

# Democracy in East-Central Europe: Consolidated, Semi-Consolidated, Hybrid, Illiberal or Other?

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The countries of East–Central Europe (ECE) – and the Visegrád Group in particular – have been one of the most important concerns of critical comments and reviews in recent years. Reading West European mainstream media, it is easy to see that a fundamental distinction has been drawn between “old” and “new” Europe. This distinction puts so-called traditional liberal democracies, a group usually equated with the EU-15 countries, plus other “Western” countries without a post-Communist tradition (Switzerland, Norway and Iceland but also Malta and Cyprus) on one side. On the other side is the group of “new” democracies (post-Communist states of East-Central or Eastern Europe) based on their unsatisfactory or even failed democratisation. Central Europe is labelled “big, bad Visegrad” or “Europe’s dark heart” while a “clash of cultures” is said to be under way in the European Union between old democracies, who are defenders of European values, and anti-European populists from East-Central Europe with the Visegrád Group countries in first place.<sup>1</sup> These critics stress that East–Central Europe has clearly shown in recent years that it has not been socialised in European democratic values. The new democracies, they say, favour illiberal solutions and so on.

In this essay, I review five new books that analyse political developments in East–Central Europe – and particularly in the Visegrád Group – in the last or last few decades. These books are largely concerned with the preconditions and reasons for political instability and the growth of populism in East–Central Europe while some also focus on selected policies, especially “European” policies. In fact, while all five books analyse selected political actors, factors and issues

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes all appeared in a recent article in *The Economist*. See Big, Bad Visegrad (2016): *The Economist*, 28 January, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21689629-migration-crisis-has-given-unsettling-new-direction-old-alliance-big-bad-visegrad> (4. 10. 2017)

within one or more East–Central European countries, in all cases, their analysis is embedded in a broader “European” context. A second common characteristic of all five works is that they have been written in the German language (or, in one case, partly in German and partly in English). In other words, this review focuses on a “German” or “Austrian” view of East–Central Europe, that is, of the eastern part of Central Europe comprised of the Visegrád Group countries (i.e. of the neighbours to German-speaking Germany and Austria), and in one case, of the countries and regions of one of the EU’s new macro-regional strategies – the Danube strategy.

The authors of these works tend to take a multidisciplinary approach, combining political science, contemporary history, legal studies and regionalism as well as development studies. Two of the works (Heydemann – Vodička, eds. 2013; Ther 2014) provide a comprehensive analysis of East–Central European politics based on an in-depth review of democratic transition and consolidation processes and political developments in the region since the fall of the Iron Curtain. This analysis is either offset by a comparison with Western Europe (Heydemann – Vodička, eds. 2013) or forms part of a “pan-European” vision where the difference between West and East is overshadowed by the description, analysis and critique of neoliberal ideology as the “master narrative” for European reunification since 1989 (Ther 2014).

Another two of the reviewed books focus on (East–)Central Europe from a European perspective. Christopher Walsch (2015) has given his book *Aufbruch nach Europa* [Breakthrough into Europe] the subtitle *Sieben Beiträge zur europäischen Integration Ungarns seit 1990* [Seven contributions concerning Hungary’s integration into the EU after 1990]. In fact, these seven essays clearly go beyond Hungarian borders, presenting a mostly Central European/Visegrád Group perspective and position; Walsch returns particularly to the matter of further EU enlargement and the role of Central Europe in “socialising” the Western Balkans. As it happens, Walsch is also one of the editors of the collection *Strategie für den Donaauraum auf dem Prüfstand. Erfahrungen und Perspektiven* [Testing the EU’s Strategy for the Danube Region: Experiences and Prospects] (Bos – Griessler, – Walsch, eds. 2017). The latter work differs from the other four books in this review since its focus is selected areas of EU macro-regional policy. Nevertheless, it too develops an argument based on a Central European perspective, albeit one using a very different definition of the region.

Last but not least, I consider Helmut Fehr’s 2016 book *Vergeltende Gerechtigkeit – Populismus und Vergangenheitspolitik nach 1989* [Retributive Justice: Populism and Reckoning with the Past after 1989]. This work may seem unique in this sample since it concerns selected practices and actors related to retribution/transitional justice and de-Communisation in Central European countries. At the same time, Fehr presents his analysis as a critique of East–Central European politics, and I include his book here for this reason.

Born in 1945, Fehr is a German scholar with a background in linguistics, political science, sociology and philosophy. After the transition, he drew on his knowledge of Polish and – along with other activities – was a full professor of political science in Bielsko-Biała for ten years. Fehr’s analysis addresses three Visegrád countries (Czechia, Hungary and Poland) while also including the case of (East) Germany for a comparison. As he states in the book’s introduction, the goal is to analyse debates about the past in Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary by reappraising the underlying discourses. The main issue for Fehr is “justice” (*Gerechtigkeit*) as this idea has been taken up in political and public discourses. Despite the clear emphasis on transitional justice in the first phases of the transformation, Fehr (2016) points out that “corrective” justice also supported efforts to include former rivals in the debate and the new regime (pp. 12–13). There were, he writes, two main objectives of the efforts to overcome the Communist past: forming new institutions and establishing the legislation needed to ensure historical justice based on de-Communisation. Among the most important responses, Fehr singles out the “thick-line” approach, finding a good example in the line drawn by Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki. In contrast, he criticises the unlawful lustration carried out in Czechoslovakia even before the first competitive elections in May 1990.

Fehr also decries comparisons that equate “red” with “brown”, in other words aligning the Communist ideology and regimes with Nazi Germany and fascist regimes. Even so, he fails to make an argument addressing and refuting authors (not only politicians but also one respected social scientist) with a different opinion. Instead, he maintains that “in contrast with the criminal past of Germany between 1939 and 1945 where there was a clearly determined offender and network of victims, it is impossible to establish a ‘Communist regime’ based on the criminal activities of elite groups in power” (Fehr 2016: 8). “Real socialist” regimes, Fehr argues, drew on the support of the citizenry based on their normative approach to equality (p. 9). The Nazi regime, we might counter, also made use of the genuine support of citizens. I would add that while I fully agree with Fehr’s criticisms of yellow journalism about the past (p. 15), we should also take into account the tendency to relativise the Communist past that can be seen in contemporary East-Central Europe.

In fact, I’d suggest that Fehr’s critical position is too shaped by his stance on the East German situation and internal debates in Germany about the Communist past. Certainly, we can accept his thesis that de-Communisation was an emotional project of the first half of the 1990s (p. 35) while being less convinced that lustration laws reflected some principle of communal guilt (p. 37). Revisiting Czech lustration laws and knowing the practice, I would argue, for example, that lustration was very limited in the Czech lands, and in many spheres, these measures were barely applied. Certainly, it is true that from a political science perspective, the term “totalitarian” is used excessively (p. 42), with differences

in the types of pre- and post-totalitarian authoritarianism sometimes being ignored altogether (cf. Linz). Moreover, identifying “totalitarianism” with the “*nomenklatura*” (p. 42) is incorrect if we accept the fact that in countries like Czechoslovakia, an important number of the *nomenklatura* were pragmatic opportunists – the same individuals who are now state rulers (see, for example, of Robert Fico and Andrej Babiš). Generally, I would agree with Fehr’s criticism that East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) is often labelled “Stalinist” or a “totalitarian dictatorship” without any attempt to distinguish different eras of power (p. 53). On the other hand, we need to ask a simple question: can any of these eras be called something besides “undemocratic”? Unlike Fehr, I agree with the definition of the GDR as (pre-)modern. Certainly, it was not “no-man’s land” [*Niemandsland*] as Fehr claims (pp. 56–58), but rather – like any other Communist dictatorship – a “false state” [*Unrechtsstaat*]. We can, thus, acknowledge the limited state sovereignty of Communist countries in East-Central Europe, which is fully comparable in my opinion with the so-called sovereignty of Slovakia in the period 1939–1944/45.

One of Fehr’s strongest arguments against equating Nazi Germany and the GDR is that while Nazi Germany ignored international law, the GDR promised to respect the results of the Helsinki process (p. 62). At the same time, we should note that though the GDR and other Soviet satellites officially signed the Final Act, they did so without any real preparedness to respect it. Again, I would point out that the political practices of the GDR and Czechoslovakia – not to mention the sultanic regime in Ceaucescu’s Romania – were in all important respects undemocratic while the behaviour of the secret police and other pillars of these regimes was totalitarian until at least the mid-1980s. While Fehr rejects the description “terrorist state” for the GDR, we should recall that the GDR engaged in state-organised terrorism along with Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria.

Putting this aside, Fehr perfectly captures and describes the connections between de-Communisation and national populism, especially in contemporary Hungary and Poland: on one side, he writes, there was a common “we with the mandate of the entire people, and on the other, the red monolith” (p. 17). Turning to contemporary discourses in Hungary and Poland, he detects a “brutalisation of political rhetoric” (p. 26), noting that key words like “compromise” and “dialogue” have been rejected. In Poland, we may observe a new wave of de-Communisation led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Jarosław Kaczyński. The latter politician is, in Fehr’s view, the “inventor of de-Communisation as a theme for conflict” (p. 19). Analysing the “illiberal democracies” in Hungary and Poland, he finds a “nationalist populism” that originated in the interwar period (p. 7). Current national conservatives, he says, hold that “thick-line” politics brought a pink dictatorship instead of a red one (p. 29) and so they call for the “restoration of the state” and the “creation of a just nation” (p. 30).

As regards the most important paradigms informing this national conservative “revolution” in Hungary and Poland, Fehr names moral revolution, re-traditionalisation and anti-modernisation. In contrast, the Left, liberals, intellectuals and old networks have been demonised (p. 25) along, of course, with the EU and other transnational activities and structures including the general principle of globalisation. Conservatives, Fehr writes, maintain that the national interest can and should only be realised within the nation state – that bastion against Europeanisation and globalisation – and that “we cannot speak about democracy without the nation state” (p. 67). On this view, “[j]ournalists and liberals do not have any loyalty to the nation state” but are agents of some fifth convoy (p. 68). Brussels is also said to be overridden by leftist elites while the EU is likened to the former Soviet Union (p. 68). It is worth singling out the rhetoric of Kaczyński, who stresses the “colonial laws” of Tusk’s Poland and the “German dominance” of the EU (cited in Fehr, p. 111); Poland, he claims, is the last defender of truth (p. 69). Prime Minister Orbán takes a similar line vis-à-vis Hungary, combining this rhetoric with a more traditional casting of Hungary as a victim (p. 86).

Observing the Polish debate, Fehr suggests a master narrative of injustice [*Ungerechtigkeit*] may be at work (p. 67). The leaders who preceded the Kaczyński brothers are, thus, dismissed as “Solidatura”; only PiS, it is said, can bring real democracy to the country based on the “values of Christian Poland” (p. 69). Leftism does not reflect the “Polish spirit” (p. 22). Fehr here quotes Jan Parys, the leader of the Third Republic movement: “In Poland, there is no ‘normal’ Left, only the Left that collaborated” (p. 24)

Populism is rooted in reverence for the “common people” – the everyman and his representatives who are, as Fehr notes, said to be struggling against liberal, (post-)Communist, German, European/inised elites (pp. 68, 73). Both PiS in Poland and the Fidesz party that dominates Hungarian politics equate “liberal” with “cosmopolitan” and “freemason” where the latter is also a synonym for those of Jewish ethnicity. The leaders of national conservative movements and parties also make clear use of a highly problematic and seemingly extremist rhetoric, sprinkling speeches with terms like “racial mix” (Polish Foreign Minister Waszczykowski) and “liberal scum” [*Lumpenliberalismus*] (Kaczyński).

The anti-intellectualism, anti-Communism and anti-liberalism described by Fehr (p. 27) – intellectuals are apparently all liberal and leftist – are accompanied by calls for a loyal and patriotic media and reverence for the people, “who remain above the law,” as Kornel Morawiecki of the Kukiz-15 movement puts it. (The law, he has said, “is important but cannot be sacred and must serve the people.”) National conservatives are, thus, building an ethnically homogenous nation that pits itself against minorities and other nations based on a politics of resentment. At work here are a blatant xenophobia and his-

torical stereotypes about neighbouring countries, which are condemned as “German agents”, “foreign influences” and “journalists funded from abroad”. Meanwhile, minorities are branded potential collaborators with the enemy. Poland’s nationalist Catholic elite have, thus, claimed that “Jews have always been alien to us” and even more startlingly, “Jews betrayed us and handed us over to the Soviet occupiers” and “[a]n Israelite cannot be a real Pole” (c.f. Pufelska cited in Fehr 2014:142)

As Fehr painstakingly shows in his analysis of the 2012/13 Czech presidential campaign, the national conservative movement can also team up effectively with leftist populists in some countries. Throughout the campaign, Miloš Zeman was billed as a “genuine Czech” in a showdown with the “non-Czech” Karel Schwarzenberg, who even had an Austrian wife (p. 121). National conservatives, Fehr stresses, here play the same cards that the Communists relied on before the transition: “In both Poland and the Czech lands, hatred of the Germans was the Communists’ last hope” (p. 114). Obviously, such populist politics is at once pragmatic and irrational and paranoid. The paranoid style of politics on display in Poland and Hungary stresses the dangers posed by “liberals”, “cosmopolitan elites” and “banking circles” (or “New York”) while Czech President Zeman and many other Central European politicians appeal to public anger about migrant arrivals (this is despite the fact that there are almost no migrants in any of these states besides Hungary). In the case of Poland, Fehr also specifically addresses the role of President Lech Kaczyński’s death in a plane crash, noting how this “myth of Smolensk” complements traditional conspiracy theories.

The brutalisation of political language has introduced terms like “witch”, “killer”, “agent”, “devil” and “traitor”. Kaczyński, Orbán and Zeman, Fehr notes, rely on a politics of inferiority complexes (p. 141) and fear (p. 145). Both Orbán and Kaczyński discount guarantees of human and civil rights as merely ideological. In contrast, populism is a good thing – and Orbán, who sees himself as a “good populist”, observes: “In Hungary, we call things by their real name. This is part of our natural history” (quoted in Fehr, p. 149). This “common sense” is contrasted with so-called political correctness, an alien concept brought in from the West.

Fehr’s analysis concludes with his own round of name-calling: the politics of Central European national conservatives, he notes, is “plebeian” and aimed at the masses of former country-dwellers. Again he quotes Orbán: “We Hungarians are a nation shaped by agriculture.” Fehr is clearly highly critical of the Polish and Hungarian national conservative parties and his analysis provides ample evidence for this take on their anti-liberal and generally anti-democratic attitudes. At the same time, he does not proceed – and it was not his goal – to explore the reasons for the de-democratisation trends in these countries or more generally in East-Central Europe. That task is, on the other hand, taken up by another work, Phillip Ther’s comprehensive *Die neue Ordnung auf dem*

*alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa* [The New Order on the Old Continent: The History of Neoliberal Europe] published in 2014.

Ther, who was born in Germany and teaches at the University of Vienna, specialises in modern, contemporary and comparative history with a focus on East–Central Europe, particularly the Visegrád Group countries. At the same time, his work has important applications for other East–Central European countries and Russia. This approach is rooted in Ther’s own background, as becomes clear in the book’s first chapter, which describes his experiences and emotions as a young man living behind the Iron Curtain. As a specialist in contemporary history and sociology, Ther sets out to analyse the reasons for the “European crisis” that erupted after 2008. His hypothesis is that neoliberal responses to the weakness(es) of the (Western) welfare state fell short – and continue to fail us – and that this has produced or exacerbated deep-seated problems and cleavages in Europe/the EU. At the same time, Ther’s analysis is anything but a one-sided critique of neoliberalism; for a classic case of the latter, we might mention the work of anthropologist Loïc Wacquant (2010; 2012) (for a critique of Wacquant, compare, for example, Cabada 2014).

Instead, this account begins with a basic question: “Could the state be overburdened by all the social benefits it is meant to deliver?” (p. 11). Oil crises and subsequent developments in the West have revealed deep problems in the welfare state that are mainly due to the gap between societal expectations and the funds available. This disjunction has led to an expanding and – and in some European countries – seemingly intractable problem with growing public debt. In examining the situation, Ther also considers the countries behind the Iron Curtain: “The Eastern bloc missed the digital revolution, and some countries (Yugoslavia, Hungary) also faced problematic foreign debts” (p. 41). Economic – and more generally development – problems are, thus, diagnosed as an important cause of changes in Eastern Europe. As Ther writes, Poles, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks who could travel were quick to notice the lack of proper development in their countries compared with the West (p. 43).

Turning to the period before the transition, this book also shows how the West used the détente years to develop new economic relations with the East. Of course, the joint venture activities of Western firms in Eastern Europe (including French firms in Romania and various investors in Hungary) were already observable in the 1960s, but it was really during the 1970s that this economic cooperation became more systematic. During the détente, the West saw the opportunity to take advantage of a cheap and well-educated labour force in the Communist countries – Austria was extremely active in this regard but so too were Sweden and others. In Ther’s view, this was a chance for slow reform. This may be the case, especially if we take into account that economic and developmental failures had negative consequences for an important section of the *nomenklatura* who were often caught up in the grey or even black economies

of their countries during the regime change.<sup>2</sup> Ther does mention this quest to secure new positions in these transforming systems (p. 44), but he does not address the *nomenklatura* methodically.

By the same token, it would have been useful to consider some of the political science debates about differences among the Communist states – Of note here, for example, is the outstanding work of Herbert Kitschelt and colleagues (1999), who provide a taxonomy of patrimonial, national-accommodating and bureaucratic-authoritarian Communisms. In my view, applying this taxonomy to the issue of West–East economic cooperation and its role in dismantling Communist regimes would have revealed that this premise is only valid for some Communist countries and does not hold, for example, for sultanic Romania. To compare a non-European example, the development of Kaesong industrial park has not helped open North Korea up to the world or led to any relaxation of its regime.

Nevertheless, I would fully agree with Ther’s point that reforms were expected and began across both halves of Europe in the 1980s (pp. 47–48). I must also concur that the “crisis in the East was ‘invisible’ and this included the horrible environmental situation” (pp. 50–51). And Ther is right to stress the importance of anti-Russian nationalism both within and outside the USSR (p. 53). There are, however, some regional differences that might have borne closer examination: while in the West, the 1980s saw a clash between neoliberals and supporters of a broad welfare state (including both “socialists” and more general supporters of a social market economy), economists in the East were trying to combine a limited market economy with the Communist ideology. Ther’s account suffers from the lack of any discussion of the role of the Prognostic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which was established in 1984 and has since been criticised as a leading Communist tool for reform without democratisation. Employees of the Institute included such names as Václav Klaus, Miloš Zeman, Valtr Komárek, Vladimír Dlouhý, Tomáš Ježek, Karel Dyba and Miloslav Ransdorf – all of whom besides Ransdorf became members of post-1989 governments and two of whom went on to be the Czech Prime Minister or President.

There is, however, absolutely correct that after 1989, the post-Communist region became a laboratory for neoliberal economic policy. With some exceptions – Slovenia under Drnovšek and Czechoslovakia in the first two years of the transition – the concept of a “third way” was, as he notes, rejected (p. 13). Packs of Western neoliberal economists quickly descended on East–Central Europe (p. 32) and also found supporters in domestic arenas. As Ther captures so well, the success of these “Eastern Thatcherists” was also based on the clear

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2 It is worth highlighting the excellent analysis of Czech sociologist Ivo Možný, whose seminal 2009 volume *Proč tak snadno... Některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce* [Why it was so easy... Some familial reasons for the Velvet Revolution] exposed the extent of the Czech *nomenklatura*’s interests.



failure of Communist reforms in the USSR, Poland and Hungary (p. 55). Ther rejects the idea that this neoliberalism was entirely mistaken, instead maintaining that the Western welfare state needed – and still needs – at least partial reform. At the same time, he cites examples which show that alongside the mistakes and failures, the economic transition had some very positive results for East–Central Europe. No one, he argues, was in a position to assess these processes “definitively”, and there have been many important shifts in the evaluation of the transitioning ECE states. In the beginning, Hungary and the Czech Republic were seen as exemplary, however this later changed and Estonia and Poland became the more positive case studies. We might add that Slovakia is now often championed as another positive example whose macroeconomic indicators should soon equal if not outdo those of the Czech Republic. Promoters of a common EU currency might also point to this development. Certainly, I would agree with Ther that the relative success of East–Central Europe became apparent shortly before the 2004 EU-enlargement: in 2002/2003, several ECE countries had better economic results than some of the poorer EU-15 countries.

In my view, however, the highlight of Ther’s book lies in its chapters that address the differences between metropolitan areas and the countryside. Ther has an excellent shorthand for both his hypotheses and the results of his analysis: “[r]ich cities, poor countryside” (p. 20). The gap between the “winners” and “losers” of the transformation clearly reflect this split, as Fehr has also noted. Ther’s comparisons, however, reveal usefully that the disparity between the economic development of urban and rural areas was not specific to East–Central Europe – and a growing regional and social divide could also be seen in the West. At the same time, he argues that Southern Europe is the new Eastern Europe. In both regions, the post-2008 crisis has hit country dwellers much harder than city residents. For Ther, Southern Europe and Eastern Europe have not overcome the rift between the centre and the periphery that exists across Europe; rather, the harsh neoliberal economic transformation of East–Central Europe has only deepened the divides in post-Communist as well as many other European countries.

A similar view can be found in several of the essays written by Christopher Walsch (2015). Walsch’s academic background is very similar to that of Ther, and he also studied modern and social and economic history and then pursued international relations and European and development studies. The Austrian-born Walsch has been active for more than a decade at various academic institutions. His book logically brings together a number of his essays about Hungary, reflecting on the country through three different levels of analysis: domestic, Central European and European. Like Ther, Walsch begins by observing that Central Europe lagged economically behind in the 1970s and especially the 1980s. The term “Central Europe” (*Zentraleuropa*), it should be stressed, is used carefully here and mostly refers to the Visegrád Group countries plus Austria

and Slovenia. Commemorating the unwritten agreement between the Czechoslovak political elite and these societies after the August 1968 occupation, he describes the region as a “happy barracks”. Following this regional analysis, Walsch’s focus shifts to Hungary’s “goulash capitalism” and the transition to a market economy. This analysis deftly captures how both left- and right-wing parties and governments have been plagued by growing budgetary debt; the result has been an economic populism based on increasing financial promises to the public in exchange for votes. New governments have, thus, repeatedly stopped long-term reforms and awarded radical wage rises to the public sector; they have repeatedly found new forms of economic populism (the introduction of a national pension age of just 56 is one example.). In Walsch’s view, the main problem with the Hungarian transition – and the country’s politics in general – lies in the lack of any consensus. Like the accounts of Fehr and Ther, his argument highlights the significant cleavage across this society.

In the space of the next four essays, Walsch presents an analysis of Central European politics and selected policies over the last 25 years. This begins with a comparison of the Central European/Visegrád cooperation with similar format arrangements (Benelux etc.) and proceeds to an analysis of Visegrád Group’s development, including examples of the cooperation’s successes and failures across selected policy areas. Among the priorities for this cooperation, Walsch names energy policy and security, the Eastern Partnership and further EU enlargement based on the ongoing support of the Central European countries for the aspirations of Western Balkan states. Interestingly, this analysis sees the Visegrád Group as a band of confident countries who are offering their experiences with Europeanisation and socialisation processes to EU-membership candidates. This confidence would seem to be at odds with the oft-mentioned problems with democratic consolidation in some ECE countries. Still, it is certainly true that Western Balkan countries are more likely to resemble other new democracies than West European countries. Walsch highlights the very specific “V4+” format that has been used to create ad hoc coalitions of ECE states. The most important case of this cooperation is, he notes, the “group of friends of cohesion”, which formed during the negotiations of the 2014–2020 EU budget. Walsch’s observations can be linked here with Ther’s emphasis on the creation of this group from countries on the EU’s periphery, i.e. not only states in the East but also those in the South. Walsch concludes this interesting collection of essays by setting out ten theses concerning Hungary’s Europeanisation. The majority of these stress the importance of democracy, consensus, civil society, education, the division of powers and similar norms. In other words, Walsch calls for the (re-)establishment of liberal democracy in the country.

The idea of Central European cooperation is also taken up in another work to which Walsch has made an important contribution. Specifically, he is the co-editor with Ellen Bos and Christina Griessler of a recent book addressing

one of the EU's new integration and development tools: macro-regional strategies. Most of the articles in this collection focus on the EU's Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) as an example of the new regionalism based on constructivist approaches. On the other hand, several chapters take a more traditional approach to Central Europe and even ask whether these perspectives are complementary or in competition. The EUSDR includes two southern German republics, Austria, three Visegrád Group countries (Poland is notably absent), Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, three candidate states from the Western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) as well as selected regions of Moldova and Ukraine. In this sense, it really is a new, functionalist development. The book's contributors consider why the EU has launched this new strategy (the answer lies in the limited success of existing regional and cohesion policy). They also ponder what this new activity means for differentiated integration across the EU (Boglárka Koller offers an excellent analysis) and how it might support existing regional cooperation in Central Europe (Walsch) and the Western Balkans (Griessler). Having outlined these regional and European perspectives, the book turns to several comparative studies of already launched or currently prepared macro-regional strategies in the Baltic region and the Alps; there are also policy analyses of mainly economic issues and cooperation. All in all, this collection offers a slightly different take on the analysis of Central European politics, with a clear emphasis on new challenges and opportunities. A good balance is struck between top-down and bottom-up perspectives, and it is fascinating to see the "return" of the Central European Initiative (CEI) as the main platform for a new functionalist style of cooperation that goes behind the Iron Curtain (the Alps-Adriatic Alliance, Quadrangolare and Pentagonale).

Finally, I would highlight a collection of analyses that was published in 2013 and edited by G. Heydemann and K. Vodička. Both these editors work at the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism in Dresden; it should be noted that Vodička left Czechoslovakia in the 1980s and became an exile in Germany. Since the collapse of the Communist regimes, his academic career has developed in both countries, focusing mainly on democratic consolidation issues. Among Vodička's key research contributions is the axiom that the former East Germany should be considered alongside the ECE countries, that is, that the new federal republics did not simply become Westernised after German reunification. It may be recalled that Fehr also included (East) Germany case in his analysis while Ther (2014) saw the former GDR as an area in transition (p. 28).

This volume edited by Heydemann and Vodička, *Vom Ostblock zur EU: Systemtransformationen 1990–2012 im Vergleich* [From the Eastern Bloc to the EU: Comparing System Transformations 1990–2012] brings to mind the excellent book series *Die politischen Systeme Westeuropas* [Political Systems of Western Europe] and *Die politischen Systeme Osteuropas* [Political Systems of Eastern Europe] edited by Wolfgang Ismayr which has appeared in many editions since

the early 2000s. Since addressing all of the case studies in this volume is hardly feasible, my comments here focus specifically on the objectives and results of this research. The editors start their introduction with a note that all these studies confirm the important and persistent differences between post-Communist countries and other countries. Heydemann and Vodička's view can be summed up in a single sentence: "Compared with established EU democracies, the democracies of the post-Communist EU space seem to suffer from a wide range of democratic shortcomings at the level of representation (virulent party systems), actors (a propensity for corruption) and civil society (weaker support for democracy and unpreparedness for political participation)" (p. 15). The two also note that Communist rule "destroyed the moral values of the pre-totalitarian period, deformed civic political culture and erased civil society" (p. 319).

Nevertheless, they remain positive about the current situation and the prospects for East-Central European countries based on their analysis. Heydemann and Vodička write repeatedly that the majority of the ECE countries who are new EU member states are now on a direct track to consolidated democracy. The point becomes clearer when they compare current and potential EU candidate states and other post-Communist states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region and Central Asia: "The populations of the new EU member states support democracy not just as a model but as a real system and they decisively reject anti-democratic system alternatives [...] Experts assess the post-Communist EU member states as consolidating democracies while all other former eastern bloc countries are seen as defective democracies at best" (Vodička – Heydemann 2013: 320). Certain other comments are, however, perhaps too optimistic given what has transpired in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic: "[t]he eastern EU states have already put the most difficult years behind them: in the social, economic and political arenas, we should count on predominantly positive developments" (Vodička – Heydemann 2013: 380).

It is worth recalling that East–Central Europe is not composed solely of Central European countries with illiberal tendencies; it also includes very promising consolidating democracies like Estonia and Slovenia. Conversely, there are many states in Western Europe where we may observe democratic shortcomings, suggesting that consolidated democracy may be more or less a norm that countries should tend towards. Certainly, I would agree with Heydemann and Vodička's (2013) position that the most important problem for the ECE states is "widening and even endemic corruption" (p. 378).

In sum, it is understandable that comparative politics scholars are continuing to search for differences between East and West. However, most of the books considered in this review show that European countries are facing very similar and common challenges and risks. Just how they respond may depend on very different divisions and preconditions than whether they belong to the "old" or the "new" Europe.

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