‘What has been the impact of the European Union on the consolidation of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe?’

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‘[S]ome of the most important institutional innovations, especially in the first, transitional period of democratic change, were taken predominantly under domestic public pressure… [Democratic elites] had some fundamental templates for liberal democracy in mind without necessarily being affected by any outside persuasion’

(Sadurski 2004: 375).

‘The remarkable success of democratization in much… of Europe since the beginning of the post-Communist period is undoubtedly linked to the processes of European integration centred on the EU’ (Emerson and Noutcheva 2005: 25).

Introduction

The story of Central and Eastern Europe¹ (CEE) since 1990 is, overall, one of remarkable success. In the late 1980s, the communist regimes began to collapse, and within a few years the entire area had been transformed; oppression and economic backwardness was replaced by freedom, democracy – which was just a ‘hopeless daydream’ in the communist era (Kornai 2006: 208) – and increasing prosperity (Pond 2001: 131-134). Between 2004 and 2007, 10 countries from CEE acceded to the European Union (EU), completing a ‘return to Europe’, (Mikkel and Pridham 2004: 718), symbolising rapprochement with the West, and marking a new era in the region’s history.

¹ We define Central and Eastern Europe as the 2004 EU entrants – excluding Cyprus and Malta – and the 2007 entrants, Romania and Bulgaria. Therefore Slovenia is included although the rest of the Former Yugoslavia is excluded.
The crux of our question is whether the promise, and later realization of, the benefits stemming from EU membership caused democratic consolidation in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). Alternatively, the CEECs may have already consolidated democratically by the time EU membership became a reality, or even a tangible possibility, whilst other actors such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and internal CEE influences may have been more important.

Before proceeding, however, we need to discuss terminology. By ‘democratic consolidation’\(^2\), we follow Linz and Stepan’s threefold definition that democracy has been consolidated in a state when; no subsections of the population ‘spend significant resources attempting to achieve their objectives by creating a nondemocratic regime’, democratic institutions have the support of a ‘strong majority’, and both governmental and non-governmental organisations throughout the state’s territory ‘become subjected to, and habituated to, the resolution of conflict within the specific laws, procedures and institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process’ (Linz and Stepan 1996: 6). The EU, alternatively, mentions the ‘stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy’ (Europa 2010: http://europa.eu/) in the 1993 Copenhagen criteria – a check-list of achievements the CEECs had to meet in order to gain EU membership (Europa 2010: http://europa.eu/) – but fails to provide clarification about democratic consolidation.

Despite having included ‘democracy, the Rule of Law, human rights and respect for, and protection of minorities’ in the Copenhagen criteria, the EU did not specifically

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\(^2\) When we use the term ‘democratisation’, we have in mind a process resulting in *consolidated*, not fragile, democracy.
define ‘democracy’ at this stage (Albi 2009: 50), although the concept that democracy would be a prerequisite for accession was codified into the EU Treaty in 1997 (Kochenov 2008: 33). Some clues about the EU’s stance can be gleaned from the Commission’s Opinions issued annually since 1997 on the readiness of the CEECs for accession, which covered the ‘parliament, executive, the judicial system, and anti-corruption measures… civil and political rights… and the protection of minorities’ (Albi 2009: 48). However, the EU may have been deliberately ambiguous about the meaning of ‘democracy’ to allow for ‘arbitrary definition by those who were conducting the enlargement process’ (Langer 2006: 9). Regardless, our definition of democracy will be:

[A] system of government [which] consists of institutionalized mechanisms for interest articulation and integration, based on broadly agreed constitutional and political structures. These structures must include limited government founded on the rule of law; free, secret, and competitive elections… and guaranteed civil and human rights. (Hyde-Price 1994: 222).

In summary, the framework of ‘conditionality’ – crudely, the idea that ‘only the worthy should be entitled to enter the Union’ (Kochenov 2008: 39) and that therefore certain criteria must be met by applicant states – includes democracy as a central aspect, even if the EU has been sketchy about the precise definition of democracy.

**The EU as a Factor in Democratic Consolidation**

The manner in which the EU is said to have impacted democratic consolidation in the CEECs can be seen as twofold. Firstly, the idea of conditionality provides a pre-accession incentive to democratise. Secondly, EU membership results in material and symbolic benefits which are conducive to democratic consolidation.
Let us first examine the issue of democracy as part of conditionality for EU accession. The ‘carrot’ of EU membership was a major incentive for the CEECs’ democratisation following the collapse of communism. For example, the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA) was created in 1991 ‘as a way to prepare for EU membership’ (Cichowski 2000: 1245). This may betray the economic priorities of the CEECs, but since the full economic benefits could only be attained through EU membership, political reforms were necessary. The EU, for its part, had actually been influencing economic policy in CEE ‘right from the start’, through the PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme, beginning in 1990 (Ataç and Grünewald 2008: 40), although without offering EU membership to the CEECs until 1993 (Hoffmann 1995: 427).

Had the EU not existed, empirical evidence suggests that democratisation would not necessarily have occurred. This is demonstrated by the fact that Russia – where EU accession is ‘no longer seen as an option’, though it was vaguely discussed in the 1990s (Wiegand 2008: 10) – has not consolidated democratically since emerging from communism. According to Freedom House, Russia is ‘not free’, and received criticised for ‘electoral abuses, declining religious freedom… and the repeated use of political terror’ (Puddington 2010: 17). We need only a little imagination to see that CEE could have followed the same path in the absence of prospective EU membership.

We can better understand the reasoning of the CEECs when we accept that it was anticipated that EU membership would ‘be enormously beneficial to the CEEC economies’ (Baldwin et al 1997: 169), because of the impact of the ‘European Single
Market with its free and unhindered movement of commodities, capital and labor [sic]’ which brought ‘many new opportunities’ to the CEECs (Doyle and Fidrmuc 2003: 6). Additionally, the provisions of the Structural Funds and the Common Agricultural Policy, from which the CEECs stood to benefit hugely (Baldwin et al 1997: 169), must have been a further motivation for the CEECs to meet the EU’s membership criteria.

This faith in the EU’s economic benefits has not been misplaced. Taking one measure of economic performance, gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing power parity\(^3\) (PPP), we can observe a steep upward trend in the CEECs in the period between pre-accession and 2008, and particularly after accession in 2004 (Table 1). By way of comparison, the GDP as PPP of the United Kingdom was 1,515 billion international dollars in 2000 and 2,228 billion international dollars in 2008 (International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2010: www.imf.org). This growth is impressive, but pales in comparison with many of the CEECs, some of whose economies doubled in size in real terms over this period. However, since the economies of other formerly communist countries, which did not have any immediate prospect of EU membership, such as Ukraine, also grew dramatically over this period (IMF 2010: www.imf.org) it is unclear how much growth can be attributed to EU accession. Nevertheless, the positive correlation between economic development and democracy (Helliwell 1994: 244) suggests that this economic growth is likely to have been a factor in democratic consolidation in CEE.

\(^3\) Purchasing Power Parity is a measure of economic growth which accounts for exchange rates between countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2005: www.oecd.org).
Table 1: Gross Domestic Product based on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) 2000-2008 in CEECs. Source: International Monetary Fund 2010: www.imf.org.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>PPP in 2000 (Billion International Dollars)</th>
<th>PPP in 2004 (Billion International Dollars)</th>
<th>PPP in 2008 (Billion International Dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>153.770</td>
<td>191.108</td>
<td>261.777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>13.595</td>
<td>20.107</td>
<td>27.612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>123.533</td>
<td>159.479</td>
<td>196.417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>18.278</td>
<td>26.684</td>
<td>38.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>29.526</td>
<td>43.366</td>
<td>63.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>396.280</td>
<td>484.932</td>
<td>668.551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>60.646</td>
<td>78.710</td>
<td>119.464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>34.767</td>
<td>43.461</td>
<td>59.413</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, the past year has witnessed a global economic crisis, which has been especially damaging to some CEECs. Lithuania’s GDP as PPP, for example, is forecast to drop to 51.413 billion international dollars in 2010, from a high of 63.729 billion in 2007 (IMF 2010: www.imf.org). This will test the CEECs’ democratic credentials, as it is generally accepted that economic hardship results in greater authoritarianism (Sales 1973: 55). Despite this, there is reason to believe that the CEECs will avoid backsliding into authoritarianism, as the EU is recognised as having enabled the CEECs to enhance ‘political processes, transparency, treatment of minorities, rule of law, and basic civil liberties… even as some have experienced political divisions and discontent over economic change’ (Puddington 2007: 134).

4 Excludes the 2007 entrants as it may be too early to draw conclusions from these cases.
Unlike in the 1930s, when economic crisis helped authoritarianism re-establish itself in CEE (Berend 2001: 314), today the EU’s ‘anchor function’ ensures that the CEECs will overcome political and economic difficulties for the greater payoffs of continuing EU membership (Tomfort 2006: 8).

The CEECs did not merely seek economic or political gains from EU accession; however, it was also a symbolic act. Joining the EU ‘club’ was seen as ‘the bridge to democratic dreams as symbolized in the West’ (Cichowski 2000: 1250), quite apart from the material benefits of accession. To be an advanced European country was to be an EU member, and the fact that the EU is associated with democracy – despite its internal democratic deficit and bureaucracy (Raik 2004: 587) – has drawn the CEECs towards the EU, although the alternative of further dependence on Russia was, understandably, seen as anathema after decades of oppression from the Soviet Union had bred ‘resentment and suspicions’ in CEE (Hughes 2007: 2). In fact, the CEECs made democratisation and human rights central issues in their relations with Russia (Hughes 2007: 2).

*Alternative Explanations for Democratisation in CEE*

However, there are alternative explanations for democratisation in CEE that do not revolve around EU accession. Firstly, the importance of NATO membership for the CEECs should not be understated. In CEE, public support for NATO membership was regularly higher than for EU accession in the early post-communist years, although often NATO and EU support went hand-in-hand. For example, in a 1996 survey of Estonians, 65% of those who said they would vote in a referendum on NATO
membership supported accession, compared to just 36% for EU accession\(^5\) (Kostadinova 2000: 242, Tverdova and Anderson 2004: 193). The disparity was smaller elsewhere, but in Tverdova and Anderson’s sample of six CEECs – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia and Slovakia – the mean level of support for EU accession stood at 49.5%\(^6\), compared to 61.3% for NATO membership (Kostadinova 2000: 242\(^7\)). This public approval of NATO accession was justification of CEE political elites’ determination to join the alliance (Kostadinova 2000: 246).

The reasoning for desiring NATO membership is readily apparent, since it provided a security guarantee for the CEECs against the possibility of a resurgent Russia, with fears being stoked by the turbulent 1990s Russian political scene, including ‘the destruction of the Russian parliament’ (Eyal 1997: 701). Furthermore, NATO was perceived to be the only organisation that offered any tangible security benefits in the face of violence in Yugoslavia (Eyal 1997: 700-701). Whilst NATO does not possess the same ‘conditionality’ as the EU; the alliance did insist that the CEECs fulfil a number of criteria, including ‘commitment to democracy, respect for international law and the rights of ethnic minorities’ (Eyal 1997: 705) in order to gain membership. Although the relevance of these criteria is disputed, there is evidence that they ‘did encourage good behaviour from some governments’ (Eyal 1997: 706), Therefore, there is no reason to suppose, \textit{a priori}, that NATO membership did not encourage the CEECs to consolidate democratically in equal measure to EU membership.

\(^5\) The EU data are from a separate survey, also conducted in 1996. The figures were originally given as totals of everyone surveyed, but have been adjusted to represent only those who said they would vote in a referendum, thereby matching the NATO figures.

\(^6\) Own calculations.

\(^7\) Own calculation based on data for the same six states.
Moreover, the OSCE and the Council of Europe might dispute the assertion that EU membership alone encouraged the CEECs to consolidate democratically. By 1990, the OSCE – then the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) – had already ‘laid the foundations for the structural accommodation and Europeanization’ of CEE (Ágh 1999: 272), with the Paris Charter declaring that democracy was ‘the only system of government of our nations’ (CSCE 1990: 3). The Charter outlines various provisions regarding elections, the protection of rights and the rule of law, which constitute a ‘European’ style of government, and have been described as ‘vital for democratization’ (Ágh 1999: 266). These are noticeably more detailed and specific than the EU’s Copenhagen criteria. One caveat, however, is that there was no mechanism to ensure compliance in democratisation, resulting in states as undemocratic as Belarus becoming OSCE members. The Council of Europe, for its part, has played ‘a much bigger role in homogenizing and extending the criteria for human and minority rights to all European states and… has a much stronger institutional mechanism to monitor their implementation’ (Ágh 1999: 272-273). However, this claim must again be balanced against the fact that some countries with poor human rights records, such as Russia, are now members. Nonetheless, in the early 1990s, the Council of Europe was viewed as having ‘a key role in strengthening the process of democratisation in the post-communist world’ (Hyde-Price 1994: 243), and cannot therefore be ignored.

Having examined some external actors in democratic consolidation in CEE, we must not neglect the influence of internal forces, without whose determination democracy would not have flourished. We should also keep a proper historical perspective on events. As our opening quotation from Sadurski demonstrated, internal elites were, in
the early transition phase at least, primarily motivated by domestic pressure to democratise, not exogenous actors. This argument gains greater credence when we consider that the possibility of the CEECs being admitted to the EU did not appear until 1993, by which time many CEECs had already taken considerable steps towards democratisation, as demonstrated by their scores in the 1993 Freedom House survey, in which seven CEECs were rated ‘free’, and the rest ‘partly free’. By 1997, when the Commission began to evaluate the CEECs’ progress towards democracy, only Slovakia remained ‘partly free’ (Freedom House 2010: www.freedomhouse.org).

Simple chronology therefore suggests that the EU cannot have provided the initial impetus for democratisation in CEE, although since beginning the democratic transition does not equal democratic consolidation, in the strictest sense, we cannot infer from this analysis that the EU did not contribute towards the CEECs’ democratic consolidation, although its influence may have been exaggerated. Certainly CEE elites and masses took conscious decisions to choose democracy and reform (Sadurski 2004: 377) over regression to authoritarianism.

Ironically, the decisions of almost all CEE elites that EU membership was a necessary objective for their countries, and that democratisation must therefore be pursued, may actually been detrimental to the democratic development of the region, because of its implications for the removal of real choice for voters: ‘European Union membership was presented as a fait accompli, as policies around which there was little room for competition’ (Innes 2002: 90). Without real ideological competition, parties remained underdeveloped, possibly resulting in a ‘debilitating effect’ on democracy, reducing politics to battles over which party was more competent to achieve the desired goal.

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8 The 1991 Europe Agreements did ‘recognise the objective of the CEE-5 governments [Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania] to join the EC’ (Kaminski 1994: 8), however.
Post-accession, it remains to be seen how parties will compete ideologically in the long-term.

Conclusions

Determining when democratic consolidation has occurred in a country is extremely difficult – how does one tell, in Linz and Stepan’s terms, when key groups have become ‘habituated’ to the democratic process? Therefore, establishing the causes of democratic consolidation is doubly difficult. Indeed, it is arguable whether some states in CEE have even now consolidated democratically. Some scholars have warned of the rise of anti-liberal, if not anti-democratic, populist political parties (Rupnik 2007: www.eurozine.com), which tend towards ‘nationalism, xenophobia and suspicion of minorities’ (Bútora 2007: 49). This development may be due to a ‘sense of malaise after EU accession’, as CEE publics are drawn to populist appeals over such issues as the alleged ‘extinction’ of local food products (Bútora 2007: 53). Meanwhile, corruption remains a major problem in countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, and ‘it is doubtful whether EU-driven measures [to fight corruption] have been effective’ (Noutcheva and Bechev 2008: 138).

Regardless of whether the CEECs have technically consolidated democratically, there is no doubt that they have made huge strides in this direction. Despite the importance of NATO membership, the influence of the OSCE and Council of Europe, the vital role of indigenous actors in CEE itself and the possible stifling effect of EU membership on party competition in the region, we cannot ignore the EU’s contribution to democratisation in the region, through the political, economic and symbolic incentives that it provides for progression on the road to democracy. Even
though the EU’s expectations of democratisation in CEE were vague, the CEECs decided to imitate Western institutional models (Jacoby 2001: 170). By the time of the Commission’s first Opinions on the prospects for membership of the CEECs in 1997, five were already at a sufficiently advanced stage to open accession negotiations, with the rest following in 1999 (Richardson 2006: 215). This suggests that perhaps more relevant than the actual criteria was the fact that the CEECs appeared to be willing to do whatever was required for EU membership, including democratic consolidation, to the great benefit of the longsuffering CEE people.
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