

Milada Anna Vachudova:
Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage,
Integration After Communism

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 341 pages, ISBN: 0-19-924119-8.

The Eastern enlargement of the European Union has been studied quite extensively lately in international relations and European studies, and yet a monograph dealing with the issue from a coherent theoretical perspective is still rather unique. So this book deserves some attention. Milada Anna Vachudova is an American scholar who has devoted her interest to Central and Eastern Europe for more than a decade, with a command of some of the regional languages.

In 2003 she contributed to the debate on EU enlargement with an article co-written with her more famous fellow scholar Andrew Moravcsik,¹ using to great effect the theoretical framework of liberal intergovernmentalism. That article, and this book, made the case that: "Straightforward national interest explains not just why the EU's aspiring members have been willing to go through so much to secure EU membership, but also why the EU's existing members have been willing to let them in."² In this review I will discuss some of the problems of explaining enlargement from this perspective, but first let us examine the disposition of the book and some of its main conclusions.

Vachudova's main goal is to explain the European Union's leverage on the political transformation of six East and Central European (ECE) post-communist states: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The book is divided into eight chapters, with the first two studying why three of the discussed countries turned to an *illiberal* pattern of political change more or less immediately after 1989 (Bulgaria, Romania and later Slovakia) and the remaining six chapters dealing extensively with the EU's leverage on the political transformations of the six countries.

One keyword that traces throughout the book is political competition. Chapters one and two present the argument that the lack of political competition in the illiberal states allowed the ruling elites to violate the rule of law, and the political liberties of their citizens, and turn to rent-seeking behaviour. The level of political competition in a single country is in turn explained by the communist legacy. The nature of the former regime determined the character of the elites after the democratic revolutions of 1989. In the so-called *liberal pattern states* there was at this turning-point in history: "...a liberal democratic opposition to communism strong enough to take power and to prevent the democratic monopoly of rent-seeking elites." Countries with working political competition were faster to implement economic reforms and adapt to the rules that would bring them closer to EU-membership.

Even if it were possible to criticise Vachudova for having a one-sided approach to political competition, and disregarding other important factors in the political transitions of the ECE countries, that might miss the point. In particular, this one-sided focus on political competition enables Vachudova to

draw some rather provocative conclusions. For instance, the Czech Republic is labelled a hybrid case (between liberal and illiberal) because of its restricted political competition from 1992 to 2002.⁴ The lack of political competition is in turn explained by the absence of a reformed Czech communist party, leaving a vacuum on the left of the political spectrum.⁵ Due to this absence of political opposition there was more space for political and economic rent-seeking in the Czech Republic than in Poland or Hungary. In consequence, the reformed communist parties' elections to power in Poland in 1993 and Hungary in 1994 are considered crucial for those countries' liberal trajectories.

Chapters three to seven examine the EU's leverage. Once more political competition is highlighted, being presented as the main factor explaining why the ECE-countries reacted so differently to the EU's leverage. Given the assumption, stressed throughout the book, that membership was in the national interest of all six states, we would have expected them to be equally eager to comply with the Union's demands. Vachudova's explanation for why this was not so is that in countries with restricted political competition the ruling elite is likely to prioritise its own interests at the expense of the general population.

Furthermore, Vachudova argues, the illiberal pattern governments in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia had more to lose from adopting the *acquis communautaire*, which would undermine their power-base, which depended on: "...limited political competition, partial economic reform and ethnic nationalism."⁷ Limited political competition also enabled the ruling elites of these illiberal regimes to mediate between the EU and the electorate, and thus for a long time they simultaneously kept the impression of being seriously committed to EU membership and carried out domestic policies contradicting this goal.

Even if the illiberal regimes were more immune to EU-leverage than the liberal regimes, the EU still played an important role in these countries, primarily by encouraging political competition. In her view the EU contributed to the regime changes after the elections in Romania in 1996, in Bulgaria in 1997 and in Slovakia in 1998, by strengthening the civic sector and opposition parties.

So this begs the question of why these countries' opposition politicians were more open to European influence than the ruling elites. Vachudova consistently adopts rationalist explanations of actors' behaviour, in contrast to constructivist ones. By doing so she portrays an opposition between material interests and ideological convictions. So from her perspective, the opposition politicians decided to embark on an EU-friendly path not because of idealistic convictions but because it was a path that eventually would reward them with power.⁷

The weak point in the chain of causality presented in the book is not so much that politicians are presented as rational actors as how this conception is projected onto state-actors. Vachudova largely ignores the issue of how a national interest is articulated, thus we must assume that this is something out there, ready to be used by anyone interested in the general wellbeing of a nation.⁸ This simplistic view of the national interest is crucial for Vachudova's distinction between liberal and illiberal regimes; illiberal regimes can afford to neglect the national interest whereas liberal regimes can not.

Vachudova acknowledges the role of public opinion for the turnaround of politics in the so-called illiberal states. In her words: "...citizens of Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia overwhelmingly favored a westward orientation for their countries and joining the EU..."⁹ The reason for this support, or indeed the main themes of the public debate in these countries, is either not discussed or is discussed only very briefly. About the early 1990's Vachudova writes: "[t]o a great extent elites and publics now equated Europe with the EU. And for them, the appeal of EU membership was initially as much a question of beliefs about their identity and culture as it was a matter of geopolitical and economic interest."¹⁰ This idealistic attitude is, however, argued to have been quickly replaced by an approach dominated by trade and economics. Vachudova is cautious when it comes to showing that the decisive issue for the mentioned elections was concern for EU-membership. Yet even so, the chain of causality presented must be interpreted as such, because the argumentation suggests that once political competition is in place then the electoral outcome will naturally correspond to a national interest that can be *objectively* defined.

Furthermore, if we ignore the problems of defining a national interest and assume the possibility of rather simple cost benefit calculations, it is unclear, at least given the discussion in this book, as to why the poorer member states in particular, which arguably had the most to lose from enlargement, committed themselves to admitting the ECE-states at the European Council's Copenhagen Summit in 1993. Even if this is primarily about the political developments in six ECE-countries on the road to EU-membership, Vachudova emphasises that it also was in the national interests of the existing member countries to expand, and includes some lengthier discussions on this topic in chapters 5 and 8.

Still, Vachudova makes a big case out of the asymmetric interdependence that she sees between candidates and members, precisely when the enlargement was less important to the EU-15 than to the candidates. Without this asymmetric relationship the EU would have been unable to use the strategy of leverage based on conditionality including credible claims of exclusion.

Furthermore, the material interests of the member states fail to explain why the EU made such a big effort to ensure the attainment of democratic standards in the candidate countries: something that Vachudova also acknowledges; "[a]nd even if the EU's liberal norms only *reinforced* material interests in bringing about the decision to enlarge, they were clearly important in other ways, for example, in shaping the EU's pre-accession process and influencing the content of the EU's membership requirements."¹¹

In chapter eight Vachudova also provides some insights on further EU-enlargement. Due to the incomparable benefits of a membership, the EU has a unique capability to influence domestic politics in candidate countries. However, the precondition here is that aspiring countries believe that they will eventually join. Thus Vachudova's conclusion is that if the EU wants to play a major role in stabilising its borderlands, it needs to carry on expanding. Furthermore, in a country that was once treated as a candidate country, like Turkey, a later rejection can lead to a severe backlash and a stall in reforms.

The case of Turkish membership of the Union can also provide an interesting case to portray enlargement as a matter of national interest. Vachudova ar-

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gues that the EU's national interest, geopolitical interest/stability, "...is precisely why the EU has let itself go so far with Turkey."¹² If so, a rejection of Turkey might turn out to be a setback not only for Turkish reformists, but also for a theory of EU-enlargement based primarily on national interests.

In conclusion, it is stimulating to read a monograph written from a cohesive theoretical perspective on such an urgent topic. Thanks to the author's knowledge of the region and to the decision to include (only) six case-countries, as opposed to all of the post-communist candidate countries, it provides an interesting and somewhat lengthy discussion on the development of the individual countries. This makes the book well worth reading for the reader who wants an overview of the political development of any of the six countries in the last fifteen years.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Moravcsik, Andrew and Vachudova, Milada Anna (2003), "National Interests, State Power and EU Enlargement". *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 17, pp. 12–57.

² Vachudova, Milada Anna (2005), *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, Integration After Communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 243.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chapters 2, 4 and 7.

⁵ The Czech communist party's inability to reform is explained by the cleansing of intellectual forces inside the party during the normalisation period.

⁶ Vachudova, *cit. op.*, p. 73.

⁷ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 140, 163.

⁸ The definition of what is included in the national interest when it comes to EU-membership is discussed on pp. 65ff, but in a rather broad and inclusive way, rather than a narrow one as Vachudova claims.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 250.