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# EXPLAINING TWO DECADES OF POST-COMMUNIST TRANSITION

## APPLICATION OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES TO THE GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES IN THE DANUBIAN REGION 1989-2009

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### INTRODUCTION

There is a common conception in Eastern Europe that conventional laws of politics or economics are not valid in the region and that many Western thinkers or theoreticians do not understand local developments of events because too many of their underlying assumptions are incorrect. In Eastern Europe, the driving forces are not enterprise and long-term planning, but rather the whims self-interested government leaders and/or imperial Great Powers—forces beyond the consensus of a majority or the preferences of rational consumers. However, this phenomenon could itself be considered rational. In this article, I endeavor to elucidate how “Western” theories of international relations contribute to the explanation of the geopolitical changes of the recent past in the Danubian region, using empirical and theoretical analysis.

I focus mostly on common post-communist trans-national trends, on international relations theories, and on foreign affairs. This means that the following analysis is bound to oversimplify, to overlook many domestic factors, and may not go deeply enough into each individual case. Of course, the transitions to a post-communist society have been different in each country, depending on the alternatives it has faced at the time. In some countries, citizen movements called for pluralism based on a Western European model, whereas in other places more authoritarian forms of government emerged. In my discussion, I will certainly generalize, knowing that such an approach may be simplifying the real complexity of events, but this tactic will be of use in my analysis. Furthermore, I do not focus on either the Baltics or other former USSR member states. I focus on the Danube river region, including

Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The region is comprised of countries of similar experience. All of these countries used to be behind the Iron Curtain and therefore in the Soviet sphere of influence, but since 1989 have become more closely associated and linked to Western Europe. Since 1989, the Danube region has been in the process of post-communist transformation. Finally, one must keep in mind that all international relations theories have their proponents and critics—these are theories that may never fully explain behavior because they do not take into account all factors.

Geopolitics is a field of study that has been defined in many ways, especially after the emergence of critical geopolitics since the 1990s. In this paper, I will try to avoid a discussion on the many possible meanings of this term. By geopolitics, I refer to the relationship between changes in a country's political, geographic, strategic, economic, and cultural aspects and alterations in its foreign policy, shifts in its strategic alliances, and changes in its economic trade patterns.

At the outset, we need to have an understanding of the general trends of what has been happening. In the last twenty years since 1989, there have been transformational changes in Central and Eastern Europe. This is a widely used phrase. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 heralded a new era of geopolitics in much of Europe, within and beyond the borders of Germany. But in spite of the revolutionary spirit in all of Eastern Europe, the last two decades are better described as a long and gradual transition process.

In Eastern Europe, "transition" is defined in a rather interesting way. Many people seem to believe that transition begins with the deterioration of life and (partly because of this) with the weakening of autocratic rule. However, some people understand the end of transition in a different way. For Eastern Europeans, the end of the transition process does not come when democratic institutions are established and the first competitive elections held. The transition ends when these institutions start working properly and standards of living increase dramatically. By this definition, many people joke that their country's transition is not over, and will last at least 10-20 more years. With the disappearance of the Cold War, nevertheless, the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have shifted their economic and political models and orientation. This did not occur overnight after the 1989 "turning point", but is mostly a complete, gradual, and irreversible process.

**WHAT CHANGES (DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL) HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THE DANUBE REGION IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS?**

The transition from communism to post-communism was rapid, and strict control over society did not allow well-organized political opposition movements to develop. Due to the excitement of the population for change, the short period in which elections were held, and the dominant position of the old elites in negotiations, many of the people involved in the communist circles before the collapse of the Eastern bloc became involved in both the new socialist and opposition democratic parties. For instance, in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Socialist Party won national elections in 1990, 1995, and 2005. In Hungary, the Hungarian Socialist Party was back in power in the 1994 elections. Popular and fair elections were held, but many of the same political figures remained in power, under different party names. This return of communist political leaders caused many worries for Western observers regarding what would emerge in post-communist countries.

Even with ex-communists at their head at present, the Danubian countries have distanced themselves from communism. Countries such as Bulgaria have a democratization process that has a stable and irreversible character—supposedly guaranteed by establishing new institutions and separating the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. This is a result of the new processes initiated after the events in 1989-1990. I place these developments into three broad categories: Westernization of foreign policy, democratization of domestic politics and economic liberalization.

On the international arena, the countries of the Danube region shifted their primary allegiance and foreign policy from a close relation to the Soviet Union to a bold integration with Western European countries. While Latin America adopted anti-American rhetoric, in Eastern Europe both government and opposition embraced anti-Russian rhetoric. Politicians began promising to turn towards Europe, to gain independence from Moscow, and so on. This resulted in many political initiatives for cooperation, such as the CEFTA Free Trade Agreement preceding WTO membership, a political initiative for Visegrád cooperation since 1991, the Central European Initiative, and the South East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI) since 1992. Hungary joined the European Union (EU) together with Slovakia and five other countries in 2004, while Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007. In addition, today all these countries are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the last election campaign in Bulgaria, the main arguments of the Bulgarian Socialist

Party were that they had had two great successes: they had successfully completed membership accession procedures for the EU and NATO.

Many domestic political and economic reforms within these countries resulted in the establishment of pluralist parliamentary democracies based on the rule of law and of market economies, which superseded the one-party systems and command economies. All countries hold free and fair elections, and political life is based on the principle of political pluralism. Over the last years, there has been a growing understanding of human rights and both the state and society are promoting and protecting human rights. This is very important, as many politicians concede that the protection of human rights and freedoms is essential to building a just society based on the rule of law and democratic institutions (and also a prosperous economy). For example, by 1999 the death penalty had been abolished in virtually all of Europe (except Russia, Belarus, and Latvia).

The “third wave of democracy” (to borrow Huntington’s term) of the 1989 revolutions was followed by a second series of revolutions in the late 1990s (1997-2003). With exceptions, these were mostly non-violent but nationwide protests and demonstrations. The civic protests were against the new abuses of power. Examples include the storming of parliament in Bulgaria in 1997 leading to an end of Videnov’s socialist regime, the Otpor movement in Serbia and the accompanying bulldozer revolution that brought down the rule of Milosevic, and Slovakia’s OK’98 campaign that promoted democratic rule. We can generalize that in 1989 people demanded any democracy, and in 1999 people demanded real democracy.

In the 1990s, economic life was based on one broad, common ever-present strategy—privatization. Although deals were usually done through uncompetitive, secret, and questionable auctions or sales, most if not all state-owned enterprises, factories, and properties were sold out to either domestic businesses or to foreign companies and individuals. There are no more Five Year plans, no one is required to produce according to the government mandates, there has been an explosion of many small- and medium-sized businesses, and there is a migration from rural to urban areas. The share of services as a percent of GDP has increased, and economies of the region start looking like their Western counterparts. Although it may take longer to found a business in Bulgaria, Serbia, or Croatia, for example, than in Denmark or Portugal, we may say that the “invisible hand” is allowed to operate in society.

In the last twenty years since 1989, Eastern Europe has undoubtedly changed. The picture of the region today is radically different from what it was twenty years ago, when all of Eastern Europe was either part of the Soviet Union or satellite states that were ruled by one-party regimes, determined to hold on to power by any means, including repression, and dictating the states' command economies. It is even very different from the picture of 1995-6 when the old elites were back in government and the region looked poised to turn into chaos. Social sciences did not predict the rapid and total collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. But after 1990, there have been some big distinguishing trends that can be explained by some theories of international relations, and I focus precisely on the three outlined above – Westernization of foreign policy, democratization of domestic politics, and liberalization of the economy.

## **REALISM**

Realpolitik or political realism is a traditional, dominant paradigm in the field of international relations, especially throughout the post-World War II era. Its principles were first fully formulated by Hans Morgenthau. Realism assumes that states are independent and rational actors whose decisions are taken to best advance their national interests within their material capabilities. The bare minimum the states seek is to survive, meaning to maintain political autonomy and integrity. When the states' existence is not threatened, they seek to maximize power relative to other states, through which they can accomplish other goals—influence over resources, capabilities, outcomes, events, issues, and so on. These assumptions lead to the conclusion that because states operate in an anarchical world (without world government) there would be no eternal allies and enemies and that states will always try to do anything to maximize power through coalition formation and balance of power. But to understand the specific actions of states, we need to know more about their goals, capabilities, and strategies.

According to realism, the strong powers do what they want, and the weak ones suffer what they must, a truth formulated long ago in the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides' depiction of the Peloponnesian War. The distribution of capabilities within the system before 1989 was divided in two power centers—the Soviet Union and the US—that were commanding others what to do. When the USSR dissolved, it created a power vacuum that was filled by the US and its allies, setting foot permanently and deeply into the region, and beginning to be the new great power

to dictate events. This has led to the regional countries accepting the new dominant power of the US and Western Europe and adjusting accordingly.

Many political scientists are engaged in debates as to whether a bipolar or a multi-polar world would be more stable or war-prone. Two things seem to be beyond doubt. First, the Cold War world was bipolar, centered at the US and the Soviet Union; and second, such a bipolar world is more rigid and gives little room for state-level maneuvering. This means that before 1989, all of Eastern Europe was a part of the communist world. If a country wanted to break out of the regional power's influence, such as Hungary or Czechoslovakia, they encountered rolling tanks. In addition, for these countries the West presented a danger to their existence, and there could be no bargaining with that part of the world. The way to increase power was to stay within the Soviet sphere of influence and be more servile. The other option was to try to become neutral (i.e. independent), risking isolation. The collapse of communism provided an opening for all these states to shift their foreign policy. After 1989, the world was not seen any more as a final battle between communism and capitalism, and states could be flexible with their choices.

In 1991, military structures (the Warsaw Pact) and economic structures (Comecon) were dissolved. The new military alliance shift—NATO enlargement—offered greater influence of the US in European affairs, but also greater security for all new members. NATO enlargement clearly brings benefits to the US. It is the only international organization in Europe of which the United States is a member. When NATO includes new members, it promptly increases the US's direct influence in these places. With the last rounds of expansion, NATO has a stronger base, positioned in more strategic places (the Baltic states, Central Europe, and the Balkans). What is more, the European states actually want NATO. European countries, even those that have joined the EU, lack any coherent foreign or military policy. A fundamental reason is that decisions are taken with unanimous consent, which is very difficult for these countries to obtain on most issues. NATO thus serves a vital function of unity and prevents a potential security competition between EU states. Potential members see NATO membership as a valuable security guarantee that may help them reduce military budgets, and even more importantly put them on the road to acceptance in other Western institutions, i.e. the EU.

In this framework of thinking, we may look at the changes after 1989 as a process in which states have sought to ally with a stronger emerging power (Western Europe)

and thus trying to avoid a gradual downfall associated with the Soviet Union, which was losing power. But this logic is not strong enough. Furthermore, one of the corollaries of political realism is its specific prediction that balancing occurs all the time. This means that states are interested in their power relative to others, and thus seek security. Therefore, if there is one emerging state with greater power, the others will balance against it in an effort to limit its future actions and safeguard their existence. During the Cold War, most countries sided either with the Soviet Union or with the US, in effect balancing the two camps. The US and Russia periodically tried to use China against the other side. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union most states that sought independence have tried to bandwagon with the United States. Realism fails to explain this trend, but this is where neo-realism sets in.

### **NEO-REALISM**

The states in the Danube region were as much concerned with gaining power as with ensuring their security. And neo-realism places an emphasis precisely upon security. It is a theory that identifies a different blame for the existence of wars—it is not the international system (anarchy), but human nature that causes us to fight against each other. Neo-realists further point out that sometimes too much power can be bad for your relative power position because everyone will be against you. Therefore, neo-realists argue that states are most primarily concerned with their security, not power.

The decision to expand eastward by the EU and NATO indicates two very important trends in the reconfiguration of the European security equation. First, the European security vision includes the whole of Europe, i.e. the former Soviet sphere of influence, hence the EU original members' willingness to enlarge and include the less economically developed Central and East European (CEE) states. Second, the security issue most important to former communist countries was the desire to keep Russia's influence and possible threat to a minimum while securing and deepening democratization processes introduced after 1989. NATO's enlargement was introduced with very similar goals in mind: providing security for the newly democratizing CEE states while not upsetting Russia's national interests.

Realism understands interstate relations as competitive interactions in which states seek relative gains and seize opportunities. Therefore, there is limited genuine international cooperation, and if there is (in the case of an expanding NATO), it serves

only temporary goals. For the US, it is expanded power in the region, while for the Danube countries it serves the role of a security guarantee.

### **LIBERALISM**

Liberalism utilizes some assumptions contrary to realism. It assumes that states are not unitary actors, and that within them powerful lobbies of social groups, NGOs, businesses, and others participate in shaping state behavior. Even more importantly, political liberals assert that international politics is not a zero-sum game and that countries can have compatible interests and may seek absolute gains. Absolute gains means that as long as a treaty benefits two countries in some way, no matter which gets the relative advantage, both would be willing to enter into such an agreement. Therefore, countries can and actually do cooperate.

There are two popular trends of liberalism theories: institutional liberalism and commercial liberalism. Institutional liberalism puts the emphasis on trans-national actors and the fact that alliances and institutions promote all states' interests and they increase the power and security of all participants (if not the relative power among them). This naturally explains the tendency of Danubian countries to seek to join and become involved with as many regional and international institutions as possible. In this sense, integration with Western Europe is seen as creating collective security arrangements that diffuse conflict. The other option was to follow an independent path in a very unstable region and time. Liberalists also point out that the joining of institutions results in predictability and transparency in successive interactions. Thus, the joining of OSCE, the Council of Europe, NATO, the EU, and other organisations by Danubian countries appeared to be beneficial for all by providing necessary stability.

Commercial liberalism explores the role of trade and economic processes, which make war more costly. Thus, according to liberalism, growing institutions, trade, and in general any common activity reduce the probability of war and increase cooperation between states. Countries of the Danubian region have engaged in more trade with Western Europe than in the past and less so with Russia. In the 1990s, much of the former trade with Russia was disrupted, the flow of goods interrupted, and economic activity slumped. During the subsequent recovery, Western European businesses, banks, and other entities played a greater role than Russia in shaping the new economic environments. While this does not mean that states will be less hostile



to the outer world, commercial liberalism supports the notion that countries in the Danubian region would be more friendly towards their new trade partners.

The resulting interaction is caused by common security, economic, or other interests and results in new institutions, increased trade, and generally greater interdependence. If after 1989, the countries of the Danube region found compatible interests with Western Europe, then this would naturally explain the ongoing trends.

### **CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Constructivism is a theory that places emphasis not only on the material reality, but also on the ideas, beliefs, and expectations of states about their own and others' behavior. By placing rules and restraints in international agreements, states create norms of behavior that they become subject to. These norms become in turn widespread and shape and constrain future behavior by obligating states to observe these norms. For example, a state may initially adopt human rights norms only to enhance its international prestige or to improve trade relations. However, this will necessarily lead to some domestic structural and societal change, which will set in motion the process of identity transformation, and then the state will maintain these human rights norms because of a new-found belief and identity, not just for face value.

Since the Cold War, there has been an emerging norm to use multi-national and supra-national institutions, as most such organizations expanded in membership and scope of activities. Thus countries in Europe have sought to bandwagon in alliances. Furthermore, there have been emerging norms to affirm human rights, to defend national minorities, and to hold elections. The importance of human rights in contemporary European affairs can be illustrated by the creation of the Council of Europe and the adoption of the European Convention for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. These norms are what has become acceptable behavior.

Finally, apart from emerging norms, constructivism is an emerging broad international relations theory that looks at shifting identities. The theory may have great explanatory power. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Danube was largely under the control of the Ottoman sultan. Such historic developments have created feelings both in the West and East that these regions of Europe differ considerably and can form their own civilizations. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fault line was at approximately the same place but the divider was different—the Soviet project. After East and West Germany were unified and the Soviet Union dissolved, the intense ideological rivalry between

the USA and the Soviet Union was abated, and the division of Europe between pro-US West and pro-Communist East was obsolete. Subsequently, there is a new emerging definition of Europe and European identity that includes broader regions than before. This has allowed for the expansion of the EU, and even to the proposal of common European symbols—a flag and an anthem. This has been a process on both sides. On one side, in Danube region countries, people have begun to talk about themselves as modern Europeans, while in the past it was common to say that “we” were still not in Europe. On the other side, Western Europeans (although not fully) have actually started to think of Eastern Europe as a part of the European continent and Western civilization. The stereotype of the backwardness and orientalism of the Balkans is still present, but it is shaken. That may explain why we see this close cooperation between the Danube region and Western Europe. It is unlikely that anyone in the region will ever deliberately adopt a communist ideology and try to establish a command economy because no one identifies with it.

## CONCLUSION

The difference between the geopolitical situation in 1989 and 2009 is also quite obvious by comparing the behavior of Russia towards the Danubian region and its neighboring countries. For example, today it seems unlikely that Russia may have significant direct influence on events in Hungary or Bulgaria, whereas it still has an aggressive stance and a strong position in Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia. This is a function of geographical position, but also of the much smaller pace of change in respect to shifting military and economic interests and identity.

Danubian countries have become more like their Western partners in domestic affairs and economic life. People in both the East and West have begun to reconsider old boundaries and identity stereotypes, as they feel to belong to one common union. Although still in embryonic state, a new European identity is in the making. Finally, there has been considerable security, economic, and political integration of the Danube region to Western Europe. According to the outline above, many political theories support the behavior and new reality of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Today Europe looks more united than twenty years ago. What is more, this new atmosphere is conducive to unprecedented regional partnership and security cooperation.