately following membership. With respect to the latter dynamic and the second round of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, extremist parties have either gone into decline or chosen to adapt. Thus, just as political competition increased in all of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe that had lagged in democratization, the structure of competition itself changed through the decline in political polarization. The EU may very well have played a key role in that process.

What is critical to recognize, however, is that these generalizations about the impact of the EU on narrowing the ideological spectrum apply less well in 2017 than they did five and certainly ten years ago. Like Western Europe, some countries in Central and Eastern Europe—most obviously, Poland and Hungary—have experienced a resurgence of right-wing nationalism. The popularity of the EU has also declined.

Conclusion and Some Speculation

In this chapter, I have argued that the transition to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe has proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, from 1989 to the first half of 1996 (with the Romanian presidential elections constituting the turning point), there were variable regime outcomes, with half of the region moving quickly to democracy and the other half either stuck in dictatorship or perched precariously between the two regime extremes. In this period, the key issue was the development of oppositions during communism and the extent to which they embraced liberal politics and were able to win in the first competitive elections. In the second period, 1996–2014, the "laggards" in democratization all moved in a liberal direction. In this case, the causes were multiple, including diffusion effects within the region, the role of the EU, the declining capacity of authoritarian leaders to maintain power through exploitation of cultural differences, and limited constraints on democratization because of what was, from a broader regional standard, a shorter history of Communist Party rule. As a result, the pronounced political diversity of Central and Eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of communism and communist states declined. Just as state boundaries tended to endure, so too democratization spread. Indeed, even the exceptional cases of Montenegro and Kosovo and their secession from Serbia could be construed as an investment in a more authentic democratic politics for all three parts of the original Serbian-Montenegrin federation.

The patterns of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, together with their underlying causes, present us with several important questions that are relevant to this region and, more generally, to the study of recent transitions to democratic rule. What do we mean by regime outcomes? Does it make sense to argue that some countries in Central and Eastern Europe succeeded or failed to become democratic orders after communism, or does it make more sense to argue that the countries in this region were differentially situated to build democratic orders, with the result that democratization took longer in some cases than in others? The analysis presented above suggests that the latter interpretation is more compelling. This implies that there are differences in the assets and obstacles to democratization and that these differences affect how long a transition can take, even after the evident decline of authoritarian rule.

The time horizons we use to evaluate democratization, therefore, are critical in two ways. First, we can draw premature conclusions about political pathways after authoritarianism if we rush to judgment. Second, we may need different explanations for these pathways, depending on when we choose to step back and evaluate political patterns. In this sense, there seems to be no single road to democratic politics, especially if we allow ourselves to recognize faster versus slower transitions.

But does this mean that, given time, democracy is inevitable? Given the nearly region-wide victory of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe by 2016, or twenty-six years into the transition, we might be tempted to draw such a conclusion. However, there are ample reasons to be skeptical. One is that there are still significant differences in the quality of democratic governance in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, Macedonia has faced repeated instability rooted in the intersection between ethnic diversity and interparty competition, political support for conservative nationalist parties and conservative politicians with inconsistent commitments to democracy has increased in recent years in Bulgaria and especially Poland and Hungary, and the shift to the democratic column in Croatia and especially Serbia is of relatively recent vintage. In addition, other waves of democratization in the past, while admittedly not as global in their reach as the current wave, have been followed by democratic breakdowns. Here, the contemporary examples of Poland and especially Hungary serve as cautionary tales of being too quick to generalize about democratic change. This is especially the case since, in the third wave in particular, we have seen few examples of the collapse of democracy but more examples of a subtler deterioration in democratic performance. Moreover, the current global wave reveals a disturbing pattern: the rise of more and more hybrid regimes, which could tip in either political direction and, at the same time, could endure as halfway houses built on political compromises that promote stability at the cost of corruption and checkered economic performance. Still another consideration is that democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, as I have repeatedly emphasized throughout this chapter, is strongly advantaged by the long connection of this area to Western Europe and, more recently, by the influence of international institutions such as the EU. That recognized, however, it is also the case that populism in Western Europe has influenced politics in Central and Eastern Europe (and vice versa), and that the EU is poorly set up to deal effectively with challenges to democracy in its member states. To put the matter succinctly, the EU's political and economic leverage is much greater with states that are seeking membership than with states that are already members.

Finally, Central and Eastern Europe is distinctive in another way that has also invested in democratic political outcomes. This is a region that does not force dominant international powers, such as the United States, NATO, or the EU, to choose between security concerns and democracy promotion—a choice that was evident throughout the Cold War and that undermined, as a result, democratic politics. Even after the Cold War, this choice is being made again with regard to US policy toward Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Pakistan.

Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, therefore, as in southern Europe beginning in 1974, while proceeding in stages, has nonetheless been strongly aided in ways that are largely unavailable to many other countries that have participated in the third wave. Unlucky throughout its history, especially in comparison with Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe at this time—in comparison with other regions undergoing regime change—has become, in these respects, lucky. Domestic and international factors are largely working together to support democratic rule, whereas both sets of factors in the past had usually pushed these countries in the opposite direction.

These advantages, however, must be judged alongside some constraints on democratization that are likely to become even more apparent in the future. One issue is the declining capacity of the EU to provide incentives for new members, candidate members, and countries with association agreements to deepen the dynamics of both democratization and economic reform. The problem here is that the EU is very divided from within; it is perceived by many publics, whether inside or outside the EU, as too bureaucratic and too removed from its various citizenries to represent their interests and speak for them; it is facing deep economic problems; and it is in the midst of addressing the departure of the United Kingdom from the EU as a result of the verdict of the British voters in June 2016. As a result, the EU is unlikely in the near future, precisely because of all these problems, to expand to include such new but precarious democracies as Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, or Ukraine. The EU, in short, is less willing and able to invest in the newest democracies than it was in the case of the first and most robust democracies in the region. In this sense, the north-south divide in Central and Eastern Europe is likely to continue.

In addition, there is the continuing problem in many of these countries of significant corruption and expanding socioeconomic inequality—with the latter often correlated with cultural cleavages. These developments can contribute to political polarization, especially in hard economic times—as we have seen, for example, in Hungary and Poland. Moreover, most of the regimes in the region feature weak political parties—as institutions that structure the political preferences of mass publics, serve as the primary linkages between citizens and their governments, and shape, especially through elections and parliaments, the course of public policy. The “party” problem, in combination with a severe economic crisis, helps explain political polarization and deterioration in the quality of democracy in Hungary. Yet another issue for even the well-established democracies in the region is the very high level of political cynicism (whether citizens focus on the performance of democratic institutions or on specific politicians), coupled, not surprisingly, with often low voter turnouts. Throughout the region, therefore, we find both continuing weakness in democratic institutions and public disappointment with the democratic experiment. Democracy, therefore, while region-wide, is flawed, and these deficiencies, while unlikely to be fatal to democracy, will necessarily define the boundaries and the consequences of political competition for many years to come.

Study Questions

1. Is it accurate to say that the end of communism led to an immediate and region-wide transition to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe?
2. What are the key differences between democracy and authoritarianism?
3. What are hybrid regimes?
4. How typical have the experiences with region transition in Central and Eastern Europe been in comparison with such transitions in other parts of the world?
5. What have been the key differences in the political evolution of regimes in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of communism, and what key factors account for these differences?
6. How important was the EU for the spread of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe?
7. What do the recent politics of Poland and Hungary tell us about the durability of democracy?

Suggested Readings

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Notes

1. The tripartite political division of the region in the immediate aftermath of communist regimes has been analyzed by several scholars. See, e.g., Valerie Bunce, "The Political Economy of Postsocialism," *Slavic Review* 58 (Winter 1999): 756–93; M. Steven Fish, "The Determinants of Economic Reform in the Postcommunist World," *East European Politics and Societies* 12 (Winter 1998): 31–78; and Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54 (January 2002): 214–44.

2. There are many competing definitions of democracy. Perhaps the most helpful summary of these debates can be found in Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

3. Since the early 1990s, hybrid regimes have become the most common outcome of the global wave of democratic change that began in the mid-1970s. See Larry Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 3–24; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65. See also Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment Press, 2003).

4. On the issues of demobilization of the liberals in these two countries, see V. P. Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Kevin Deegan-Krause, "Uniting the Enemy: Politics and the Convergence of Nationalisms in Slovakia," *East European Politics and Societies* 18 (Fall 2004): 651–96.

5. See, e.g., Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule,* vols. 1–4 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

6. On the unexpected problems encountered after the fall of Saddam Hussein, see Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq?" *Foreign Affairs* 83 (Summer/Fall 2004): 34–56; and Peter Galbraith, "Iraq: Bush's Islamic Republic," *New York Review of Books* 52 (August 11, 2005): 6–9.

7. A useful summary of these arguments can be found in Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen Hanson, eds., *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

8. Carol Leff, *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918–1987* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

9. See, especially, O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead, *Transitions*; and M. Steven Fish, *Democracy from Scratch: Opposition and Regime in the New Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

10. See Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

11. Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1992* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

12. Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 18–36.

13. See Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23 (Spring 1990): 28–49; and Valerie Bunce, "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience," *World Politics* 55, no. 2 (January 2003): 167–92.

14. Bunce, "The Political Economy," 756–93; McFaul, "The Fourth Wave," 214–44; and Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Favorable Conditions and Electoral Revolutions," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 4 (October 2006): 5–22.

15. Valerie Bunce and Aida Hozic, "Diffusion-Proofing and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Demokratizatsiya* 24 (September 2016): 345–456.

16. International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe's Future* (Sofia: Secretariat Center for Liberal Strategies, 2005).

17. Elton Skendaj, *Creating Kosovo: International Oversight and the Making of Ethical Institutions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2014).

18. David Ost, "Grappling with the Hungarian and Polish New Right in Power," *Newsnet* 56 (August 2016): 1–4.

19. For a comparison of these two waves, see Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, "A Regional Tradition: The Diffusion of Democratic Change under Communism and Postcommunism," in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul, and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

20. The importance of geographical proximity to the West has appeared in a number of studies that have attempted to explain variations among postcommunist political and economic trajectories. See, e.g., Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David A. Reilly, "Geographical Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 53 (October 2000): 1–37.

21. See, e.g., Milada Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Wade Jacoby, *The Enlargement of the European Union and NATO: Ordering from the Menu in Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Ronald H. Linden, ed., *Norms and Nannies: The Impact of International Organizations on the Central and East European States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).