

Beyond the 'Leninist Legacies': Alternative Approaches

TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE THE VARIED TRAJECTORIES OF POST-COMMUNIST DEVELOPMENT SINCE 1989 STRENGTHENED THE LEVERAGE OF ALTERNATIVE THEORIES OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR, WHICH EMPHASISE INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES, POLICY CHOICES AND INTERNATIONAL FACTORS?



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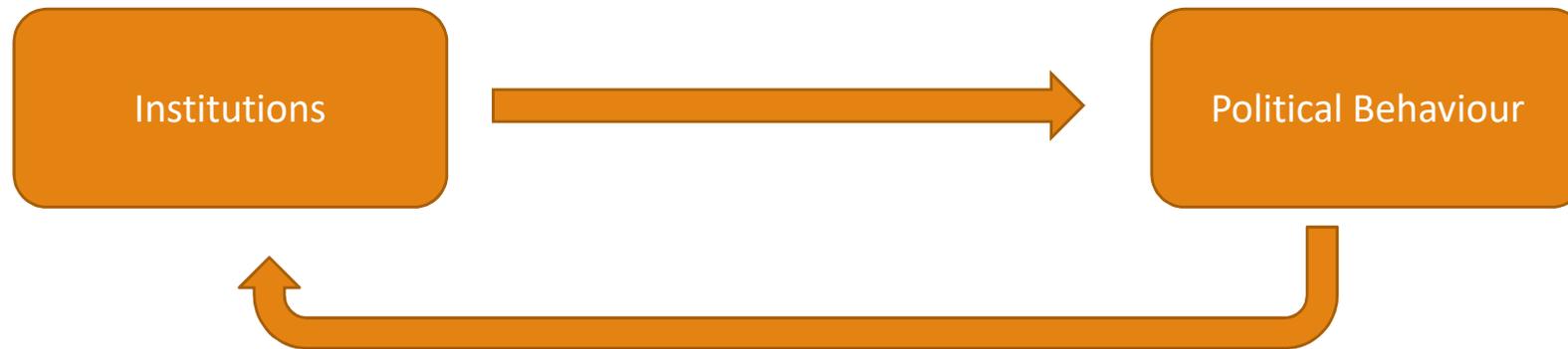
- A brief critique of the ‘legacies’ approach
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The 'legacies' framework



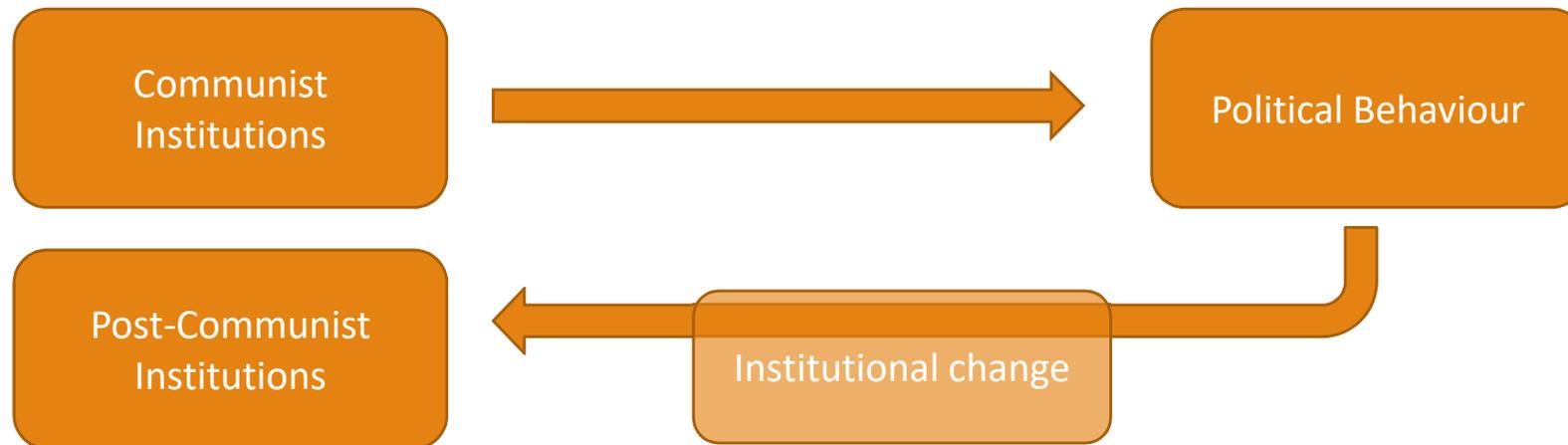
- Legacies intended as “durable causal relationship between past institutions and policies on subsequent practices and beliefs, long beyond the life of the regimes, institutions, and policies that gave birth to them” (Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014:7).
- But institutions are not ‘given’, they are socially determined (Shvetsova, 2003)

The 'legacies' framework



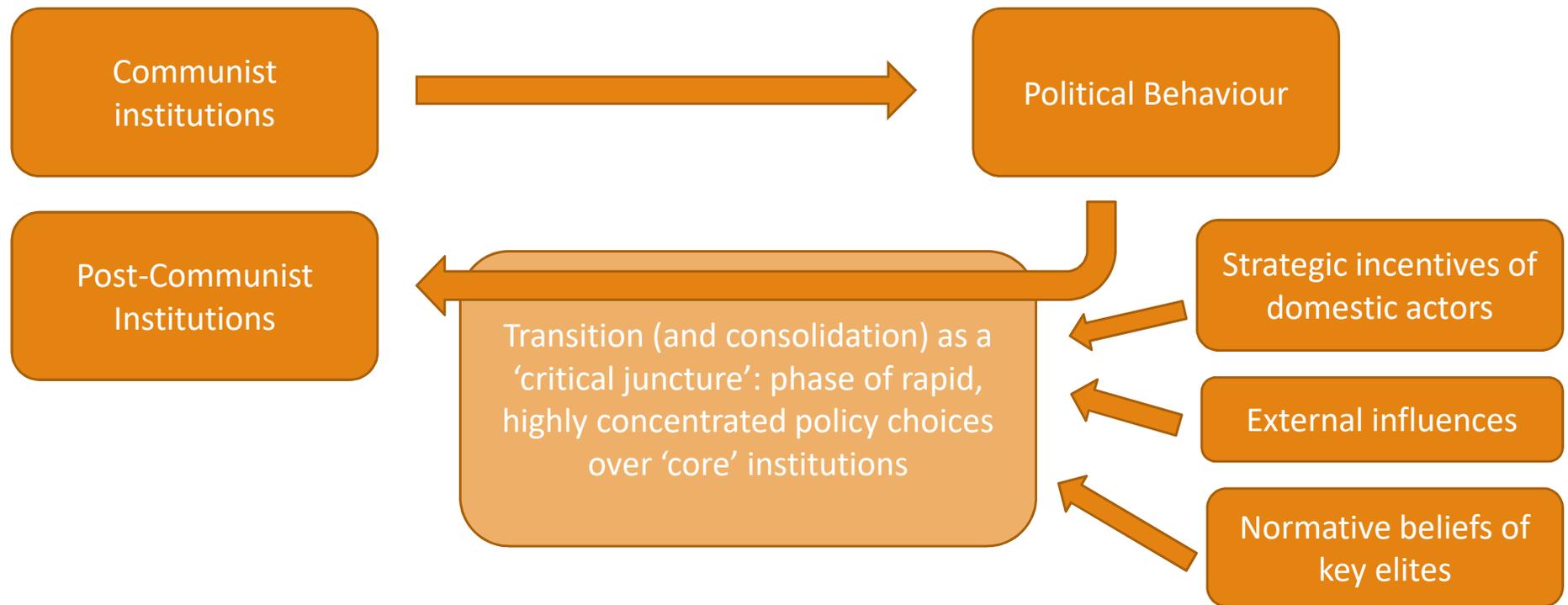
Recognising the endogeneity of institutions does not defeat the 'legacies' argument: "those who adopt the legacies approach argue that the forces that shape current choices have deep roots in cultural, economic, and social conditions inherited from the past" (Crawford and Lijphart, 1995: 177)

The 'legacies' framework



“New institutions may be created and new international pressures for liberalisation may exist” but “institutions are simply ‘arenas’ within which actors, driven by more fundamental historical, cultural or ideological factors, seize power or compete for resources” (Crawford and Lijphart, 1995: 177)

The 'legacies' framework, revisited (1)



The 'legacies' framework, revisited (2)



Explaining post-Communist diversity

- Debate outlined in terms of “legacies” vs “liberalisation” in Crawford and Lijphart (1995), or “political culture” vs “rational-choice” explanations (Evans and Whitefield, 1999).
- ‘Political culture’ explanations link the trajectories of post-Communist countries to norms, values and patterns of behaviour rooted in distinct Communist and pre-Communist experiences.
- Conversely, rational-choice frameworks highlight how, during a critical juncture, institutions created *for the short-term, immediate advantage of one particular party or individual* – often in a context of uncertainty and chaos – can be expected to have longer-term consequences. (Geddes: 1995)
- Therefore, in this view, post-Communist diversity can be better explained by the constellation of political actors at the time of transition, and the way this *immediate context* creates constraints and incentives to pursue certain policies.

Methodological implications

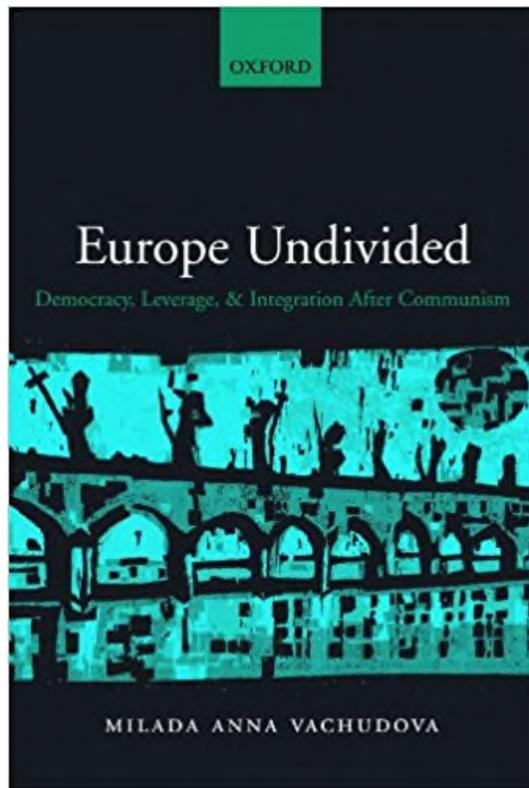
- If the ‘prime mover’ of political behaviour in post-Communist countries is to be found in their Communist past, fruitful comparisons can be made almost exclusively *between* these polities.
- If, on the contrary, incentives present at the time of transition and policy choices taken in the immediate aftermath are the key to explain political behaviour in the new polity, then cross-regional comparisons with other post-authoritarian countries will be more insightful.
- As post-Communist institutions consolidate and the path-dependence processes triggered by transition develop, it may make more sense to “group/compare Poland with Spain, not Albania”. (Tucker, 2015)
- Underplaying the Leninist legacy weakens the ontological status of ‘Eastern Europe’, but opens opportunities for new comparative perspectives. (Bernhard and Jasiewicz, 2015)

Example (1): Explaining Variation in ‘State Exploitation’

- Why did parties in some countries (Latvia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia) freely reap private gains through distribution of assets and loose regulation of party funding, while parties in other countries (Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia) did not?
- In absence of institutional safeguard, the only check on state exploitation was the presence of a robust opposition that was seen as viable governing party (ironically, this was often the ‘successor party’ of the post-communist Left).
- Thus, the configuration of political forces in the early 1990s determined the extent to which ruling parties could ‘exploit’ the state.



Example (2): Explaining Variation in Response to EU Membership



- Why did some countries (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic) satisfy the EU *acquis* requirements fully and in time in various areas of domestic policy, while others (Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia) did not?
- The benefits of EU membership were clearly recognised by all countries; however, the costs of satisfying the entry requirements varied as a function of the political strategies ruling parties needed to sustain themselves in power.
- For illiberal parties in RO, BL and SK, it was more costly to open up electoral competition, limit rent-seeking and precluding ethnic nationalism – as these were the strategies that kept them in power.

Example (3): Explaining Variation in Democratic Values and Market Attitudes

- Why do Czechs show higher levels of commitment to democracy and the free market than Slovaks in the late 1990s?
- Evans and Whitefield (1999) regressed measures of democratic commitment and economic liberalism among respondents on variables recording their personal experience of the current political system and of their living standards. Once this is accounted for, cross-national variation disappears.
- This is consistent with the 'rational choice' argument that more positive attitudes towards democracy and the market in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia are the by-product of, respectively, a smooth and successful liberalisation in the former, and an economically punitive and politically fractious transition in the latter.
- The fact that 'circumstantial' factors cancel out cross-national variations, on the contrary, casts doubt on the idea that Slovaks are intrinsically more 'eastward-looking'.

An Epistemological Rather Than an Empirical Question?

- Rational choice-based hypotheses tend to fare better in quantitative analysis and highlight discrete, temporally proximate causal mechanisms leading to political outcomes.
- However, they come with the risk of ‘excessive shallowness’:
 - Okay, party competition inhibited rent-seeking. But why was democracy more competitive in Poland than in Slovakia?
 - Okay, illiberal governing parties were less keen on the *aquis*, resulting in slower EU accession, but why were there social coalitions willing to sustain illiberal parties in some countries and not in others?
 - Okay, Slovaks are less pro-free market/democracy because their transition to free market/democracy was more traumatic. But why was it so? Why was it perceived as such?
- In other words, could it be that, in search of simplicity and statistical validity, we are focusing on the most proximate ‘triggers’ overlooking ‘deeper’ causes further down in the chain of causation?

An Epistemological Rather Than an Empirical Question?

- Kitschelt (2003) argues that the legacies-vs-rational choice debate is best understood not as a 'rivalry' between explanatory frameworks to test against the data, but rather as a deeper disagreement as to over what 'counts' as a cause and what we value about a causal explanation.
- 'Legacies' offer *causal depth*: they keep the focus on those long-term structures that reassert themselves after temporary shocks of the system that produce a lot of noise but no lasting consequence. However, (1) they are often vague as to *how* historical experience translates into outcomes down the road, (2) tend to be concerned with collective identities ('Asianness') and idealistic preferences ('solidarity') rather than human action, (3) operate at high level of generality, and (4) risk taking correlations and isomorphism as sufficient evidence of a 'legacy'.
- 'Rational choice' offers *parsimony*: they do not unnecessarily multiply causal factors (Ockham's Razor) and give us a spatio-temporally proximate account of causal mechanisms. However, (1) they come with the risk of tautology, and (2) may lead us astray into the over-analysis of outliers or temporary conjunctures rather than more analytically valuable long-run steady states of post-Communist governance. (Kitschelt, 2003; Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014)

Some Tentative Conclusions

- Theories of political behaviour, which emphasise institutional incentives, policy choices and international factors offer a useful corrective to the over-determinism of the 'legacies' approach.
- Moreover, they open up opportunities for comparison with other post-authoritarian contexts.
- Finally, they capture well the *proximate* links in the chain of causation that underlies post-Communist diversity, and lend themselves to quantitative analysis.
- However, regardless of how disruptive the critical juncture of transition was, history did not start in 1989. The political processes triggered by the fall of Communism continuously interacted with long-term processes rooted in the experience of previous regimes.
- Therefore, the 'rational choice' and 'legacies' approaches are best conceived and employed as *complementary*. The relative leverage of the frameworks depends (1) on the specific phenomenon in question and (2) on how strictly or loosely we are adhere to a mechanistic epistemology of causation.

Thank You

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