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European integration perspectives in south-east Europe

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The European integration of the western Balkans¹

Abstract

This article, the first in a series, provides an analysis of the south-east European EU integration project, taking here a historic perspective of the position as it applied in those first twenty years up to 2009. It seeks in particular to question the ‘turning point’ rhetoric – often applied to the fate of countries of the region and the European Union. It is clear that Europe is currently facing a ‘polycrisis’: a crisis in economics (banking, debt, currency, growth, inequality, cohesion and work); an institutional and political crisis; and also a crisis of imagination and trust. Indeed, the end of the post-Wall era is characterised by an immediate post-accession crisis apparently introducing a period of de-consolidation. As to how the EU and south-east European integration responds to this, the view of the author is that there is a need for paradigm change, prompted by a new understanding of the post-1989 period, by Europe’s multi-layered, polycentric nature and by the magnitude of the new world order’s changes, all of which have rendered the Union’s instruments and strategies thus no longer appropriate for tackling the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: western Balkans, EU integration, transition, reform, migration, social dumping

Introduction

In 2016, the European Union welcomed as member states: Iceland; Macedonia; Montenegro; and Serbia. 2017, Scotland, that had just left the UK, joined the EU bloc. In 2018, the EU collapsed.

This was the narrative of the art project that Thomas Bellinck exhibited in 2013 in Brussels – a welcome, ironic and provocative ‘reality check’. The Flemish artist conceived the ‘House of European History in Exile’ as a fake museum: the year is 2063 and *Friends of a Reunited Europe* has organised the ‘first international exhibition on life in the former European Union.’

The intention is to remember the time when ‘People everywhere used a single currency called the Euro,’ when ‘National borders were blurred’ and when Brussels was the heart of the old continent. Meanwhile, after the 2014 elections and the spectacular breakthrough of nationalist parties, and under the weight of its own contradictions, the EU disintegrated in 2018. And ‘Europe dwindled to what it had always been: a politically-divided continent.’

¹ A presentation drawn on the text published here was made as the keynote in the framework of the SEER Anniversary Symposium: 20 Years of *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, Tuesday 8 May 2018.

Bellinck, who believes in the European project, presented a worst-case scenario because of the necessity:

To consider all the possibilities of how it could go wrong. I think we're at a turning point, definitely.²

In terms of current policy, a renewed approach to the 2004 enlargement spotlights the re-evaluation of the multiple transformation to democracy and liberalism – and to nation-state for the post-Yugoslav republics and the Baltic States. The 'co-transformation paradigm' enables a new understanding of transformation and of the EU integration processes that reformulates the 'east-west divide'. Paradoxically, precisely at the very moment Europe reunited, serious divergences have surfaced over Europe's political, economic and social model, over its international identity and over its frontiers. Were these the first signals of the forthcoming distorted Europeanisation – thus symptoms of de-Europeanisation and de-democratisation?

In Claus Offe's words:

The European Union finds itself at a crossroads between something considerably better or something much worse than the plainly unsustainable *status quo*; in other words, in a continuing crisis.³

Alternatively, as pinpointed by Jan Zielonka:

The EU cannot be consolidated: it ought to be reinvented.⁴

Such a reinvention intimates a major institutional overhaul of the EU, a complete re-think of its integration policy and, accordingly, an introduction of new procedures for enlargement. Such a perspective would reload the Balkans accession, strengthen the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and constitute a tailored framework to envision constructive relations with Turkey and Russia.

Of course, a variety of trajectories coexist in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe as well as in the 'west'. Each country had a distinctive historical background before communism, evolved along different paths under state socialism and took diverse ways of development, with distinct results, in the transformation after 1989.

The global trend in the early 1990s was to seek to capture the overall global regional picture. The main tendency was, later on, to undertake detailed country-specific research, emphasising in a comparative perspective the differences between countries, regions and even cities. Relying on country-specific as well as on comparative studies, the time has come to combine these approaches. Our objective is thus to shed new light on the issues at stake, moving towards a hybridisation of structural factors and individual ones. Last but not least, instead of considering disjointedly the

2 Thomas Bellinck, interviewed by Ian Traynor, *The Guardian* 9 May 2013.

3 Claus Offe (2015) *Europe Entrapped* Cambridge: Polity Press: Cambridge, p. 1.

4 Jan Zielonka (2018) *Counter-Revolution. Liberal Europe in Retreat* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 113.

post-Yugoslav area, such a case-based and comparative approach reviews the post-Yugoslav states in a global regional framework.⁵

Post-Wall Europe and its paradoxes

Reviewing post-Wall Europe

Discussing the question ‘Does central Europe exist?’ back in 1986, Timothy Garton Ash made the point:

Central Europe is a kingdom of the spirit.⁶

György Konrád’s words also echo these feelings:

To be central European is a world view (*Weltanschauung*) not a state affiliation (*Staatangehörigkeit*). It is a challenge to the ruling system of clichés.⁷

This represented a challenge to the priorities and values widely accepted in the ‘west’. Today, we may ask, if central Europe still exists, whether it has changed its priorities and values – or whether its original viewpoints need to be re-opened.

With the breakdown of state socialism (1989), of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1991), of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1991) and of Czechoslovakia (1993), Europe’s post-War order collapsed. Unprecedented political, social and economic changes happened at breath-taking pace in a rapidly-changing environment. In a highly volatile and unstable geopolitical context, the region *supposedly* underwent a multi-faceted ‘transition process’: from planned economy to neoliberalism; from ‘real existing socialism’ to constitutional democracy; from the Soviet bloc to the Council of Europe and the European Union; and from the Soviet-led military alliance the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (WTO) to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

A term often used in the 1990s, the above-mentioned ‘transition framework’ clearly exaggerates the alleged coherence of the respective models, overlooks the heterogeneity of post-socialist paths and oversimplifies, with undue generalisations, what indeed amounts to a highly complex and multidimensional process.

Different trajectories of transition

To start with, there is a variety of trajectories that must be considered. First, to state the obvious, not all central and east European countries were, to the same extent, part of the Soviet-led alliance system – the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and the

5 See Christophe Solioz (2017) *Thinking the Balkans Out of the Box: EU Integration and Regional Cooperation – Challenges, Models, Lessons* Baden-Baden: Nomos.

6 Timothy Garton Ash (1986) ‘Does Central Europe Exist?’, originally written for *The New York Review of Books* 9 October 1986 issue, available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/does-central-europe-exist/> and later included in Ash (1989, 1999) *The Uses of Adversity. Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* London: Penguin, p. 169.

7 György Konrád (1985) ‘Mein Traum von Europa’ *Kursbuch* 81: 184-193.

Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). Second, distinct pathways in the breakdown of state socialist systems and the re-creation of political rule may be identified: transitions from above (the Baltic republics, Bulgaria and Romania); negotiated transitions (Hungary and Poland); collapse (Czechoslovakia and Albania); and a mix of fragmentation and reconstruction (Yugoslavia).⁸ Additionally, this transformation framework was completed, for some countries, by the creation of an independent nation state.

Claus Offe’s approach attempts to capture the various dimensions. Offe considers – at macro-, meso- and micro-levels – the economic, political and national-cultural modes of integration in the early 1990s. He assumes that each country predominantly prioritised one of these modes. His classification (reproduced in Table 1) permits us to describe and significantly contrast the trajectories of six selected central and east European countries in transition.

Table 1 – A classification of (post-)Communist states

	CSR and GDR	Hungary and Poland	Bulgaria and Romania
Duration of transition or breakdown	Short	Long	Very short
Mode of transition	Capitulation of old regime	Party competition/ election	Compromise
Geo-strategic location	Front-line states	Intermediate	Remote from western Europe
Industrial output per capita before 1989	High	Intermediate	Low
Level of ‘nationalist’ integration	Precarious to non-existent	Low	High
Level of repressiveness	Intermediate	Low	High
Elite continuity before/ after 1989	Low	Intermediate	High
Institutional change of economic system	Rapid	Slow	Delayed
Prospects for integration into EC	Favourable	Remote	Very remote
Nature of ethnic minority conflict	Non-existent	External minorities in neighbouring countries	Internal minority with ties to neighbouring country

8 We follow here Sabrina P. Ramet and F. Peter Wagner (2010) ‘Post-Socialist Model of Rule in Central and Southeastern Europe in Sabrina P. Ramet (Ed.) *Central and Southeast European Politics Since 1989* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17-18. See also the vivid country-specific account of György Dalos (2009) *Der Vorhang geht auf. Das Ende der Diktaturen in Osteuropa* Munich: Beck.

	CSR and GDR	Hungary and Poland	Bulgaria and Romania
Record of economic reforms	Extensive up to 1968, thereafter discontinued	Continuous, increasing after 1968	No significant reforms
Record of internal opposition	Weak and late	Strong and continuously increasing	Very weak due to repression
Constitutional development after 1989	Only after territorial re-organisation	Gradual revision of old constitution	Rapid adoption of new constitution
Size of private sector	Small and decreasing	Big and increasing	Non-existent
Religious structure	Strongly Protestant	Roman Catholic majority	Orthodox Catholicism
International crises	Dramatic (1953, 1961, 1968)	Intermediate	Non-existent
Prevailing mode of societal integration	Economic success	National identity	Political repression

Source: Claus Offe (1996) *Varieties of transition* Polity Press: Cambridge, p. 139

Note: Following the division of Czechoslovakia, which took effect in 1993, Slovakia should increasingly be considered in the same category as Bulgaria and Romania.

Evidencing the plurality of nationally-specific transitional paths, such a finding prompts a quite stable form of classification:

[...] there are two cases in the category of societies integrated primarily through economic success: namely, the GDR [German Democratic Republic] and the CSR [Czechoslovakia]; then there are Poland and Hungary, which are integrated predominantly through national identity; and lastly we have Romania and Bulgaria, which are, above all, integrated by means of (repressive) political rule.⁹

Third, political economy matters. As Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits note:

Once the socialist system fell apart, its pieces began to move on different but patterned rather than random trajectories, which produced a diversity of market societies instead of a single variant.¹⁰

Against the background of the interaction between government, corporatism, welfare state, the market, macroeconomic co-ordination and the quality of democracy, the authors' comparative study maps three types of post-socialist political

9 Claus Offe (1996) *Varieties of Transition. The East European and East German Experience* Cambridge: Polity, p. 140.

10 Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits (2012) *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 2.