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RETHINKING RECENT DEMOCRATIZATION

Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience

By VALERIE BUNCE*

RECENT DEMOCRATIZATION

OUR understanding of recent democratization—of such issues as the origins and the consolidation of new democracies—has been heavily influenced by the experiences of Latin America and southern Europe.¹ This is not surprising. The third wave of democratization, as Samuel Huntington termed it, began in southern Europe and then moved quickly to Latin America.² Moreover, given the political oscillations of the region they study, specialists in Latin American politics were unusually well positioned to address questions of regime transition. Finally, combining the experiences of these two regions offered a comparative advantage. They contained a large number of countries, virtually all of which had redemocratized over the course of a decade and a half; they shared some commonalities in terms of history and culture; and yet they varied with respect to the timing and mode of transition. It is precisely such a mix of similarities and differences that makes for instructive comparison.

The breakdown of state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 and the subsequent rise of new regimes and new states throughout this region provide us with an opportunity to broaden the discussion of recent democratization.³ By broadening, I

*I thank Nancy Bermeo, George Breslauer, Michael McFaul, Phil Roeder, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, Sidney Tarrow, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article.

¹ See, especially, Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, vols. 1–4 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

² Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

³ See also M. Steven Fish, "Postcommunist Subversion: Social Science and Democratization in East Europe and Eurasia," *Slavic Review* 58 (Winter 1999); Valerie Bunce, "Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Conclusions," *Comparative Political Studies* 33 (August–September 2000); Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002).

refer, most obviously, to the geography of the conversation. If recent democratization is, indeed, a global process, then the terrain of these studies should better reflect that fact. Moreover, only by expanding the geographical horizons can we know whether our conceit as social scientists—that is, our presumption of generalizability—is well founded.

There are, in addition, three other aspects of broadening. One is the familiar argument, central to the ideology of pluralism, that more voices are preferable to fewer in producing quality outcomes. This is particularly important in comparative politics, given the correlation between geographical and intellectual boundaries. As we all know, the concepts used, the questions asked, and the theories evaluated all tend to take on a regional cast.

Just as familiar is a second consideration. Stepping outside our familiar terrain often alerts us to new factors and new relationships—more generally, new thinking, to borrow from Gorbachev. As already suggested, this is not just a matter of reaping intellectual benefits from liberalization of trade among scholarly cultures. This is also a function of the new issues that additional cases often introduce. For example, with the rise of new states and new economic and political regimes in the former communist world came heightened sensitivity among scholars to a series of previously overlooked concerns. These include the impact of economic regime transition on the democratic project;⁴ the critical distinction between founding genuinely new democracies (as in most postcommunist states) versus redemocratization (as with much of Latin America and southern Europe); the impact of identity politics and the state on democratization;⁵ the consequences for democratic politics of deficiencies in civil and political society;⁶ and the role of international institutions in founding, sustaining, and/or undermining new democracies.⁷

⁴See M. Steven Fish, "The Determinants of Economic Reform in the Postcommunist World," *East European Politics and Societies* 12 (Winter 1998).

⁵Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Domestic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Postcommunist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Deborah J. Yashar, "Democracy, Indigenous Movements, and the Postliberal Challenge in Latin America," *World Politics* 52 (October 1999).

⁶Richard Rose, "Uses of Social Capital in Russia: Modern, Pre-Modern, and Anti-Modern," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16 (January–March 2000); Marc Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷See Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Janine Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); Sarah L. Henderson, "Selling Civil Society: Western Aid and the Non-Governmental Organization Sector in Russia," *Comparative Political Studies* 35 (March 2002).

A final benefit of broadening is methodological. The most illuminating comparisons are those that restrain the universe of causes while expanding the range of results. In the case of comparative democratization, while Latin America and southern Europe go far in meeting the first condition, they are less helpful on the second—though recent threats to democracy in, say, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, and perhaps Argentina have provided greater variation in dependent variables. By contrast, the postcommunist region of East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union is unusually useful on both counts, given, for example, similarities in institutional legacies and in both the timing and the agenda of transformation alongside the sheer diversity of the region's economic and political pathways—what Charles King has aptly termed the “mercurial dependent variables” of postcommunism.⁸

The appeal of this region as an ideal laboratory for comparative inquiry has not been lost on analysts. There are thus a number of studies that use cases from the postcommunist area to address such questions as why democracies either do or do not arise and why some of the new democracies succeed, whereas others break down;⁹ whether variations in economic performance reflect historical or more recent influences and geographical, economic, or political factors;¹⁰ and why transitions to democracy are sometimes accompanied by nationalist protests, why some states dissolve in reaction to these protests, and why state dissolution is either violent or peaceful.¹¹

⁸ King, “Post-Postcommunism: Transition, Comparison, and the End of ‘Eastern Europe,’” *World Politics* 53 (October 2000). On the divergent political and economic dynamics of the postcommunist region, see Valerie Bunce, “The Political Economy of Postsocialism,” *Slavic Review* 58 (Winter 1999); www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/index; Karen Dawisha, “Post-Communism’s Troubled Steps toward Democracy: An Aggregate Analysis of Progress in the Twenty-seven New States” (Manuscript, Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies, University of Maryland, September 1997).

⁹ Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 54 (January 2002); M. Steven Fish, “The Dynamics of Democratic Erosion,” and Stephen E. Hanson, “Defining Democratic Consolidation,” both in Richard D. Anderson, M. Steven Fish, Stephen E. Hanson, and Philip G. Roeder, eds., *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Interwar Europe and post-WW II Latin America also provide an ideal laboratory for the study of democratic breakdown. See Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Collapse of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Vladimir Popov, *The Political Economy of Growth in Russia*, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, no. 17 (Cambridge: Davis Center, Harvard University, 2000); Timothy Frye, “The Perils of Polarization: Economic Performance in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 54 (April 2002); Anders Aslund, *Building Capitalism: The Transformation of the Soviet Bloc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David A. Reilly, “Geographical Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 53 (October 2000).

¹¹ Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Carol Skalnik Leff, “Democratization and Disintegration in Multinational States: The Breakup of the Communist Federations,”

COMPARING NEW DEMOCRACIES

This article aims to use the postcommunist experience in East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union—twenty-seven cases in all—to rethink our understanding of recent democratization. It does so by conducting a conversation between two bodies of research: (1) studies of Latin America and southern Europe, which collectively have constituted the reigning wisdom in the field, and (2) research on postcommunist politics. The discussion will focus on two relationships central to discussions in the field—between transitional politics and subsequent regime trajectories and between the consolidation and the sustainability of democracy. We will see that the postcommunist experience challenges the way both issues have been understood.

In particular, I argue the following. First, the degree of uncertainty in democratic transitions varies considerably. This in turn affects the strategies of transition and their payoffs. Second, mass mobilization can contribute to both the founding and the consolidation of democracy. Third, under certain conditions the democratic project is furthered by transitions that involve both nationalist protest and changes in state boundaries. Fourth, while rapid progress in democratic consolidation improves the prospects for democratic survival in the future, it does not follow that unconsolidated democracies are necessarily less sustainable. Indeed, compromising democracy (and the state) may *contribute* to democratic survival. Finally, while comparisons among new democracies can identify the optimal *conditions* for democratization, they may have less to say about optimal *strategies* for democratization.

TRANSITIONS TO DEMOCRACY: ASSUMPTIONS AND ARGUMENTS

The analysis of recent democratization has been premised on some core assumptions about transitions from dictatorship to democracy—with the transitional period understood as beginning with an evident weakening of authoritarian rule and ending with the first competitive elections. These assumptions include the following: (1) that immediate influences are more important than historical considerations in shaping transitional dynamics; (2) that transitions are inherently quite uncertain; (3) that the central dynamic in a transition is bargaining be-

World Politics 51 (January 1999); Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics* 53 (July 2001); Abby Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Rasma Karklins, *Ethnopolitics and the Transition to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

tween authoritarian leaders and leaders of the democratic opposition, with outcomes a function of their relative power; and (4) that the key issues on the table during the transition are breaking with authoritarian rule, building democratic institutions, and eliciting the cooperation of authoritarians.¹²

These assumptions, coupled with comparative studies of Latin America and southern Europe, have produced several generalizations about what constitutes the ideal approach to transition. First, as Dankwart Rustow argued more than thirty years ago, successful democratization seems to require at the very least a prior settlement of the national and state questions.¹³ Second, bargaining about the rules of the transition and the new political order should be limited to a small group of authoritarian elites and representatives of the democratic opposition. Finally, given the uncertainty of transitions, it is useful to forge compromises that promote political stability during the construction of a democratic order. In practice, this means pacting; reducing the range of issues on the bargaining table (for example, avoiding reforms of the state and, if possible, major and inherently destabilizing economic reforms); demobilizing publics (which also limits the issues on the table, while depriving the authoritarians of a rationale for sabotaging democratization); forming interim governments with leaders agreeable to both sides; giving the military some room for political maneuver in the constitution; and holding a competitive election that produces a government broadly representative of both authoritarians and democrats.¹⁴

MASS MOBILIZATION

The postcommunist experience seems to challenge many of these assumptions about transitional strategies. Let us begin by addressing the

¹² O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (fn. 1); Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23 (Spring 1990); Guiseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹³ Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970).

¹⁴ O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (fn. 1); Richard Gunther, "Spain: The Very Model of a Modern Elite Settlement," in John Higley and Richard Gunther, eds., *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Robert M. Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime: Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy," *World Politics* 42 (April 1990); Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jose Maria Maravall, "Politics and Policy: Economic Reforms in Southern Europe," in Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, Jose Maria Maravall, and Adam Przeworski, eds., *Economic Reforms in New Democracies: A Social Democratic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Moderate policies, however, do not imply the absence of political conflict. See Nancy Bermeo, "Myths of Moderation," *Comparative Politics* 29 (April 1997).

role of mass publics in the transition. It is widely agreed among specialists and confirmed by the rankings over time by Freedom House that the most successful transitions to democracy in the postcommunist region have been in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia.¹⁵ The transition to democracy in every one of these cases, except Hungary, began with mass protests.¹⁶ Moreover, if we restrict our focus to those countries that show significant improvement in their democratic performance over time, or Bulgaria and Romania, we see the same pattern: mass mobilization at the beginning of the transition.

Why was mass mobilization so often helpful to the democratic transition in the postcommunist context? The answer is that political protests performed a number of valuable functions. They signaled the breakdown of the authoritarian order; created a widespread sense that there were alternatives to that order; pushed authoritarian leaders (and sometimes even leaders of the opposition, as with Walesa in Poland) to the bargaining table; created (and sometimes restored) a large opposition united by its rejection of the incumbent regime; and gave opposition leaders a resource advantage when bargaining with authoritarian elites. Finally, mass mobilization created a mandate for radical change that subsequently translated into a large victory for the democratic forces in the first competitive elections and, following that, led to the introduction of far-reaching economic and political reforms.

UNCERTAINTY

If we accept that mass mobilization during the transition can further the democratic project, then we necessarily confront additional challenges to the received wisdom about recent democratization. First, it can be argued that in many cases such mobilization in the postcommunist region reduced the uncertainty of the transition—by providing a clear reading of mass sentiments, by strengthening the bargaining power of opposition leaders, and by forcing the communists to give up their defense of the old order, either stepping aside quickly (as in Czechoslovakia) or, when thinking prospectively, joining the movement

¹⁵ See fn. 8.

¹⁶ In Hungary mass mobilization was understood to be politically risky (and turned out ultimately to be unnecessary), given the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, on the one hand, and the willingness of the reform communists, even before the roundtable, to jump on the democratic bandwagon, on the other hand. See Patrick H. O'Neil, "Revolution from Within: Institutional Analysis, Transitions from Authoritarianism, and the Case of Hungary," *World Politics* 48 (July 1996).

for democracy (as in Poland, Slovenia, and the Baltic states).¹⁷ At the same time, mass mobilization promised—and delivered—a popular mandate for democracy in the first competitive elections.

Most of the transitions to democracy in the postcommunist world were, of course, highly uncertain. This is evidenced by the fact that the first competitive election in most of the countries in the region led to a communist victory. Indeed, the larger the victory, the more likely that authoritarian rule continued. Moreover, even ten years after the transition began, only one-third of the postcommunist regimes were ranked fully free. Although this is the highest number since state socialism fell, it is a percentage much lower than what one finds at a comparable point in the Latin American and southern European transitions. When combined with the earlier observations, these patterns suggest that the uncertainty surrounding postcommunist political trajectories varied significantly.¹⁸ In some cases, a democratic outcome was relatively predictable; in most others, the political options after communism were far more open-ended.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF UNCERTAINTY

The existence of a more certain political environment in some countries calls into question both the necessity and the logic, outlined earlier, of safeguarding the new democracy by forging compromises between authoritarians and democrats. It is precisely the absence of pressure to do so in the Polish, the Czech, and the other highly successful transitions that explains another contrast between the “East” and the “South.” It is true that many of the most successful transitions in the postcommunist area included pacting (though rarely as elaborate as the Spanish experience) and that some also evidenced for a brief time broadly representative interim governments.¹⁹ It is also true, however, that the transitions in the postcommunist region that combined pacting with demobilized publics—or what has been asserted to be the preferred approach in the South—were precisely the transitions that were most likely to continue authoritarian rule in the postcommunist region.²⁰ Moreover, the other

¹⁷ See Anna M. Grzymala-Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past: The Regeneration of Communist Parties in East-Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Because Poland was the first country in the region to break with communist party rule, its transition was somewhat more uncertain. Given the character of the Soviet bloc, however, developments in Poland during the first half of 1989 lowered the risks of transition for other members of the bloc.

¹⁹ Jon Elster, ed., *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁰ Pauline Jones Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions and Pacts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

compromises that were deemed so beneficial for the southern European and Latin American transitions were rejected by opposition leaders in Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, and the like. Instead, they were strongly positioned to favor an immediate and sharp break with the authoritarian past. Thus, in every highly successful case of democratization in the region, the military was excluded from political influence from the start; the first elections involved a radical break with the political leadership of the past; and major changes in the economy were introduced quickly.²¹ Just as important was the commitment in each of these cases to reforming the state, including in most of them its very boundaries. For the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and the Baltic states, then, the agenda of transition was unusually ambitious.

Postcommunist transition dynamics therefore ask us to amend the familiar formulation drawn from the South. It was precisely because mass mobilization was so threatening to authoritarians that leaders of the opposition in some of these countries were free to carry out radical political and economic reforms. Put differently: because of popular mobilization or, in the Hungarian case, reform communism and collaboration between democrats and authoritarians, opposition leaders in what became the most sustainable and full-scale democracies in the East could proceed quickly in breaking with authoritarian rule and building democratic (and, for that matter, capitalist) institutions without worrying as much as their counterparts elsewhere about appeasing authoritarian interests.

This, in turn, altered the strategies of transition and their payoffs. While bridging between the old and the new order constituted by all accounts the most successful approach to democratization in Latin America and southern Europe, the most successful strategy in the postcommunist region was the opposite—severing ties.

THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY

Also contributing to these interregional contrasts in the optimal strategies of transition was the very different role of the military in Latin America and southern Europe, on the one hand, and in the communist area, on the other hand. Specialists in the South have argued with essentially one voice that the biggest threat to democracy today, as in the

²¹ On the benefits of breaking with past leadership, see Aslund (fn. 10); Frye (fn. 10); McFaul (fn. 9); and Bunce (fn. 8). Hungary, again, provides an exception. Major economic reforms were introduced only after the second competitive election, when the ex-communists returned to power with a large mandate. However, Hungary was also exceptional in how far reforms went prior to the end of communist party rule.

past, is the military. One has only to recall, for example, the long history of military interventions in Latin American politics, most of which terminated democracy (though some of them oversaw a return to democratic governance, as also occurred in unusually circuitous fashion, in the Portuguese transition). There is, in addition, the attempted military coup d'état in Spain in 1982. Indeed, precisely because of its long importance in politics, the military has been awarded remarkable powers in many Latin American constitutions, their democratic claims notwithstanding.²² When combined, these examples carry an obvious message: the military in these contexts can make or break regimes. It is precisely this capacity that contributed to the uncertainty of the transitions in the South and that necessitated compromises with authoritarian forces.

In much of the postcommunist world, by contrast, there is a long tradition of civilian control over the military—a tradition that goes far back in Russian history and that, following the Bolshevik Revolution and the demilitarization after the Civil War, was maintained at home and then after World War II was projected outward to the members of the Soviet bloc.²³ Civil-military relations, in short, constituted one area where the authoritarian past proved to be beneficial, rather than a burden, for democratization after state socialism.²⁴

With the military less threatening in the postcommunist context and with mass publics in some cases mobilized in support of democracy, authoritarian elites in the postcommunist region were indeed under siege. This was particularly the case in East-Central Europe, where domestic control over the military (and the secret police)—except in Yugoslavia, Romania, and Albania—had been ceded to the Soviet Union after 1968. All this left the opposition in what came to be the most successful democracies in the region with unusual freedom of maneuver—a freedom enhanced by public support in the streets. As a result, both the effects of mass mobilization *and* the most successful strategies of transition were different in the postcommunist context from what they had been in Latin America and southern Europe.

²² Brian Loveman, "Protected Democracies and Military Guardianship: Political Transitions in Latin America, 1978–1993," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 36 (Summer 1994).

²³ The key phrase is "members of the Soviet bloc." For those communist regimes outside the bloc or mavericks within the bloc (Albania, Romania, and Yugoslavia), party control over the military was compromised. It was precisely in these cases that the exit from state socialism was violent. Variations in civil-military relations also account in part for the violent disintegration of the Yugoslav state, in contrast to the peaceful dissolution of both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. See Bunce (fn. 11).

²⁴ See Bela Greskovits, "Rival Views of Postcommunist Market Society: The Path Dependence of Transitory," in Michel Dobry, ed., *Democratic and Capitalist Transitions in Eastern Europe: Lessons for the Social Sciences* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION

The analysis thus far has sidestepped an issue of considerable importance in the transitions from state socialism: the distinction between protests against the regime and protests against the state. Here, the postcommunist region exhibits another surprising pattern. While popular protest in both the Czech lands and Poland targeted the regime, the Baltic and Slovene demonstrations are better understood as both liberal and nationalist. In the latter cases, then, nationalism supported democratic governance, even when nationalist concerns grew out of and were in part responsible for the disintegration of a state.

There also seems to be another positive linkage between nationalist mobilization and successful, sustained democratization. The republics that made up the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia varied considerably from each other with respect to whether publics protested, whether the opposition was strong and united, and whether publics, the opposition, and, indeed, even the communists were committed to democratization. With the breakup of these three ethnofederal states along republican lines, those republics with the best conditions for democratic governance were liberated from a political and economic context that made such an outcome unlikely, if not impossible. Thus, not just Slovenia and the Baltic republics, but also Macedonia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine were better positioned to pursue a democratic course following state disintegration.²⁵

How can we reconcile these observations with the familiar argument that nationalist mobilization poses a threat to democracy on the grounds that the logics of state building and democratization are contradictory? This argument, moreover, has empirical support in the postcommunist world, given the deleterious effects of nationalism on political developments after state socialism in Bosnia, Croatia, Georgia, Serbia and Montenegro (and Kosovo), and Slovakia. In each of these cases the nationalist movement excluded minorities residing within the republic; transformed some communists into nationalists, who then used nationalism to maintain authoritarian control; and constructed illiberal successor regimes while deconstructing successor states.²⁶ What explains these divergent consequences of nationalism?

²⁵ For a parallel situation, see Michael Bernhard, "Democratization in Germany: A Reappraisal," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 4 (2001).

²⁶ See Zsuzsa Czergo, "Language and Democracy: A Comparative Study of Contestations over Language Use in Romania and Slovakia" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 2000); Georgi Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Adjara before and since the Soviet Collapse," in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz, eds., *The "Myth" of Ethnic Conflict: Politics, Economics and Cultural Violence*, Research Monograph, no. 98. (Berkeley: University of California International and

When nationalism enters the discussion, parsimonious arguments often give way to thick explanations. In this instance, however, there seems to be a relatively simple distinction: *when* nationalist demonstrations began in the republics. Late nationalist mobilization—or nationalist demonstrations that first appeared when the communist regime and state were disintegrating—is associated in virtually every instance with a rapid transition to democracy and progress since that time in building a stable—or at least increasingly stable—democratic order. This describes, in particular, not just the cases of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia, but also the far more flawed, but nonetheless durable democracies of Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine.

By contrast, nationalist demonstrations that first occurred before the regime and state began to unravel are associated with very different political pathways after state socialism—either democratic breakdown or a delayed transition to democracy. There were five republics and one autonomous province that experienced such demonstrations by their titular nation during the 1970s or at the beginning of the 1980s: Armenia, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Slovakia, and, to a more limited extent, Serbia.²⁷ In every one of these cases the subsequent transition to democracy was undermined, as was the successor state in most cases.

Why is timing so important? The key seems to be differences in regime context. In the “early” cases, nationalist mobilization arose in response to two conditions: a strong sense of identity on the part of members and especially the self-appointed leaders of the republic’s titular nation (reflecting earlier developments, such as the experience of statehood prior to communist party rule) coupled with republican political dynamics that featured domination by the titular nation along with significant autonomy from the center. Once demonstrations began, three developments followed: minorities within these republics (except homogeneous Armenia) defended themselves from titular domination by building countermovements while allying with the center; the center, fearing that nationalist protests would spread and thereby challenge both the regime and the state, suppressed the titular

Area Studies, 1998); Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Valerie Bunce and Stephen Watts, “Managing Diversity and Sustaining Democracy: Ethnofederal versus Unitary States in the Postsocialist World” (Paper presented at the workshop on Power-Sharing and Peace-Making, San Diego, December 10–11, 2001).

²⁷ See Beissinger (fn. 11); and Besnik Pula, “Contested Sovereignty and State Disintegration: The Rise of the Albanian Secessionist Movement in Kosovo” (Master’s Thesis, Georgetown University, 2001). On the Serbian case, see Valere P. Gagnon, “Liberalism and Minorities: Serbs as Agents and Victims of Liberal Conceptions of Space” (Paper presented at the workshop on Citizenship in Multicultural States: Comparing the Former Yugoslavia and Israel, Austrian Institute of International Affairs, Vienna, April 20–21, 2001).

national protesters, purged the republican party, and empowered minorities as a counterweight to the titular nation; and the republican party fissured in the face of irreconcilable demands from local nationalists versus central communists.

As a result, by the time state socialism began to dissolve, the stage was already set for an unusually problematic transition to both democratic rule and independent statehood. Two insurmountable divides were in place. The first was between nationalists, who dominated the political scene, and liberals, who had been demobilized. The second was between leaders of the majority nation and leaders of minority communities. The national identities of these groups were well defined and exclusivist, and their competing identities were joined with competing interests, political alliances, and preferences for the future. Moreover, the communist leaders of these republics, facing the loss of both their institutional and their ideological bases for ruling, did not have the option their Slovenian counterparts had, of defecting to an opposition that embraced both independent statehood and liberal democracy. Instead, they could either become nationalists or, if adopting a liberal position, face political marginalization.

By contrast, when nationalist mobilization began only later, in response to the weakening of the regime and the state, all these conditions were absent—or at least less well defined. This meant that the majority and the minorities were free to coalesce around the issues of republican sovereignty and liberal democracy. Thus, in these contexts a liberal agenda combined with a nationalist agenda; and not only opposition forces but even many communists embraced that agenda.

We can now conclude our discussion of transitions in the South versus the East. The experiences of the latter region suggest the following, all running counter to the received wisdom about Latin America and southern Europe. First, historical factors are critical in shaping the resources and especially the preferences of elites during the transition, as well as, more generally, transition trajectories. Second, one proximate and positive influence, lying outside the high politics of the transition, is mass mobilization. Third, transitions seem to vary in their degree of uncertainty, and this affects what constitutes the most successful path. In the postcommunist world, where some transitions were less uncertain, the most successful approach was one that moved quickly on both political and economic fronts. Fourth, democratization can be successful when it is combined with nationalist mobilization and the founding of a new state. This is particularly so when such mobilization first begins with the weakening of the state and the regime.

Finally, if we divide the transitions in the postcommunist world into two types—where nationalist mobilization was present and where it was not—we find two simple stories. One has already been noted—the consequences for democratization of timing—when nationalist mobilization begins. The second story describes the remaining countries in the region. Here, the key issue appears to be the strength of the opposition, as indicated by their competitiveness in the first election. Put succinctly, the better their electoral performance, the more successful the transition to democracy.

DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION AND DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY

With the formation of the first popularly elected government, the transition to democracy is understood to have ended. Scholars then shift their focus to two issues: the consolidation of democracy and its sustainability. The consolidation of democracy refers to the degree to which the key elements of a democratic order are in place, and whether those elements function to promote effective, inclusive, and accountable governance. The sustainability of democracy refers, simply, to the continuation of democratic rule. In the first case, scholars look to mass publics (public opinion, interest associations, and political participation), political institutions (parties, the state, and representative bodies), and the behavior of political leaders. In the second, the concern of scholarly investigations has been equally broad, looking to economic and demographic factors, political institutions, political parties, public opinion and behavior, and the decisions of political leaders.

These two bodies of work rarely confront one another, which is surprising, since on the face of it they are analytically related. Despite the parallel play, however, they do seem to converge along two lines of argument. One is that the choices made by political leaders have powerful effects on whether democracy consolidates and whether it survives.²⁸ The other is that the quality of democracy—that is, the degree to which it is consolidated as defined above—predicts its sustainability.

RUSSIA'S MUDDIED POLITICAL PROFILE

It is precisely these two arguments that I wish to question. Rather than comparing the postcommunist cases with each other, as I did earlier, I will concentrate instead on one case in particular: Russia, which serves

²⁸ See, for example, Higley and Gunther (fn. 14).

as a useful empirical foil for two reasons. One is that Russia represents in many respects the modal postcommunist case—for example, with respect to economic development and economic performance, the age of the state, the structure of its government, the weakness of labor, and the slow development of the party system.²⁹ Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Russian politics—and one that, again, represents the central tendency in postcommunist Eurasia—is the absence of significant political polarization among citizens and the relative stability of their political preferences over time.³⁰ The other reason to focus on Russia is that the case provides a particularly good test of the arguments about consolidation and sustainability. This is because Russia has a highly improbable and seriously flawed, yet durable democracy. The ledger of Russian democracy can be summarized as follows. Russian democracy is deficient in two key respects. One problem is the Russian presidency; a second is the weakness of the Russian state. As is widely recognized, Boris Yeltsin played a central role in the rise of democracy in Russia, yet many of his actions, beginning in 1993, would seem to have compromised the democratic project, as well as economic reform and state capacity.³¹ Moreover, given his commitment to the recentralization of the Russian state, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, could be viewed as a less capricious and, therefore, potentially a more formidable force against democratic politics. Such an interpretation is particularly tempting, given the parallels between contemporary Russia and Weimar Germany—for example, disastrous economic performance, downward mobility in the international system, and the existence in both cases of a mixed presidential-parliamentary system, with important powers reserved for the presidency.³²

²⁹ See, for example, Bunce (fn. 8); Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, "The Limited Reach of Russia's Party System," *Politics and Society* 29 (September 2001); Stephen Crowley and David Ost, eds., *Workers after Workers' States: Labor and Politics in Post-Communist Europe* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

³⁰ See, especially, Richard Ahl, "Society and Transition in Russia," *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 32 (April 1999); and Ted Brader and Joshua Tucker, "The Emergence of Mass Partisanship in Russia," *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (January 2001); for a different view, see Valerii Solovei, "Kommunisticheskaya i natsionalisticheskoi transformatsii Rossii," in Lilia Shevtsova, ed., *Rossia: politicheskaya* (Russia: Politics) (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 1998).

³¹ Three very insightful analyses of the Yeltsin era are Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Realities* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999); Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Yeltsin* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); and George Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³² See Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, "The Weimar/Russia Comparison," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 13 (July–September 1997). However, there is one striking contrast between these two cases: civil society in interwar Germany was highly developed but German publics were polarized, whereas civil society in Russia is far less developed but Russian publics tend to cluster at the center of the po-

If the Russian presidency is a problem, so, too, is the weakness of the Russian state. It is weak because of the absence of rule of law, continuing conflicts between central and local laws, and the privileging of localities over the center with respect to both the identities of local officials and publics and the targets of compliance. As a consequence, the Russian state and regime are both spatially fragmented.³³ This fragmentation, moreover, extends to the economy, thereby compromising the capacity of the state to create the economic integration necessary for capitalism to function effectively.³⁴

If the internal boundaries of the Russian Federation are "too strong," then the external boundaries of this state are "too weak." This is evident, for example, in the continuing wars in Chechnya. Also important is the absence of public agreement concerning the boundaries of the state—which reflects both the power of localities in practices and in public and official minds and the weakness of Russian national identity. Russian identity is weak for many reasons, including the absence during the Soviet period of republican institutions that could forge such an identity; the divisions within the Soviet and then Russian elite stratum over whether and how to define this identity, and the considerable constraints on the construction of a common identity when the particular protonation in question is numerically dominant, geographically dispersed, and located in the core, not the periphery, within an empire, not within a state.³⁵ Thus, Russian national identity lacked what many other groups within the former Soviet Union had and what served as the basis for mobilization once the regime and the state began to disintegrate: political, cultural, social, and economic institutions; geographical compactness; an "other" that was defined simultaneously in

litical continuum. See James Gibson, "Social Networks, Civil Society, and the Prospects for Consolidating Russia's Democratic Tradition," *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (January 2001); and Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997).

³³ See, in particular, Kathryn Hendley, "Legal Development in Post-Soviet Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 13 (October–December 1997); Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). A historical perspective on rule of law in Russia is provided in George Yaney, "Law, Society, and the Domestic Regime in Russia in Historical Perspective," *American Political Science Review* 59 (June 1965).

³⁴ See David Woodruff, *Money Unmade: Barter and the Fate of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

³⁵ See, especially, Yitzhak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and idem, "National Identity and Democracy in Postcommunist Russia" (Manuscript, Department of Political Science, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, August 2001). See also Veljko Vujacic, "Historical Capacities, Nationalist Mobilization and Political Outcomes in Russia and Serbia: A Weberian View," *Theory and Society* 25 (December 1996); Mark Beissinger, "Demise of an Empire-State: Identity, Legitimacy and the Deconstruction of Soviet Politics," in Crawford Young, ed., *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Bunce (fn. 11), chaps. 4–5.

ideological, spatial, and national terms; and a sense of being an embattled minority poised against a majority.

If there is a consensus that the Russian state is weak, there is also a consensus that this poses a serious problem for Russian democracy. As Stephen Holmes has observed: "Today's Russia makes excruciatingly plain that liberal values are threatened just as thoroughly by state incapacity as by despotic power."³⁶ While most definitions of democracy do not mention the state and instead emphasize rights, liberties, and competition, a capable state is nonetheless implied. Can there be civil liberties and political rights without rule of law? Can political competition function as it should in a democracy without, for example, power resting in the hands of elected officials and without state guarantees that there will be free and fair elections and that public policies will be implemented?³⁷

THE CASE FOR RUSSIAN DEMOCRACY

There is little doubt, therefore, that Russian democracy is seriously flawed and unconsolidated. In some important respects, however, democracy is well defined in Russia. First, since independence, Russia has held five elections at the national level—and hundreds more at the local and regional levels. These elections have by and large been free and fair: they have invited considerable competition, and power has changed hands repeatedly. In the gubernatorial elections of 1996–97, for example, fully one-half of the incumbent candidates were defeated—an important consideration, since one indicator that a democracy is consolidating is peaceful turnover of political power.³⁸ Second, the rules of the political game have been relatively stable since the referendum on the 1993 Constitution. Third, the number of parties on the ballot for the Duma has declined over time, as has the number of wasted votes.³⁹ Fourth, there is evidence of growing cooperation over time between the president and the Duma.⁴⁰ Fifth, while there are some extremists in the Duma, Russian public opinion, as already noted, tends to cluster at the center of the political continuum and to evidence im-

³⁶ Holmes, "What Russia Teaches Us Now," *American Prospect* 32 (July–August 1997), 33.

³⁷ See Barry Weingast, "The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law," *American Political Science Review* 91 (June 1997).

³⁸ Steven Solnick, *Putin and the Provinces*, Research Monograph, no. 115 (Cambridge: Harvard University, Davis Center, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2000).

³⁹ See Robert Moser, *Unexpected Outcomes: Electoral Systems, Political Parties, and Representation in Russia* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ Thomas Remington, *The Russian Parliament: Institutional Evolution in a Transitional Regime, 1989–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

pressively high support for democracy despite the uncertainty of the political environment.⁴¹ Sixth, the Russian court system has functioned relatively well; indeed, it may become even more effective in the future if President Putin's recent reforms are fully implemented.⁴² Finally, and most important for our purposes, gloomy predictions to the contrary, Russian democracy has lasted.

It is precisely this final point that introduces two key questions. Most obviously: given the ledger just presented, why has Russian democracy endured? And less obviously: is this in spite of its democratic deficits, as is usually presumed, or because of them?

COMPARATIVE STANDARDS

We can begin to answer these questions by addressing the issue of comparative standards. Yeltsin has been criticized for his role in weakening the state (through, say, bilateral treaties with various regional governors), tolerating the accumulation of considerable power by various economic interests, compromising economic reform in ways that serve those interests, and, therefore, giving Russia a capitalism that does not work. It is a state that is both corrupt and limited in its ability to extract resources, elicit compliance, and meet its financial obligations; and it is a democracy that lacks accountability. What is often implied in these critiques is that Yeltsin should have made other choices that supported the state, democracy, and capitalism, rather than undermining them. But this introduces a question. Were those superior choices effectively available to Yeltsin? The answer to that question is rarely provided. Instead, another case—say, Poland or the Czech Republic—is introduced to demonstrate the costs of the Russian approach to political and economic transition.

There are good reasons to pair Russia with either Poland or the Czech Republic, especially when the issue at hand is variations in shock therapy or voucher privatization.⁴³ However, the problem is with a second step that is sometimes taken, once the comparison is raised: to

⁴¹ See, especially, Donna Bahry, Cynthia Boaz, and Stacy Burnett Gordon, "Tolerance, Transition and Support for Civil Liberties in Russia," *Comparative Political Studies* 30 (August 1997); James L. Gibson, "The Russian Dance with Democracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17 (April–June 2001).

⁴² Herman Schwartz, *The Struggle for Constitutional Justice in Post-Communist Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Robert Sharlet, "Putin and the Politics of Law in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17 (July–September 2001); Peter Solomon, "Putin's Judicial Reform," *East European Constitutional Review* 11 (Winter–Spring 2002).

⁴³ See Peter Murrell, "What Is Shock Therapy? What Did It Do in Poland and Russia?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 9, no. 2 (1993); Hilary Appel, "Voucher Privatization in Russia: Structural Consequences and Mass Response in the Second Period of Reform," *Europe-Asia Studies* 49, no. 4 (1997).

argue that the Russian leadership did it wrong and should instead have adopted the approaches taken by its more successful counterparts. But this approach verges on the automatic, given the emphasis in the relevant literature on (1) leadership choice and (2) the procedure of identifying the optimal approaches by comparing cases with variable records of success. Both arguments ignore differences in context and the ways those different contexts produce not just different menus of choices but also different consequences attached to the same choices.

Ignoring context can be highly misleading, as can leaving the notion of context too vague. Here is where it is necessary to shift from the abstract to the concrete: by comparing Poland and Russia. The Polish leadership that came to power in late summer 1989 had the rare luxury of being able to make choices that could be at once easy, yet radical. I use both adjectives advisedly. Communism in Poland had created over time a popular consensus supporting liberal politics and economics. This consensus had multiple origins—for example, the long history of Polish nationalism, which had been shaped in part by foreign domination, especially Russian and then Soviet; the extraordinary national homogeneity of Poland after the Second World War; Poland's democratic tradition (which preceded the partitions and which was further reinforced through subsequent domination by authoritarian states); and the vulnerability of the communist regime in Poland, given its political dependence on the Soviet Union and its failure to fully Stalinize the polity and the economy and to constrain popular unrest.

When the communist system made its formal departure in the summer of 1989, the newly elected Polish leadership was in the distinctive position of being both liberal in its outlook and liberated from constraints. It was not just that Soviet power had retreated or that the roundtable accords defined a two-stage transition to democracy. It was also that the newly elected Polish leadership enjoyed a large mandate, thanks in part to the unexpected outcome of the June 1989 semicompetitive elections and the subsequent support of the communists and Gorbachev for the formation of a Solidarity-led government in August of the same year. At the same time, with respect to economic reform, Polish rent seekers, long suspecting that the game would soon be up, had begun to reposition themselves as early as the mid-1980s to reap benefits from the more liberalized economic order to come. They were, in short, better understood as partners than as antagonists.

In this way, an unusually large coalition was in place in Poland to support a transition to democracy in conjunction with sweeping economic reforms (which were also aided by the long-term crisis of the

Polish economy and the failure of earlier rounds of reform in the face of a continuing political stalemate). Critical to both the economic and the political transition, however, was Polish nationalism—which lengthened popular horizons.⁴⁴ Lest there be any doubt about the enormous political capital supporting Poland's radical break with state socialism, note that the finance minister, Leszek Balcerowicz, faced *no* opposition to his economic reform package when he consulted with other members of the government and with deputies in the Sejm; that Polish publics did not rebel when the reforms produced an unexpectedly sharp and prolonged economic downturn; and that the transition to democracy proceeded more quickly than the roundtable accords had projected. Thus, Polish leaders had a rare opportunity, whether in the annals of democratic politics in general or of new democracies in particular, to combine considerable power and public support with a radical reform agenda.

In Russia, by contrast and for many reasons, including the weakness of Russian national identity and the dynamics of the collapse of the Soviet state, there was much less consensus among publics and among elites about either the regime or the state-in-formation. As a result, the movement toward the new order was compromised and, because of that, necessarily politically and economically solicitous of rent seeking. Rather than jumping on a train they already knew was leaving the station, as happened in Poland, rent seekers in Russia were waiting to see whether there even was a train and, if so, where it was heading. In doing so, to recall the earlier discussion, they benefited from the uncertainty of the Russian transition and its consequences—partial economic reform and partial democracy.⁴⁵

Indeed, the Russian version of this process did not originate with Yeltsin or even with Gorbachev. It was also characteristic of the Brezhnev era, where central control over politics and economics was reduced in order to prolong the regime and keep rent seekers within the fold rather than pushing them outside, where they could make even more mischief. Simply put, Brezhnev gave up power in order to keep it—and the weakness of the regime, the state, and the bloc, along with the lackluster performance of the economy during the Brezhnev era, all testified to how costly those compromises were. Indeed, one reason why the Soviet bloc disintegrated so quickly and Russian economic performance

⁴⁴ See Rawi Abdelal, *Economic Nationalism after Empire: A Comparative Perspective on Nation, Economy and Security in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ The phrasing, as well as some of the logic, is borrowed from Joel S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics* 50 (January 1998).

has been so poor for the past decade was Brezhnev's legacy of maintaining power, the regime, the state, and the bloc by undermining all four.⁴⁶

In the absence of either a popular or an elite consensus, then, the "choice" in Russia, more recently as during the Brezhnev era, was, in contrast to Poland, neither stark nor simple. Instead, choices were defined by "ordinary politics"—to reverse Balcerowicz's apt characterization of the "extraordinary politics" that shaped the early stages of the Polish transition to democracy and capitalism.⁴⁷ As Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman have argued with respect to economic reform, choice in Russia was severely circumscribed. As they generalized: "The task of a reformer in a weak state is to persuade stakeholders to give up more socially inefficient ways of receiving rents in exchange for less socially costly payoffs."⁴⁸ The same holds true in the political sphere. The task of a democratizer in a precarious regime and state is to persuade stakeholders—say, regional governors, powerful economic lobbies, and the communists—to give up some of their political power in exchange for a more stable order.

The contrasts between Russia and Poland suggest a more general point. Two problems emerge from the scholarly emphasis on elite choice, so central to the study of recent democratization (and economic reform) and so in keeping with the recent preferences of the discipline to search for optimal strategies and to privilege more immediate and obvious influences over those that are more removed and subtle. One problem is a failure to recognize most decisions as choices among competing opportunity costs. The other is a pronounced tendency, especially when "unusual politics" is available as a comparative standard, to overestimate what leaders can do. The first oversimplifies choice while ignoring the thicket of constraints. The second transforms decision makers into heroes or villains—a characterization that speaks to the excessively voluntaristic focus of much of the literature on recent democratization.

Such a focus has been justified on the basis of both the extraordinary impact of leaders during the transition period and the notion of uncer-

⁴⁶ Valerie Bunce, "The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism," *British Journal of Political Science* 13 (January 1983); idem, "The Empire Strikes Back: The Evolution of the Eastern Bloc from a Soviet Asset to a Soviet Liability," *International Organization* 39 (Winter 1984–85).

⁴⁷ See Bakerowicz, *Socialism, Capitalism, Transformation* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995).

⁴⁸ Shleifer and Treisman, *Without a Map: Political Tactics and Economic Reform in Russia*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 4.

tainty—which has been interpreted as a reduction of constraints on leaders. However, as noted earlier in this article, the privileging of political leaders and the presumption of high uncertainty are both questionable. Moreover, while uncertainty logically gives leaders more room for maneuver, it also curtails their ability to shape political and economic developments. Both hold for precisely the same reason—institutional fluidity during transitional periods.⁴⁹

If elite choice needs to be reconsidered, so does the relationship between the consolidation of democracy and its survival. One reason is that “the stability of a regime and the quality of a regime are analytically separate categories that should not be subsumed under one word—consolidation.”⁵⁰ The other reason can be deduced from the ledger of Russian democracy, presented earlier: it is a democracy that is flawed but not fleeting. Its flaws reflect the compromises, minus a formal pact, that were required as a consequence of the uncertainty surrounding this transition.

If that is the case, then we might want to reverse the usual formulation regarding the relationship between consolidation and sustainability. The sustainability of democracy could be construed as an investment in democratic consolidation. At the same time, it could be argued that the failure to consolidate democracy in Russia may explain why Russian democracy has survived. Thus, it is precisely the democratic deficits in Russia that may have prolonged this democratic experiment. This interpretation can be most readily supported by considering the only alternatives to Yeltsin’s policies that might have furthered democracy—a capable, stable, and a well-functioning capitalist economy. What if Yeltsin had proceeded by, say, building a party, strengthening democratic institutions, expanding state control over the regions, and staying the course on economic reforms? Assuming for a moment that these actions could somehow have been carried out, the logical consequence would have been to alienate rent seekers. What might have ensued was a coalition of authoritarians, powerful economic lobbies, and decentralizers—three key groups that are currently divided, not united.⁵¹ This, in turn, could have produced a walkout—on the economy, the state, and democracy.

⁴⁹ Valerie Bunce and Maria Csanadi, “Uncertainty and the Transition: Postcommunism in Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies* 7 (Spring 1993).

⁵⁰ McFaul (fn. 31), 310.

⁵¹ On the instability of these coalitions, see Philip Roeder, “The Rejection of Authoritarianism in the Soviet Successor States,” and Hanson, “Defining Democratic Consolidation,” both in Anderson et al. (fn. 9).

Yeltsin's options, therefore, were threefold: to resist a liberal revolution (like the Polish political stalemate of the 1980s), to embrace this revolution fully (as in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, or the Baltic states), or to proceed, but in compromised fashion. It can be argued on the basis of the Russian context that the third approach was best positioned to yield a flawed but, perhaps because of that, sustainable democracy. Thus, democracy was shortchanged but durable; capitalism was distorted but implanted; and the state, while weak and vulnerable to challenges, nonetheless survived.

CONCLUSIONS

Research on democratization, particularly the founding and performance of new democracies, is largely a literature about the choices political leaders have made and the consequences of those choices. It is also largely a literature based on the return to democracy in Latin America and southern Europe. The purpose of this article has been both to question and to complicate the focus on elites and the generalizations that have been made about transitions to democracy, democratic consolidation, and democratic sustainability. I have done so by adding an additional region to the empirical equation—the twenty-seven countries that make up the Eurasian postcommunist region.

Several conclusions emerged. First, transitions to democracy seem to vary considerably with respect to the uncertainty surrounding the process. This variance in turn affects the strategies of transition and their payoffs. In the postcommunist region it was widely assumed that the uncertainty surrounding these transitions was unusually high, given, for example, the absence in most cases of a democratic past together, the extraordinary economic and political penetration of state socialism, and the seeming tensions among democratization, state building, the construction of a capitalist economy, and the radically changed relationship of the state to the international system. It turns out, however, that for a number of countries in the region the transition to democracy was in fact not so uncertain, for two reasons. First, the military was eliminated from the transition. Second, there was present a powerful opposition that gained strength from popular mobilization against the regime (often also against the state) (as with the Baltic, Slovenian, Czech, and Polish cases) and/or reform communists who collaborated with an opposition committed to democracy (as with the Baltic countries, Slovenia, Poland, and Hungary).

Because uncertainty was lower, moreover, the transition in all of

these cases produced a sharp break with the state socialist past—for example, through founding elections that gave the opposition a large mandate, rapid progress in constructing democratic institutions, quick introduction of far-reaching economic reforms, and, in most of the cases, the construction of a new state. By contrast, transition was far more uncertain where the military was engaged in the transition, where mass mobilization focused on leaving the state but not building democracy, and/or where the communists were able to command considerable support in the first election. As a result, the break with the authoritarian past was less definitive—in terms of both political leadership and public policy.

These contrasts have several implications. One is that, while the most successful transitions in the South involved bridging, the most successful transitions in the East involved breakage. Indeed, it is precisely the bridging approach in the East that produced the most fragile democracies. The other is that the contrast between bridging and breakage—and the costs and benefits of each approach—in large measure reflected differences in uncertainty.

Another conclusion is that mass mobilization can play a very positive role in the transition, as it did, for example, in the Baltic, Polish, Czech, and Slovenian cases and, most recently, in Serbia and Montenegro. This is largely because mass mobilization can reduce uncertainty, thereby influencing the preferences of the communists, as well as the division of power between them and the opposition.

Nationalist mobilization and the disintegration of the state can also influence the democratic project. Whether this occurs seems to reflect a key distinction: whether such protests first arose when the regime and state were unraveling or whether the demonstrations at that time were the culmination of a longer history of such protests. In the first case, which describes Slovenia, the Baltic countries, Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the transition produced sustainable democratic orders, albeit of varying quality. By contrast, in every transition where nationalist protest had a longer lineage, both the old and the new state, as well as the democratic project, experienced continuing contestation.

This leads to another conclusion. If we divide the twenty-seven cases into two groups—where the transition was accompanied by significant nationalist mobilization and where it was not—we find two sets of stories. As already noted, the first story is about the timing of nationalist mobilization. In the second group, the key issue is the strength of the opposition, which is indicated, for example, by the outcome of the first election.

This brings us to our final set of arguments. It is true, when adding the amendments already discussed, that political leaders—their preferences, their power, and their actions—are critical to the founding and the sustainability of democracy. However, it does not then follow that leaders in different countries have the same menu from which to choose; that similar choices in different contexts necessarily have the same consequences; that there are, as a result, optimal choices that are generally applicable; or that compromising the democratic project and the state during and after the transition necessarily reduces the sustainability of democracy. There are two basic distinctions here: between conditions and strategies and between the consolidation of democracy and sustaining it.

In the first distinction, the key point is that some transitions are more constrained—or more uncertain—than others, and it is precisely the degree of uncertainty that defines both the strategies available to political leaders and the consequences of those strategies. Thus, “easy” transitions feature very different matrices of choices and payoffs than do “hard” transitions. In the postcommunist world there were transitions, as noted above, where the opposition was powerful and the authoritarians either marginalized or collaborative and where, as a result, there could be a radical break with the past. These transitions then produced a quick consolidation of both democracy and capitalism and, when accompanied by state disintegration, even the state. They also set the standard for what constituted the ideal approach—in economics, as well as in politics.

Most transitions in the postcommunist world did not fall into this category, however. Instead, uncertainty was higher, and the best result was a compromised democracy, capitalism, and state. Nonetheless, this did not necessarily mean that leaders in these contexts adopted the wrong strategies. Rather, they merely faced the “wrong” conditions. Moreover, if they had pretended otherwise and opted for breaking over bridging, thereby emulating their more successful counterparts, they might very well have ended up with no state, democracy, or capitalism. Thus, strategies and their particular payoffs are defined by contexts, not by other cases—unless those cases have similar contexts.

This leads, in turn, to the relationship between the consolidation and sustainability of democracy. It is certainly true that consolidated democracies are very likely to sustain themselves. But it does not follow that unconsolidated democracies are necessarily less sustainable or that policies and behaviors that compromise the consolidation of democracy necessarily detract from its sustainability. Indeed, as the Russian case

suggests, it may be precisely the limits to democracy, as well as to the state and capitalism, and the policies that contributed to those limits that sustain all three.

We are now in a position to address some issues of broader concern. First, as this article reinforces, the cases chosen do indeed seem to determine the conclusions drawn. This is particularly the case, one can argue, when case selection reduces variation in dependent variables. Moreover, case selection also seems to shape assumptions and therefore analytical approaches. Second, as noted in the introduction, it can be costly to restrict our regional reach. As we have discovered, expanding regional horizons can introduce new variables and new issues, while challenging common assumptions, approaches, and arguments. However, given the repeated contrasts between the South and the East that emerged in this article, an obvious question presents itself: do these contrasts mean that political dynamics are regionally defined?

It is tempting to concur with this statement. After all, for the post-communist cases in particular, the notion of regional effects is logical—given, for instance, the structural similarities forged by the political economy of state socialism and the Soviet bloc; the common origins of all the new states as a result of disintegration of the ethnofederal states in the region along republican lines; and the similarities in the timing as well as the key players involved in the transition to democracy. However, I would nonetheless argue against the notion that political dynamics respond to regional effects.

First and most obviously, a major rationale for analyzing the post-communist cases is their extraordinary variability, not their similarities. Indeed, it is ironic that the variable practices of authoritarianism in Latin America and southern Europe and the variable timing of their transitions to democracy seem to have produced less variation in transition dynamics and in the quality and sustainability of the democratic project than we see in the postcommunist context. Second, like urban-rural distinctions and even some nongeographical cleavages, such as gender and class, that analysts habitually employ, region only begs the question about the factors actually at work. As Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune argued more than thirty years ago: the purpose of comparative analysis is to replace place-names with variables.⁵² Indeed, this is precisely what this article has attempted to do by framing the discussion in terms of variations (1) in the timing of nationalist mobilization, (2) in the historical role of the military in politics, (3) in the strength of

⁵²Przeworski and Teune, *The Logic of Social Inquiry* (New York: John Wiley, 1970).

the opposition, (4) in the uncertainty built into the transition, and (5) in the range of policy options available to political leaders and their payoffs.

Thus, region is merely a summary of factors that have taken on geographical form. For this reason and because regions can provide not just new factors and variation in those factors, cross-regional studies can be quite helpful in contesting or complicating those assumptions and arguments that were derived from the analysis of one or several similar regions.⁵³ This is particularly the case when regions are very different from one another in culture, historical development, and relationship to the international system; when they add new causal considerations to the analysis; when they vary the timing of the political dynamics of interest; and when they evidence considerable variation in dependent variables. It is precisely for these reasons—and not because region itself matters—that it is advisable where possible to expand our geographical horizons. This is particularly the case for democratization, given its global reach.

⁵³ See, for example, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).