

## THE BALKANS: DIFFERENT, BUT WHY AND HOW?

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*After more than a decade of study of postcommunist transitions the contention that there are profound differences between "Balkan" and "Central-European" countries has attained the status of an unassailable truth. And yet, comparative studies that purport to describe and explain these differences are often littered with simplistic clichés, disturbing stereotypes and analytical "black boxes."*

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Even a cursory look at the literature on post 89 Eastern Europe will quickly reveal that ambitious and seemingly sophisticated cross-regional comparisons amount to little more than an explicit endorsement of a set of "common wisdoms" that, as Maria Todorova magnificently demonstrated in her "Imagining the Balkans," have been in stock for at least two centuries. It makes a lot of sense, therefore, to ask why the attempts to explore diverging trajectories of postcommunist development have been so distinctly underwhelming.

Naturally, scholars and intellectuals who ponder this somewhat saddening puzzle are likely to focus on the enduring appeal of the hostile "animus" and the persisting prejudices at work in, to use a fancy expression, "the construction of the Balkans as "Europe's other." And the saliency of this approach cannot be denied. But it is also conceivable that the major problem is the choice of analytical tools for examining the undeniable differences between the Balkan countries and the rest of Eastern Europe. In other words, the trouble is not so much with the substantive findings offered in the literature - findings that relentlessly and somewhat tediously replay the theme of how the "developed" is superior to the "backward." The more fundamental issue concerns the types of analytical strategies employed for establishing dissimilarities. And the major problem in that regard is the indiscriminate and at times downright confusing use of the notion of "legacies." It is precisely the invocation of legacies - or the claim that diverging patterns of postcommunist development are "deeply rooted" in different historical pasts - that in fact functions as a license for resurrecting stereotypes. And it is precisely when the big talk about ineffable *longue duree*s is unleashed that explanations of the variety of postcommunist experiences degenerate into empirically rudimentary and analytically crude claims.

It is advisable, then, to use the treacherous notion of legacies with caution and prudence. Here are four commonsensical recommendations that may help streamline the on-going effort to explain why the Balkans are "different":

## **A. THE LAW OF DIMINISHING RETURNS OF GOING BACK TO HISTORY**

Insofar as explaining differences in the postcommunist era is concerned, a "law of diminishing returns of going back to history" seems to be afoot. Put differently, the more recent the historical period linked to post 89 "variations," the more promising the research projects and the more convincing the explanations are. Conversely, the more distant the legacies under consideration, the greater the probability that complex evidence will be rather inelegantly simplified in order to fit a pre-conceived explanatory scheme. Understandably, from that perspective the most important decade is the 1980s - a decade that, for the most part, remains surprisingly under- or one-sidedly researched. What were the processes of stratification in communist parties on the Balkan countries as compared to the rest of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe?

What was happening in state bureaucracies - what networks of influence emerged, how did patterns of *de facto* control over resources shift, and what, if any, were the institutional repercussions of attempts to "optimize" the working of planned economies? Did any "alternative groups" emerge in society, what were the resources that they acquired, and what were their strategies for interacting with communist party-states? Surely these questions seem much more interesting than trite reflections on the differences between the Habsburg and Ottoman political spaces.

## B. DISAGGREGATING "LEGACIES"

One compelling insight that comes out of the literature on postcommunism is that the very concept of "historical legacies" is too amorphous and indeterminate to be usefully deployed in comparative studies. It has to be disaggregated in order to fit particular projects and serve concrete analytical purposes. Over the last 2-3 years several outstanding authors have provided solid guidelines in that regard - one may think of Stephen Hanson's attempt to delineate various dimensions of "the Leninist legacy" and hypothesize about how these dimensions mold postcommunist political and social practices; of Herbert Kitschelt's effort to link dissimilarities of party systems to differences in levels of coercion and strategies for bureaucracy-building employed under communism, and Anna Grzymala-Busse's research on how different patterns of cadre-recruitment in the 1980s shaped the national political arenas that emerged in the 1990s. In the light of such sharply focused analytical interpretations of postcommunist differences broad references to "Balkan history" appear eminently unhelpful. That is why it is incumbent upon those who talk about "legacies" *tout court* to identify with a fairly high degree of exactness the factors and causal chains that underpin their explanations of variation in postcommunist development.

## C. THE IMPERATIVE OF SCALING DOWN ANALYTICAL LEVELS.

If and when differences between, say, Hungary and Romania are established, it would be prudent **not** to locate these differences on the highest analytical levels. This is so because, firstly, trained comparativists will be hard pressed to produce evidence that there is "significant variation on the dependent variable," in other words that the process of "democratic consolidation" has generated qualitatively different outcomes in "Central Europe" and in the "Balkans." But the scaling down of analytical claims is also necessary because, secondly, the propensity for grand generalizations may do a disservice to the scholarly community: important opportunities for fine-tuning research programs and enriching analytical repertoires will be missed.

For example, empirical findings pertaining to difference are as a matter of

course transposed into claims about "levels of democratic consolidation," "the strength of civil society" or "progress towards the rule of law." The same evidence, however, might be much more convincingly analyzed within more craftily devised analytical frameworks. For example, one may forego the exciting talk about "consolidated" and "unconsolidated" democracies and discuss instead the varying degrees of diffuseness in the party system in the context of free and fair democratic elections. While from that vantage point the differences between Hungary and Romania will still be palpable, the researcher will not be impelled to invoke the contrast between "true" and "bogus" democratic regimes to explain them. Likewise, the diverging outcomes of reforms aimed at institution-building - e.g. the fact that Poland has a bureaucracy that functions better than Bulgaria's - may be examined from the point of view of various elite strategies employed in the political struggles of the 1990s rather than by the simple juxtaposition of "rule of law-based" and "neo-authoritarian" political regimes. Finally, contrasting patterns of postcommunist reforms may be better explained by looking at the incentives of key players operating in concrete institutional settings rather than by impressionistic theorizing about the strength and weakness of "civil societies."

In other words, the attempt to straightjacket comparative projects into the worn-out debate about how "good" political regimes differ from "degenerate" ones is hardly going to generate genuine knowledge and understanding. In contrast, more focused comparative analyses may well engender the insights we need in order to map more thoroughly the variety of postcommunist experiences and the dimensions of transformative changes after 1989.

#### **D. ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF ACCIDENTS**

One final point that may be raised is that, at least so far, the role of accidents in explaining differences between postcommunist political systems has been unduly neglected. A methodological corollary of the due acknowledgement of the formative role of accidents is that we should not jump to the conclusion that observable differences across regions are necessarily caused by "deep structures" or "culture." A competing hypothesis, well worth considering, is that these differences might be the outcome of unpredictable chains of events triggered by unexpected accidents. One accident in particular stands out in the context of cross-regional comparisons: the collapse of Yugoslavia. Whether or not this collapse was structurally and historically determined is obviously not an issue that may be considered here. There is little doubt, however, that for the neighboring countries - Bulgaria and Romania in particular - this spectacular development was an accident that fell upon, rather than was in any meaningful way "caused" by, them. More concretely the UN-imposed embargo on former Yugoslavia led to considerable strengthening of criminal elites, affected the behavior of strategically located bureaucrats and precipitated the weakening of postcommunist state apparatuses. In the absence of this rapidly emerging and fairly unique "structure of incentives," the

institutional framework that evolved in Yugoslavia's Balkan neighbors might have been rather different.

It would be downright delusional, indeed, to believe that the brief methodological sketch adumbrated above will miraculously revitalize the somewhat stagnant field of cross-regional comparative postcommunist studies. My humble hope is that the main message is clear: is and when differences among postcommunist countries are examined, the history of these countries should not be perceived exclusively in terms of legacies that are "deeply rooted," homogenous across time, all-encompassing and "structurally determining." When exploring how the present is linked to the past, it would be wiser to interpret legacies as a set of dynamically changing factors that have a heterogeneous impact at various times and in different social settings, give rise to specific effects - and are often galvanized by accidents.

The benefits of such an attitude may go beyond the boundaries of scholarly research. As cynics will be quick to point out, the past decade has yielded numerous examples of how comparative studies proceed, in a Clausewitzian style, as a continuation of foreign policy by other means: the ultimate goal of many a scholar has in fact been to convince "the West" that his country is more "European" - "more democratic," "more marketized," "more institutionalized" - than its neighbors (usually the neighbors on the East). Against this intellectual background, a recalibrating of scholarly attention towards more subtly defined dimensions of difference and analytically more astute choices of comparative frameworks might generate desirable effects. Undeniably, at least some cross-regional studies of Eastern Europe have been dominated by what we may call, à la Albert Hirschmann, *la rage de vouloir différencier*. Perhaps it is time that this passion were tamed by a counter-passion - the passion to compare. Should such a shift of attitudes occur, it may provide a solid basis for collaboration and respect in an area often marked by competition and mutual resentment.