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THE NEW COMPARATIVE-INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND THE STUDY OF POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATIONS IN EUROPE

Liliana Pop

**ISET
London Metropolitan University
London UK
Email: l.pop@londonmet.ac.uk**

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**Institute for the Study of European Transformations (ISET)
166-220 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7133 2927
email: iset@londonmet.ac.uk**

www.londonmet.ac.uk/iset

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews four major approaches to the relationship between domestic and international factors in post-communist transformations in Europe: the nationalist perspective, the ideological explanation, state strategic action in the international community and explanations based on historically embedded rational calculations. It identifies the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches in relation to a set of standards for the theoretical construction of the object of research that is supported by work in social theory, especially that of Pierre Bourdieu.

The adoption of sensitive and realistic assumptions about the relationship between actors and their environment and the nature of politics are shown to have important consequences for solid scientific research, as scientific research, and also for generating analyses that have a critical impact on real world economic and political processes.

KEY WORDS: Post-communist transformations, Europe, Bourdieu, political economy, liberal politics

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding domestic-international linkages, such as the mechanisms through which national political economies are inserted in the inter-national order and how domestic factors could or should be conceptualised to explain variation in outcomes, has been a core element in the successive theoretical debates in international relations and international political economy (see for instance Cox 1987; Putnam 1988; Keohane and Milner 1996; Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner 1998 or Moravcsik 1998). The collapse of the bi-polar structure of the Cold War, which led to a wave of systemic transformations in the former Soviet Bloc, has given fresh impetus to these discussions. In this case, much of the literature seeks to identify and analyse the relative weight of domestic and international factors that account for the differing degrees of marketisation and democratisation in various countries. This review considers four exemplary explanations: the nationalist perspective, associated with the work of Abdelal (2005), ideology (Appel 2004), historically embedded rational calculation (Vachudova 2005) and strategic action in the international community (Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel 2006).

The paper then offers an analysis of the underlying analytical operations pertaining to the theoretical construction of the research questions and the object of research, especially in relation to the underlying assumptions about the relationship between agency and structure reveal. Each of these approaches is based on a particular set of assumptions that both constrain and facilitate a certain kind of analysis and I suggest that this investigation of assumptions and their consequences could be the basis for making a different set of choices that have the potential to overcome the current limitations in the literature. More specifically, I argue that Bourdieu's understanding of the relationship between fields, habitus and practices can provide a sophisticated methodological awareness that would improve the design of the research, the carrying out of data collection, including interviews, and the interpretation of different kinds of data. Such an approach would also provide a firmer ground for answering some of the current pressing questions about the future of democracy and marketization in Europe.

A NATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE IN COMPARATIVE-INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

The sudden collapse of the communist regimes in the countries of the former Soviet bloc opened up a whole series of dilemmas on how to reform their economic and political systems and to re-orient their (economic) foreign policies. Against this vast geographical, economic and political canvass, each of the books reviewed here identifies sets of commonalities and differences whose study might contribute to a deeper overall understanding not only of the cases in question, or post-communist transformations, but also to broader theoretical debates in international political economy.

Abdelal (2005) starts by noticing that in spite of everything the fourteen new post-Soviet states, outside Russia, had in common, i.e. thoroughly integrated economies with high energy and trade dependency on Russia, they chose widely divergent patterns of foreign economic relations once the break-up of the USSR was under way. Some reoriented their polities and economies away from the Russian sphere of influence and towards Europe, others sought various forms of regional economic reintegration with Russia, for instance within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), while still others remained divided and unable to steer a clear course between these alternatives.

Purely structural, material factors, such as trade and energy dependency on Russia, or the level of economic development do not, by themselves, explain these differences. For instance, the Baltic States choose to reorient their economic relations towards the European economic zone, in spite of the immediate economic costs incurred by renouncing cheap energy inputs and favourable access to Russian markets and the lack of encouragement from the EU itself. And, conversely, countries that have significant energy resources of their own, such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and who could benefit from opening up their economies to international trade and take advantage of higher world energy prices, choose not to capitalise on these

advantages to forge an independent economic path; they advocate in fact close economic relations with Russia or CIS renewed economic integration and the maintenance of the rouble zone.

Abdelal (2005: 1) argues that the active construction of national identity is the determining factor that accounts for these differences in foreign policy choices. Intra-elite competition takes the form of competition between alternative national projects, definitions of what the nation is and should be. When they resonate with the public and gain electoral support, such projects then inflect foreign policy choices, since 'what societies want depends on who they think they are'. Thus, according to Abdelal (2005), there are at least four mechanisms through which nationalist projects affect foreign policies. First, national identities and nationalisms provide the social purpose of state policy. Second, particular nationalist projects can justify a given ordering of priorities. As a result, the time-horizon of policy might increase because sacrifices in the short term might be more easily accepted when there is a clear sense of a longer term national objective. Finally, national identities and nationalisms confer directionality to foreign policy by shaping perceptions about available options in terms of alliances or oppositions with neighbours or other partners in the international sphere.

To illustrate empirically these contentions, Abdelal (2005) offers an account of political struggle in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine that is set in historical context, and draws sensitively on local meanings embedded in empirical evidence. Within each of these countries there are contending nationalist projects, and ultimately the orientation of the country – pro liberal reform and pro Europe, or reintegration with Russia and slower economic reform – emerges through a combination of inter-elite choices (such as alliances and degrees of affinity or confrontation) and societal support, expressed through electoral support. Thus, in Lithuania, communists and nationalists are relatively united in their commitment to a pro-western course for the country and together they can overcome resistance from industrialists whose immediate interests rest in continued participation in a Russian dominated regional economy. In Belarus, on the other hand, pro-Russian communists

virtually eliminate the pro-western nationalists already weakened by lack of electoral support, while in Ukraine the two versions of economic nationalism, communist and pro-Russian and liberal and pro-European on the whole receive comparable support from the electorate. Thus, the single most important factor in this crucial choice at the end of the Soviet era was the relationship between the communists and the nationalists in each of these polities. This relationship was decisive for how the security interests of the country were defined – whether dependency on Russia was seen as a threat (Lithuania), an opportunity (Belarus) or an uncomfortable reality that remains very difficult to negotiate (Ukraine).

This understanding of inter-state economic relations is sufficient to support the argument that national identities are an important factor in the choice of economic foreign policy; policies can be driven by cultural, non-material factors and the interpretation and attitude taken towards the hard realities of material constraint can be crucial. It would be hasty to conclude, however, that what we are dealing with is not a complex interplay of material and ideational factors. For instance, the significance of choices made by the Baltic States might well be more complex than it appears at first sight. Even though the EU did not encourage them directly to take the course of action they did in 1990-2, once this course of action became a reality, the eventual success of this strategy was, no doubt, assured by EU support. This support might have been a weak possibility in the early 1990s, but it was nonetheless an important part of the overall set of possibilities: it was structurally embedded in such broad conditions as geographical proximity and patterns of economic and cultural relations with the western neighbours that might have been weakened by Russian dominance during the communist era, but dated from before the second world war.¹

The assessment of the relative importance of structural influence, manifested as presence or absence of alternatives, is obscured somewhat by the asymmetrical research design – only countries in the vicinity of the European

¹ Admittedly, there are differences between the Baltic states in relation to intensity and importance of their relations with their western neighbours (see for instance Feldman 2001).

Union are investigated in greater detail and fully consistent with the analytical requirements of the overall argument. The politics of the central Asian republics receive a much sketchier treatment, even though chapter 3, which reviews relations among the fourteen post-Soviet states, contains a very useful analysis of their emergent national identities and economic and political trajectories. For all of the surrounding countries, Russia is a 'significant other' indeed. Criticised by its western neighbours as grasping and insufficiently committed to democracy and market reform, Russia has had at the same time some difficulty shaking off the habits of economic and political dependency in the Central Asian republics. The latter insisted on the maintenance of the ruble zone, for instance, even after Russia had decided against it. It remains an open question whether this course of action is the result of the inclination of the local elites for the preservation of authoritarian control over society, and against democratisation, or the lack of other viable international alliances.

These suggestions for a fuller consideration of structural factors do not detract from the main theoretical contribution of the book, since the effects of such factors remain mediated by historically bound interpretations and positions taken by specific actors. Moreover, in his defence of a nationalist perspective in international politics, Abdelal (2005) re-imagines the meaning and uses of a concept long burdened by narrow realist connotations, where nationalism is reduced to power calculations and selfish pursuit of self-interest. The concept of nationalism and the nationalist perspective as articulated by Abdelal are more flexible theoretically and potentially have a broad area of application. They are a tool for uncovering the variable content of the national economic projects, which could be significantly different in different countries, at different times. As Abdelal argues in his chapter on political economy after empire, it is plausible that this approach is particularly relevant for appreciating the importance of narratives about the meaning and purpose of the nation (or the state) and of efforts to articulate a forward looking economic project and a system of alliances especially at times of major political shifts, such as the collapse of empires and decolonisation, but, one may add, also major shocks and crises within the international political economy, for instance following the

dissolution of the Bretton Woods system or the debt crisis in the developing world.

IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF WORLD ORDER

Appel (2004) considers the role of ideological motivations and mechanisms in the adoption of similar reform strategies, particularly privatisation, in spite of very different domestic and international circumstances in the Czech Republic and Russia. Based on first-hand interviews with the principal actors and a sensitive analysis of the political pressures, institutional conditions and decisive decisions that ultimately shaped the privatization processes in these two countries, Appel (2004) offers a persuasive account of the factors that made a difference. Her theoretical contribution builds on the work of Amitai Etzioni and evaluates the usefulness of a theoretical framework which defines the role of ideology and the relative weight of coercive compliance, remunerative compliance and ideological reinforcing mechanisms in the adoption and implementation of policy. The policy-making process itself is understood as a series of linkages between the beliefs of the leaders and the content of their policy proposals, the interaction between these and the power distribution within society and economy, and the cost of compliance. The degree of fit between ideological choices on the part of the elite and the broader ideological context, i.e. the outlook of the powerful vested interests in the economy and society, influence the choice of strategies for compliance.

While strong anti-communism was the defining characteristic of the ideological climate in Czechoslovakia in 1989-90, this ideological orientation was more muted in Russia, where the reformists tended to promote their programme by insisting on the promised superior performance of the market system, rather than a critique of the communist one. The two countries are also different in regards to the eventual role of ideological reinforcing mechanisms for the adoption, design and implementation of the privatisation measures. Thus, in the Czech Republic, the legislation and implementation of the privatisation programme was relatively smooth, a direct reflection of the ideological fit between elite beliefs and the wider ideological context.

Portrayed as anti-communist and pro-European, the programme was seen as essentially Czech; it represented at the same time a clear gesture of rejection of the former regime which had been sustained through foreign intervention and one of affirmation of the freely chosen and true commitment of the Czech nation to its natural place, in Europe. As a result, there was little need for either coercion or remuneration in order to ensure compliance with privatisation policies.

In Russia, on the other hand, the creation of a workable fit between the elite's desire to make the fall of communism irreversible by introducing liberal property reforms and the lingering allegiance of other political and economic actors to a distinctive historical path for Russia, which implied a degree of ambivalence towards, rather than outright rejection of, the communist past, could not be achieved through pure ideological means. To facilitate a workable compromise between the elite drive towards reform and the more conservative vested interests, the privatisation policy itself was reshaped to include material concessions to the preferences of industrialists and greater privileges for labour and managers. As it is well known, this eventually led to the transformation of mass privatisation into insider privatisation and huge misappropriation of assets at the expense of the state and ultimately the effectiveness of the market mechanism in Russia. Appel (2004) contends that it could have been possible for the Chubais team to forge an ideological defence of privatisation, but they chose not to do so. Unconditional believers in the effectiveness of the impersonal, abstract market principles, the Russian liberals did not think it was necessary for them to actually defend these ideas publicly or engage in political campaigning in support of them. Also, they did not link specifically the adoption of the privatisation policies to the public sentiment or desire to become part of the 'normal' or 'civilised' world and thus missed another opportunity to forge a specifically ideological enforcing mechanism.

Appel (2004) also assesses the role of international factors in the adoption of privatisation policies in the former Soviet bloc and the relative importance of the coercive, remunerative and ideological mechanisms for achieving

compliance. She does not find any evidence that the adoption of these policies is the result of coercion on the part of external actors, a conclusion she draws from a summary review of selected IMF and World Bank interventions and the presence or absence of strong conditionality in these. Even though privatisation was encouraged by the IFIs, in their rhetoric and in the structure of the lending agreements, the funds they were providing were used to support 'existing privatization policies that the government was pursuing of its own volition' (Appel 2004: 27). Privatisation was usually part of broader packages of neo-liberal measures that were linked to various loans and assessment of performance was rarely made based on privatisation indicators alone. Moreover, depending on their geopolitical position and economic vulnerability, the countries of CEE could resist to various degrees pressure from abroad. Given its size and geopolitical importance, Russia benefited from the inclination of the US administration to lean on the IMF to soften its conditions at times; and equally, the relative health of public finances in the Czech Republic meant that the country did not need significant IMF assistance.

Appel (2004) acknowledges that by preferring to work with pro-reform sections of the domestic political elites and by funding neo-liberal educational programmes these organisations may have altered the political balance in the recipient countries, an indication perhaps that a remunerative mechanism might have been at work as well. But, on the whole, she remains convinced that the adoption of privatization policies was a case of domestically driven policy emulation and policy transfer across borders, and thus a case of ideological compatibility between the outlook of domestic political elites and the neo-liberal consensus of the 1990s. Moreover, in Appel's view (2004: 34), there is clear evidence of policy-makers in these countries expressing their need for guidance and a 'widespread deference to ideological trends and an emulation of existing privatization approaches'. Champions of neo-liberal economic reform at home, some of the Czech and Russian leaders, such as Klaus or Chubais, also participated actively in the international policy community as promoters of such policies.

STATE STRATEGIC ACTION IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The book by Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2005) attempts to explain the differential influence of the EU, NATO, OSCE and the Council of Europe on post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Belarus, Yugoslavia (Serbia), Slovakia, Romania, Estonia, Latvia and Montenegro,² by deploying a theoretical framework centred on the concepts of socialisation and strategic action in the international community. Socialization is defined as 'a process in which states are induced to adopt the constitutive rules of an international community' (Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel 2006: 2). A constitutive rule, that is, a rule that is central to the distinctive identity of a community, is considered as adopted by a state when compliance to such a rule becomes more or less guaranteed by internal, domestic mechanisms, rather than external mechanisms or forms of international influence. Seeking to engage with and contribute to the prevailing theoretical debate between rationalist and sociological approaches in international relations and international political economy, Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel's (2006) theoretical construction revisits core assumptions about the relationship between actors and their environment. Thus, actors, including states, are assumed to be self-interested and rational, and to calculate according to material interest. At the same time, the community environment also exerts an influence, through social mechanisms such as persuasion, the use of rational arguments that deploy common values to justify actions as legitimate (or not), shaming, in sum, rhetorical action.

The choice of socialization strategy by the European organizations is considered an immediate reflection of their calculus of what the membership would be worth to prospective members. The substantial material benefits of EU and NATO membership put these organizations in a strong negotiating position, while the OSCE and Council of Europe, whose membership comes with symbolic, soft power benefits tend to attach less stringent conditions for accession. As a result the OSCE and the Council of Europe opt for an internal

² Turkey and Northern Cyprus are also discussed in separate chapters.

strategy of socialisation, where countries are accepted as members even before they have fully assimilated the core values of the organisation, in the hope that once they become members peer pressure will intensify the effects of socialisation. In contrast, the EU and NATO promote an external strategy of socialisation: the applicant states are expected to adopt the core values of the organisation before they are admitted to it.

In fact, EU accession negotiations can only begin once the political criteria are fulfilled, i.e. the democratic system has become consolidated and guarantees the protection of minority rights. Once begun, accession negotiations proceed at the pace dictated by the ability of the applicant states to meet the economic conditions (the creation of a fully functional market economy, able to withstand competition in the single EU market) and to legislate and implement the body of community legislation, the *acquis*. This is a low cost strategy of reinforcement by reward, whereby EU simply reinforces progress in the accession negotiations, but remains largely impassive in relation to other events in the applicant states. Thus, the EU refrains from punishing the applicant states by withdrawing the conditional offer of membership when they slow down the implementation of required reforms (which would constitute a strategy of reinforcement by punishment). Equally, the EU does not increase the support it offers beyond a certain, relatively painless level of commitment of resources (offering additional inducements would amount to a strategy of reinforcement by support).

According to Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006), the community dimensions of strategic action are also in evidence in the socialisation of the CEE states by the European organisations. Thus, the content of EU conditionality, for instance, is derived from the core liberal values of the organisation, rather than any other, more material considerations. An important corollary of this is that the EU treats the candidates for membership impartially, according to their adoption of liberal-democratic values; this ethical commitment also inhibits aggressive pursuit of relative gains by individual EU members. For the applicant states, on the other hand, community-type considerations, such as sensitivity to social mechanisms of reinforcement,

through praise, shaming and shunning, and rhetorical recourse to arguments about legitimacy become effective only once accession negotiations have begun and the conditional offer of EU membership has been made. The ability to reach this level is a result of domestic dynamics, usually beyond the reach of EU influence.

Thus, domestic characteristics have a core explanatory role for the relative success in socialisation and ultimately accession to the European organisations. Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006) believe that the most important feature of the domestic political system is the party constellation, whether liberal, mixed or anti-liberal. Countries with different party constellations vary in their susceptibility to Western socialising influences: for liberal states socialization is relatively smooth and unproblematic; in mixed cases a pattern of 'stop-and-go' socialization prevails, but once the credible prospect of membership is established, this serves to shift the pattern towards liberalism; and finally in countries with anti-liberal party-constellations, socialization efforts have little impact. There is a brief discussion about the effectiveness of 'the *transnational channel of international socialization*, in which community norms are transmitted via domestic societal actors to the target state' (Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel 2006: 9), but this is considered ineffective. By and large, civil societies are weak and voters can punish reform-minded and reform-adverse governments alike.

Again, calculations of cost-benefit, this time made by political parties, explain their choice pro or against Europe. When there is a fit between ideological outlook and the socialisation incentives provided by international organisations, as in the case of liberal parties, the pro-European orientation is unproblematic and smooth. Non-liberal parties in a mixed party constellation, even though inclined to resist European socialisation, might find it too difficult to undo the path dependencies created by previous reforms and to reject positive reinforcement for reform when credible membership offers are made. Under these circumstances, they may choose (and are shown to have done so in Romania and Slovakia, for instance) to adopt a liberal stance. When the

costs of compliance with the values of the international organisations are potentially very high, however, as in the authoritarian, illiberal systems of Serbia (before 2000) and Belarus, no socialisation is likely to occur. The power base of these authoritarian governments is protected through direct control of the economy and society and abuse of human rights and they are unlikely to be sensitive to the appeal of the EU and or to adopt its values because this would undermine their ability to stay in power.

HISTORICALLY EMBEDDED RATIONAL CALCULATIONS AND EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION

Vachudova (2005) sets out to explain the different transformational paths within a group of Central and Eastern European countries, including the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, that broadly chose EU and NATO integration. At the same time, Vachudova proposes a synthesis between a rationalist theoretical framework which conceptualises agency in international relations as dominated by considerations of self-interest and power and a historical-institutionalist perspective, which allows her to capture some of the complexities of politics in post-communist countries. As a result, she is able to construct a narrative that includes some of the interactions between domestic political processes and EU conditionality and explains the improvement over time in the quality of domestic political competition in all the countries studied.

Her analysis starts from the observation that there is a significant degree of variation between the post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe from the point of view of their progress with economic and political reform and their progress in relation to EU accession. Vachudova (2005) then argues that the quality of domestic competition, the liberal or illiberal character of politics, is responsible for these different outcomes. EU influence is held constant, but further elaboration is provided in the conceptualisation of the mechanisms through which it is exerted, as passive leverage (the attraction exerted by the organisation by simply being there, a potential partner for economic and political relations) and active leverage (economic and political conditionality,

especially effective once the invitation to start accession negotiations has been extended).

Vachudova (2005) argues that the quality of competition has a direct bearing on the quality of policy making. Liberal, fully-competitive polities are, in principle, more likely to generate good policies, i.e. speedy introduction of the market mechanism, because political competition helps to suppress rent seeking and to overcome information asymmetries between the public and the government. This general claim is supported by the experience of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic where conditions at the end of the communist regime, most importantly the presence of an effective opposition to the communist party and the inclination of the communist party itself towards internal reform, led to high levels of competition. In the illiberal polities of Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, where these favourable conditions were absent, economic and political reforms were initially slow and hesitant. However, the balance shifted in favour of liberal politics in all of these countries once EU influence was more keenly felt in the second part of the 1990s not least because it encouraged the domestic opposition to articulate a more forceful stance and to become more effective in its pressures for full democratisation.

This shift from illiberal to liberal politics is paralleled by the shift in the character of EU influence from passive to active leverage. The latter is compellingly explained in chapter 5, which delineates the characteristics of the pre-accession process, the content and mechanisms of conditionality and their expected impact. Active leverage accelerates what had been a domestically driven process in the liberal countries of the region as they more quickly towards accession. It also has an immediate, positive effect on the domestic politics of the formerly illiberal countries, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia, who begin to acquire more of the mutually reinforcing mechanisms characteristic of an 'open, competitive political arena': alternation of parties in power, effective scrutiny of government by opposition, accountability, etc. The main mechanism that accounts for this influence is, according to Vachudova

(2005), the fact that the (rational) calculus of loss-benefit of compliance, once the possibility of accession becomes concrete, is so overwhelmingly positive.

A comprehensive comparison of political development in six countries over more than a decade is certainly a demanding analytical exercise and by and large the account given by Vachudova (2005) confirms established opinion about significant differences in the performance of the countries in the two groups. However, the distinction between liberal and illiberal polities seems to falter at times, especially since, as Vachudova (2005) recognises, countries in the liberal group, especially Hungary and the Czech Republic, also display illiberal behaviour and as a consequence attract censoring comment on the part of the EU. Hungary was reluctant, for instance, to settle quickly nationalist disputes with its neighbours, especially Romania and Slovakia, and the Czech Republic was threatened to be left out of the first group starting accession negotiations if it failed to address corruption in the economy. Especially the accounts of Romanian and Bulgarian politics in the early 1990s seem a little too simplistic. At the very least, it is difficult to understand how political actors who ended the monopoly of the communist party, introduced legislation that created a framework for pluralism, organised free elections and started the market reform of the economy could still be meaningfully described as 'unreconstructed communists'.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE OBJECT ³

All of these books illustrate both the formidable effectiveness of their chosen analytical strategies and the operation of the limitations characteristic of these strategies. Prioritising deductive reasoning, Vachudova (2005) and Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006), seek to identify and define a set of regularities that are assumed to operate as impersonal mechanisms within reality; the engagement with the empirical realities of the cases studied remains subordinate and dispenses with other concerns such as sensitivity to

³ On the importance of the theoretical construction of the object, see for instance Bourdieu (1990) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

local meanings. For Abdelal (2005) and Appel (2004), on the other hand, the rich reconstruction of historically specific political struggles leads to nuanced narratives and suggestions for theoretical modifications of our understanding of nationalism and ideology. At the same time, some of the processes pertaining to the interaction between structure and agency, material and ideational factors remain somewhat obscure.

In rationalist approaches the assumption that the regularities observed and theorised by the external, scientific observer correspond to the principles actually operative in the practice of the actors observed is particularly strong. There are also efforts to overlay this assumption with a degree of historical analysis, in Vachudova (2005), or overcome it through further theoretical probing which seeks to take account of other, properly social, considerations, in Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006). On the whole, this corrective impetus succeeds better in the case of Vachudova's (2005) conceptualisation of the 'passive leverage' of the EU which can be understood as an instance of structural influence which consists in defining the realm of the possible, as it is both projected and perceived.⁴ It is domestic actors who, in government or in opposition, manifest this effect in fact that they recognise the attractiveness of the EU project and mobilise to enable increased co-operation and eventually accession.

However, the domestic model of politics used by Vachudova (2005) also suffers from the limitations characteristic of the liberal conception of politics and its penchant for automatic, self-regulating mechanisms. There is a certain reductionism in the selection and prioritisation of explanatory factors, in the name of scientific simplicity. In this case, this affects the conceptualisation of communist legacies and the nature of post-communist transformations. Just one, presumably decisive, factor is considered relevant and representative of the communist path dependencies: the presence or absence of political opposition to the communist regime, and thus the quality of political competition (p. 21). Even though there is some interest in understanding the

⁴ Structural influence which consists in defining the realm of the possible has been recognised in theorising in international political economy for instance by Strange (1988).

process of economic reform (especially in the latter chapters assessing the impact of active leverage of the EU), the work of conceptualising the post-communist transformations and the relationship between the economy and politics is left to the aggregate indicators fashioned by Freedom House. Moreover, the Freedom House assessments of progress are taken as definitive facts to be explained, the dependent variable. The variable achievements in their modernising projects, the specific political responses to economic and political crisis in the 1980s,⁵ as well as the emergence of a legitimate opposition and the path to regime change, were all significant factors. There were important differences among these countries in the availability of resources for the implementation of a swift turnaround in the orientation of their economies and political systems and finding a place for these differences in the analysis would have enhanced the appreciation for the time needed for meaningful post-communist transformations.

In the case of the rationalist-constructivist synthesis offered by Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006), the attempt to bridge the impersonal mechanisms view of liberalism with some consideration of social mechanisms remains on the whole unconvincing and there are a few areas of the argument where this is particularly apparent. For instance, the analysis suffers from a very narrow conception of politics, and domestic politics in particular. The fact that voters do not support consistently reform-minded parties is deemed sufficient justification for the elimination from the analysis of any factors pertaining to wider societal dynamics or a consideration of the relationship between political parties and their supporters. Political parties indulge in composite calculations weighing up both domestic and international costs and benefits, but the domestic electorate rarely comes up as a significant arbiter in the competition for power.

Furthermore, at times the sharp, clear-cut typologies offered in the book become a barrier to understanding the more complicated cases, for instance

⁵ See especially Comisso (1986) and the special issue of *International Organization* on this topic that she introduces.

the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime in Serbia, after 2000. Even though Milosevic did do everything he could to eviscerate the power of democratic institutions in Serbia, to ensure his survival, his eventual fate and the wide vacillations in his positions in international negotiations also testify to his actual weakness. Control over media and security and police forces aside, he still had to win elections and often did this with very narrow margins (Gordy 1999). Caught between a much more nationalistic Serbian Radical Party and a democratic opposition that came to consider him a political pariah, he tried to play, in turn, to all sides of the electorate. This undermined his ability to offer anything like a credible solution to the complex domestic and international, economic and political problems, partly inherited from the communist period and partly created by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. His performance on the international stage was similarly ambiguous and often contradictory. The oscillation between placatory behaviour, most palpably by signing the Dayton accord, and aggression, especially in the nationalist policies he pursued in Kosovo and the support for Serbian nationalist forces in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina was testament to the same inability to articulate a position that could reconcile concerns about national dignity and status, defined in (inherited) power-politics, territorial terms, with the requirements of international relations in a globalised world of open borders.

In any case, domestic factors were decisive in the removal of Milosevic. The mobilisation of the democratic opposition to expose the descent of the regime into outright electoral fraud in 2000 might have been fuelled by recent events, such as the discontent over the failure to resolve the situation in Kosovo peacefully and even the defeat in the face of NATO bombing in 1999. But arguably, especially since the 1996 elections, and in spite of considerable control of media and access to resources necessary for the funding of political activity, there was significant mobilisation for such an outcome. Similar considerations of the practicalities of politics are also important for understanding the future course of this country as one that has now become, presumably, characteristic of a 'stop-and-go' liberalising pattern. Further democratisation and success in co-operation with the EU will depend on

hitherto nationalist forces being trusted to become part of the government (the Serbian Radical Party has the largest number of deputies in the parliament at the moment, but it is considered an unsuitable coalition partner by all the other parties) and on their choice, once there, to make the calculation that it would be beneficial for their own political fortunes and the country as a whole to stay on course with EU negotiations.

Manifestly, political parties are sensitive to their electorates and electoral results do carry messages and assessments about reform. Political parties might have some leeway in interpreting or acting upon such messages, but they cannot be completely ignored. For instance, Orenstein (2001) in his analysis of reform in Poland and the Czech Republic shows very convincingly that electoral choices and societal pressures do matter, even though their significance is not simply pro or against reform. Even when social-democratic parties, the reformed communists for instance, return to power, the commitment to reform is maintained, while at the same time the pace or the content of reforms might be modulated to take account of popular wishes. As I have argued elsewhere (Pop 2006), for all its complications, the case of Romania also supports Orenstein's thesis that the democratic mechanism has in fact provided valuable corrections for political parties and their policies while in government.

Another area of the argument where the proposed synthesis between rationalist and social mechanisms falters is the suggestion that the central mechanism in the process of strategic socialisation is that of reinforcement, the reward of conformity and the punishment of violation. Typically, political acts are sufficiently complex to carry significations – obvious or latent - that can have a combination of reassuring and censoring effects for a diversity of audiences. This complexity results out of the fact that any one act signifies not only as part of one relationship but of many that constitute a field or a subfield. In other words, any one act would carry, in its explicit content, in its timing, spatial projection and so on a variety of meanings that communicate not only for the actor towards which this particular act might be directed but for any

number of interested observers, i.e. actors who may or may not be participants in the same social field.⁶

For this reason it seems necessary to devise research strategies that incorporate a more subtle understanding of the relationship between actors and their environment. This embeddedness is not simply a question of what motivates actors – self-interest, altruism – or what are the means and abilities they deploy in order to achieve their ends – cost-benefit calculations, appeal to values and so on. Actors cannot be assumed to stand outside of their own social situation and assess it or act towards it from the position of detachment that is characteristic of the analyst or the researcher. Immersed as they are in their own reality, actors have an immediate and practical relationship to it, in other words, a native relationship. They are, as a result, moved to act in a way that reflects both the constraints of their particular position and assets and the desire to improve this position.

Accepting this premise as part of an alternative exercise in the theoretical construction of the object would enable us to create a particular vantage point and a particular filter through which to decode the significance of various actions (or observations) in the field. As manifestations of this practical relationship between actors and their environment, actions contain at the same time objective and subjective information. Subjectively, in so far as actors identify with their actions, provide rationalisations and statements of intent, we may trust that such considerations were indeed part of the operative causes for behaviour in particular instances, and were thus, in another sense, objective. At the same time, an objective analysis, objective in the sense that it is executed by non-participants in the field and from outside the field in question, one that takes account of the interaction between various structuring forces that cannot be easily manipulated by any one actor, would also see such subjective evidence as owing a great deal both to the position

⁶ If we accept the Bourdieusian hypothesis that there is a structural homology between economy and politics, for instance, or between (national) politics and the (national) social field as a whole, we can understand why occurrences in the struggle between politicians, for power, also mobilise different parts of the electorate. Thus, a broad relationship of representation between sections of the political field and sections of the social and economic fields can be said to exist (Bourdieu 1992, especially pp. 163-251)

from which it is generated and to this instinctive solidarity with the current social order.⁷

Thus, our data is always significant in multiple registers as shorthand communication of the operative cause for specific events and the field in which the actions emerge at the intersection of a diversity of factors and forces. In such an analysis it would be necessary to record significant (public) behaviour and attached rationalisations provided by actors and at the same time map these actions within a field of relationships that ultimately confer (more) objective social meaning to such actions.

A particularly relevant example of the usefulness of such an approach to the theoretical construction of the object is in relation to agency in international relations, and sovereignty in particular. It is well-accepted, of course, that there are both domestic and international dimensions to sovereignty,⁸ and in a sense all of these comparative-international explanations of post-communist transformations attempt to explain how these dimensions were articulated in a selection of states, over a period of time.

Abdelal's (2005) framework is sensitive to the processual nature of the emergence of nationalist projects and thus effective political mobilisation and domestic sovereignty and the fact that in practice it can be difficult to sustain, as illustrated by the case of Ukraine. More dramatically, the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina can be described, to use Abdelal's terms, as a situation where societal choices are still in the process of gaining some coherence and solidity. The political and economic framework imposed from outside, in the Dayton agreements, had the role of containing an array of divisions – ethnic, rural/urban, central/local - by giving them institutional representation. Whether this has had a freezing effect leading to the entrenchment of these divisions or whether it has facilitated gradual resolution of some of these differences and the emergence of complex compromises that can accommodate a diversity of

⁷ Incidentally, in so far as the market mechanism has indeed become self-regulating (in Polanyi's sense, 1957 [1944]) it might well make sense to accept that rationalist considerations play a commensurate role in the genesis of social and political action.

⁸ See for instance Philpott (2001).

interests and pressures, and thus a viable polity, remains, to a certain extent to be seen. From this point of view, it might be useful to note and to appreciate the fact that the articulation and competition of alternative nationalisms is a process of social construction that might or might not take place, and that it might or might not lead to a successful, functional state.

But the implications of accepting sovereignty as the organising principle of the international sphere could be especially profound. For instance, in Appel's (2004) analysis, the assumption is that the same model of politics can be used both domestically and internationally. The mechanisms for (ideological) compliance are presumed to be the same, within states and between states and international organisations. However, given that sovereignty is the organising principle for the international sphere, it is indeed not surprising that short of military conflict, overt coercion, understood as credible threat or use of force, rarely occurs. To say simply that IMF conditionality does not amount either to coercive or remunerative compliance because the content of this conditionality is actually positively endorsed by local elites forecloses the consideration of structural conditioning and the mechanisms through which actors become (relatively) adjusted participants in the current social order, for instance through the workings of symbolic power. It is often the case that structural constraints are internalised by actors to the extent that they see particular courses of action as inevitable; in this, actors inscribe themselves in a cycle akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this case, what requires explanation is precisely the ability of (at least some) state actors in the post-communist CEE and Russia to switch with such conviction from embracing the inevitability of the dominance of the communist regime to accepting the inevitability of the neo-liberal transformative agenda, with so little pause to consider alternative courses of action. I would suggest that once the failure of the communist regimes emerged as a fact, largely through the unintended consequences of the liberalising processes put in motion by Gorbachev,⁹ it was the logic of the international sphere, the need to

⁹ See for instance Brown (1996).

preserve status and face by the states as states that made the adoption of the dominant neo-liberal project such an imperative. Having failed in the gambit to sustain an alternative model of economic and political organisation, and to prove its superiority, the states of the former Soviet bloc could at least claim that they were willing and able to establish themselves as credible members of an international order dominated by the values of democracy and market economy.

Underlying structural similarities between the economic and political dimensions of socialism and capitalism no doubt made such a conversion conceivable at all. In the countries where communism was imposed from outside, the symbolic losses related to such failure could be minimised by claiming that the commitment to it was not there in the first place. Clearly, the conversion from 'really existing socialism' to capitalism and democracy was easier to achieve in countries where there was an actual opposition to the communist regime that could credibly take the lead; there, the change of regime was clearly marked by a change of leadership at the top. The credibility of the systemic shift, both at home and abroad, was a major consideration for the new governments coming into power in 1989/90 in CEE and 1991 in the former USSR, and they were all keen to establish that the change was irreversible by implementing radical reforms, and the quicker and more profound the better. Seen in this light, it is easier to understand why the domestic obstacles for turning such a conversion into reality were so much greater in Russia. The specific position of the country in relation to the communist project, the extent to which Russia's national identity was still invested in it and the uneven willingness and ability of different groups to adjust to a different type of political and economic system all played a part.

Taking sovereignty seriously would also modulate differently to a certain extent the analyses of the relationships between the countries and CEE and the EU proposed by Vachudova (2005) and Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006), as well. Both of these contributions treat the EU as a unitary actor whose relationship to sovereignty as the structuring norm in international relations is unproblematic. Even though the behaviour of the EU in relation to

the CEE states may be seen as sufficiently consistent overall to justify this to a certain extent,¹⁰ there are implications that follow from these assumptions that foreclose certain avenues for research and understanding. For instance, the strong implication in these two books is that influence flows only in one direction, top-down, from the EU to the CEE countries. Socialisation and the deployment of active leverage are considered natural features of a hierarchical state system based on sharply emphasised asymmetries of power. There is little interest in how the EU itself might be changing as a result of the accession process. Where the EU has to take into account considerations of fairness and meritocracy and foregoes the pursuit of relative gains, this occurs simply because of its ethical pre-commitments, its constitutive values. One may argue that the EU acts ethically not because of some inborn incapacity for political cynicism and indifference to the plight of the less powerful, but because its sense of honour, of having to abide by its own values, is engaged when it becomes apparent that the countries of the CEE are demonstrably able to deliver on their own commitment to transform their economies and politics.

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¹⁰ Contrasting perspectives in the literature draw out much more the constructed character of the Eastern enlargement process, the particular EU identity in relation to the CEE countries (for instance Sedelmeier 2005), and the crucial considerations that prevailed in the formulation and application of conditionality on the part of the EU (Smith 2003).

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