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## Europeanization as a Democratising Force in Post-communist Europe: Croatia in Comparative Perspective\*

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### Summary

Croatia remains largely left out of comparative studies of post-communism even though its political development after 2000 places it firmly within the group of European post-communist consolidated democracies. In this paper I analyse the case of Croatia by combining comparative frameworks that focus on concepts of democratisation and Europeanization. The analysis shows that in the 1990s Croatia belonged to the group of illiberal democracies together with Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. They were characterised by postponed economic and political reforms, clientelism and corruption in government. This is primarily attributed to the absence of a competitive party system with alternations of parties in power. The concept of political party competition as developed by Grzymala Busse (2002, 2007) and Vachudova (2005) is however not sufficient on its own to explain democratisation trajectories, so it is complemented with Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel's (2006) concept of political party constellation. According to their argument, in countries where both liberal and illiberal parties structure the party space, the tipping point for democratisation happens when all main parties adopt a liberal political practice. Croatia's 'democratic turn' elections happened in 2000, after which the CDU initiated an internal reform into a pro-European Christian Democratic party. As a result, after 2000 Croatian political party space became dominantly liberal-oriented and pro-EU, jump-starting EU accession. Finally, the analysis suggests that post-communist countries need to democratise first in order for Europeanization of domestic political space to start taking place.

*Key words:* post-communism, democratisation, Europeanization, political party competition, liberal and illiberal political parties, Croatia

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Post-communist countries can claim both the best and the worst record of transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Ekiert, Kubik and Vachudova 2007), with Central European countries such as the Czech Republic and Hungary at one end, and Turkmenistan and Belarus at the other. Therefore, the fundamental puzzle of post-communist politics is why some countries succeeded and others failed, totally or partially, in building and consolidating liberal democracy.

Post-communist transformations are characterised by simultaneous economic and political reforms. This simultaneity of reforms makes post-communist transition unique with respect to other democratic transitions from authoritarian rule, which usually involved chiefly political transformations, as was the case in Latin America or East Asia. According to the ‘transitional incompatibility’ thesis, democratisation has the potential to undermine economic reform and vice versa, determined economic reform can turn crucial social actors against democratisation (Armijo, Biersteker and Lowenthal 1994). In addition to that, the sequence in which mass democracy comes before market capitalism is historically unique (Balcerowicz 1995). Some cases represent even ‘triple transitions’, where the process of nation and state building was taking place at the same time as political and economic transformations (Offe 1991, Kitschelt et al. 1999). This was true for instance of Slovakia and Croatia, which acquired independent statehood through the break-up of respective federations of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

Yet another dimension to post-communist transformations into democracy is the relationship of these new democracies with the European Union. Looking back at the almost 20-year period of democratic transformation from 1989 to 2008, the process of democratisation overlapped considerably with Europeanization of countries in the post-communist region. In other words, it seems impossible to study the processes of democratisation without accounting for the influence of the European Union. On the other hand, one must also account for the fact that the EU changed immensely between 1989 and 2008, and that the character and intensity of its influence varied across time and between prospective future members in the post-communist region. That it had enormous potential influence is noncontroversial; as Pravda argued, the European Union has the most powerful set of resources for promoting democracy of any Western organization (2001).

Having in mind these daunting challenges for comparative politics scholars, it is not surprising that studies of post-communist transformations overwhelmingly focus on the comparatively ‘simpler’, or less messy, cases of

Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. More recent studies from the 2000s onwards started incorporating Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania as lag-gard Europeanizers, and a number of studies have been made of the Baltic states, mostly in the context of minority rights protection. Finally, Slovenia occasionally features in comparative studies, but it represents an exception among former Yugoslav republics that are rarely or almost never included in studies of post-communist democratisation. The main reason for this is the fact that in successor countries of former Yugoslavia systemic democratic transformations were delayed for a whole decade (Zakošek 2002). Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup>, FYR Macedonia and Serbia are still grappling with issues of statehood and territorial sovereignty, which continues to postpone their democratic consolidation by taking precedence over all other reforms. Croatia also underwent a period of dominance of ‘identity politics’ in the 1990s (ibid.), amplified by the 1991 – 1995 Homeland War that ensued after Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia. But, unlike these other cases, Croatia has since 2000 developed into a fully consolidated democracy, which provides ample justification for its inclusion in the comparative framework of European post-communist consolidated democracies. Despite this fact, however, it remains on the fringe of comparative studies of democratisation.

A notable exception to this silence is Fisher’s (2006) comparative study of Slovakia and Croatia, which ensued after many researchers noted on the similarities between Croatian and Slovakian transitions. Fisher however focuses primarily on the similar role that nationalism played in both countries as a mobilising ideology and ruling strategy of Mečiar’s and Tuđman’s governments. As a result, there still remains a gap when it comes to structured comparisons between Croatia and other post-communist consolidated democracies with respect to the development of political party systems, the emergence of party competition and political plurality. Since in the last few years a number of exciting studies have been made that focus on the democratic transformations of former communist European countries, and on the role of the EU in these transformations, in this analysis I will critically examine these propositions and attempt to incorporate the case of Croatia, the ‘pariah of Europe’ (Vachudova 2005), into existing theories of democratisation and Europeanization. While this attempt still does not introduce Croatia into structured comparative studies, it hopefully represents a first step in that direction.

Post-communist studies are a very prolific field, and scholars have already identified a broad array of factors that influence the success of democratisation: historical legacies, initial economic and social conditions, types of

<sup>1</sup> Scholars claim not only that Bosnia and Herzegovina does not function as a sovereign state, but question whether it fulfills the conditions to exist as an independent state at all (Kasapović 2005).

democratic breakthrough, types of previous communist regime, choice of democratic institutions, features of domestic political competition, the role of elites, proximity to the West, international influences, and others (Ekiert, Kubik and Vachudova 2007). Among all these, I focus on recent studies that successfully combine an Europeanization focus with a focus on domestic political institutions, taking the advice of Taggart and Szczerbiak (2001) for more productive links between EU studies and studies of comparative politics. Even more specifically, in the following discussion I will focus primarily on comparative analyses of political party system development. Arguably, political parties played *the* central role in democratic transition, and they had the biggest opportunity to abuse their power (Agh 1996). At the same time, researchers of political parties have only recently begun to acknowledge the European Union as a potentially significant environment (Ladrech 2002, Poguntke et al 2007). I assume that political party system development has a crucial impact on democratisation<sup>2</sup> and I analyse studies that propose sophisticated and convincing accounts of the democratic transformations in post-communist Europe using the combined focus on Europeanization and political party system development.

The first main argument I advance is that political party competition is a central driver of democratisation, as other scholars have already argued, but that the presence of a credible threat of replacement is not sufficient for hegemonic parties in post-communist settings to adopt liberal democratic practices. Instead, what differentiates the successful from the less successful post-communist democratisers is the actual alternation of parties in power in the first decade of transition. The second main argument I propose is that the concept of a competitive party system on its own cannot explain how for instance Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia managed to break out of the trap of partial democratic reform at the end of the 1990s. In order to explain this I introduce Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel's (2006) concept of political party constellation according to which democratic consolidation becomes possible only after the liberal segment of the political party system captures the majority of domestic political space. Thirdly, in attempting the egg and the chicken question of whether countries first democratise and then Europeanization occurs, or alternatively, that Europeanization drives democratisation, I argue that the key domestic power reshuffling which introduces the dominance of liberal political parties must occur before Europeanization can start positively affecting domestic democratisation processes.

<sup>2</sup> Pennings and Lane (2005) propose the inverse argument, according to which political parties had a weak role in the democratisation process of East European countries. They base their argument on the fact that parties in post-communist societies were not based in large memberships and stable cleavage structures. I would argue that regardless of the problem of party-electorate linkages in post-communist contexts, political parties had the key structuring role in the newly democratic polities since they have a natural monopoly over political and state resources.

### *Political party competition as a democratisation mechanism*

One of the key findings of post-communist democratisation scholars is the importance of political party competition for democracy (Vachudova and Hooghe 2008). There are several points that scholars agree on as relevant for developing political party competition: the initial exit of communist party from power, the existence of democratic opposition to take its place, the prompt reform of former communist party into a modern Social Democratic party, and the alternation of political parties in power (Bunce 1999, Fish 1998, Vachudova 2005, Grzymala Busse 2002, 2007). Next I tackle these propositions in more detail.

Recently studies have been made that attempt to explain why only some of the post-communist countries managed to escape the trap of clientelist politics, while in others party politics became tightly coupled with clientelism and corruption. This is relevant for the present discussion because clientelist parties that strip resources from the state, privatise economic gains and extract rent arguably have an adverse effect on democratisation. In a very influential argument Hellman (1998) has shown that the main opposition to reforms in post-communist countries were not the transition losers as was predicted, but initial winners who benefited from partial reform. A fusion of political and economic elites (enterprise insiders, commercial bankers, local officials) was blocking reform advances that threatened to eliminate their special advantages. Instead of supporting reforms, ‘the short-term winners have often sought to stall the economy in a *partial reform equilibrium* that generates concentrated rents for themselves, while imposing high costs on the rest of society’ (1998:204). Counterintuitively, it was in the most competitive political systems that necessary economic reforms were initiated and sustained. A competitive political party system seems to hold the key to restricting state exploitation, strengthening the system of checks and balances, and sustaining reform efforts – which makes it a major factor in the democratisation of post-communist polities.

Some of these assumptions derive from Shefter’s (1994) well-established argument according to which, if party building precedes the consolidation of state bureaucracy, party builders incline towards patronage-based strategies. Patronage and clientelist politics in turn cripple state capacity and performance with respect to efficiency and accountability, jeopardising the democratic process. Two recent studies take up party political competition as a key explanatory factor in post-communist state transformation: Grzymala Busse’s *Rebuilding the Leviathan* (2007) and O’Dwyer’s *Runaway State Building* (2006). Both focus on state expansion in post-communist countries, and propose a very similar argument.

According to Grzymala Busse the post-communist state grew because governing parties exploited the state for resources that they directed towards

party elites, which is a variation on Shefter's theme. There are significant differences across post-communist countries of the extent to which the state has grown since 1989, and according to her the key process that curbed state exploitation was political party competition. The more robust was the competition, the more stringently regulated, transparent and formalized party access to state resources became, restricting state growth and state exploitation. In this argument, Grzymala Busse is relying on her earlier study of transformation of former communist parties into Social Democratic parties of the centre-left<sup>3</sup>. Former communist parties survived after 1989 in all European post-communist countries, and in some of them they have since then run governments and assumed positions of prominence with wide popular support. While it is difficult to marvel at the everyday phenomena that surround us, the survival of former communist parties is actually quite a fascinating political phenomenon that few would predict in 1989. Former communist parties were expected to either collapse or retain outdated ideology (Przeworski 1992). In order to survive, we would imagine that they required something of an 'extreme makeover'.

Grzymala Busse (2002) studied the post-1989 transformation of former communist parties in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. The Czech Republic's communists turned out to be at one end of the spectrum as complete non-reformers and Hungary's at the other as most successful reformers. The Czech communist party successor, the *Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia*, pursued a strategy of continuity, retaining many of its organisational structures, its communist name and ideology, and many of its symbols. As a result its electorate was relatively narrow and disgruntled, and the party continued to be excluded a priori from electoral and governmental coalitions. The party relied chiefly on protest votes and expected its support to grow due to worsening economic and political conditions. By contrast, the *Hungarian Socialist Party* enjoyed the greatest public success, especially in its parliamentary performance. The party won the 1994 elections with 33% of the vote. After four years of coalition rule it continued to be seen as committed to democracy and effective in governance, even if it lost elections in 1998 with 32,3% of the vote. The cases of Slovakia and Poland also represent successful party transformations. The *Slovak Party of the Democratic Left* denounced communist ideology and appeals, and became widely accepted as committed to upholding democracy in Slovakia. It gained almost 15% of the vote in 1992 and 1998 elections. They easily entered coalitions, and were courted by both government and opposition parties during the post-1989 era. Finally, the *Social Democracy of Poland* became the electoral darling of East Central Europe. The party lost every seat it could in the semi-free elections in 1989 but then went on to win elections only four

<sup>3</sup> *Redeeming the Communist Past*, Cambridge University Press (2002)

years later, with 20% of the vote in 1993. Later in 1997 it gained more voters, and in 2001 it won elections with 41% of the vote. However, in parliament it suffered exclusion by parliamentary parties with roots in the former anticommunist opposition. Ironically, the major finding of Grzymala Busse was that it was the successful transformation of the former communists into parliamentarians that enabled these countries to develop political competition early on in transition, furthering their democratisation.

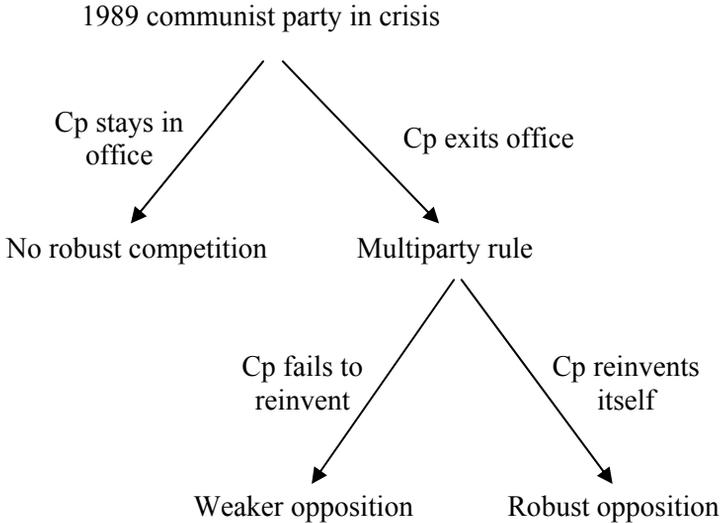
Going back to the link between political competition and the development of clientelism, O'Dwyer (2006) also argues that electoral competition curbed patronage-led state building, but he defines competition somewhat differently. According to him, competition must be institutionalised in a stable party system in order to have an effect on curbing state exploitation by political parties. In his analysis a party system that has bipolar characteristics has the strongest chances for curbing clientelism, while Grzymala Busse does not propose either stability or bipolarity as crucial features of political party competition necessary for curbing state exploitation.

Nevertheless, the argument they both make revolves around the concept of *political party competition*<sup>4</sup>: a political party system with an opposition that 'offers a clear, plausible and critical governing alternative that threatens the governing coalition with replacement' (Busse 2007:1). The proposition according to which the threat of replacement creates incentives for strengthening formal institutions that offer all parties guarantees rather than benefiting only the incumbent has been made before, among others by Przeworski (1991). Similarly, in an early study of communist breakup, Bruszt and Stark (1992) argued that strategic interaction of rulers and the opposition led to configurations of the political party field that varied between constrained competition in Bulgaria and Romania, and unconstrained competition in Hungary. Grzymala Busse (2007) develops these arguments and offers a model, presented in Figure 1. According to the model, the communists exit from power, which is followed by the transformation of the former communist party into a social democratic, centre-left party. This in turn produces the political opposition and a credible threat of replacement, leading to a competitive political party system. This is the scenario that happened in Hungary and Poland. Alternatively, in, for instance, Bulgaria and Romania the communists did not exit from power in 1989, which thwarted the appear-

<sup>4</sup> While the two authors use a very similar argument, they reach contradictory empirical conclusions. The reason for this seems to lie in problems of measurement of state growth, and in the fact that boundaries of the state are difficult to define. Since the authors drew from different data, the Polish case ended up representing a case of state growth in O'Dwyer, and a case of constrained state growth in Grzymala Busse. While this opens up an important discussion about the nature of empirical research and of contextual explanation, these issues exceed the scope of this paper.

ance of a competitive party system and democratisation, and furthered the growth of clientelism and corruption instead.

Figure 1:



Source: Grzymala Busse *Rebuilding Leviathan* (2007: 16:)

Vachudova (2005) uses Grzymala Busse's logic of political competition and applies this analysis to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia. She divides the six countries into illiberal and liberal democracies and argues that whether countries embarked on the liberal or illiberal path was determined by the quality of political competition at the moment of regime change. The quality of political competition is determined, she argues, by the presence/absence of an opposition to communism strong enough to take power in 1989, and secondly the presence/absence of a reformed communist party, which is essentially the same argument that Grzymala Busse makes. However, while Grzymala Busse specifies the relationship between political party competition and state exploitation, Vachudova explicates the essential link between political party competition and the pursuit of democratic consolidation within a liberal political setting. Vachudova proposes the following scheme of her cases, presented in Table 1.

Table 1:

Nature of opposition to communism	Nature of communist party	
	Reforming	Unreconstructed
Strong	Poland Hungary	Czech Republic
Weak	Slovakia	Bulgaria Romania

Source: Vachudova, *Europe Undivided* (2005:34)

Vachudova argues that strong political competition among cohesive and moderate opposing national parties develops most easily in the presence of a post-communist left and a post-opposition right. Poland and Hungary had both and did best, while the Czech Republic had an unreconstructed left for very long, which slowed down reform and encouraged corruption. On the other hand, all three of these countries fared much better than the other group, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, which had neither reformed communists nor a democratic opposition. According to Vachudova, in Romania and Bulgaria ‘unreconstructed communists’ kept power while in Slovakia opportunists won power by using fear of economic reform and defence of the nation to forge their political viability. In Bulgaria, after 1989 the Communist Party ‘retained all the resources needed to decide the course of event and control the process of change’ (Karasimeonov 1996: 255), while the democratic opposition started from scratch and needed a long time to become a viable opponent. In Romania the situation was even more hegemonic for the former communists. Faced with no immediate threat of replacement, Iliescu’s party made significant steps to reform into a social democratic party of the European type only in the later part of the 1990s (Batt 2002), almost a decade after assuming power within a formally democratic multi-party system.

In all three cases parties in power through the 1990s led into an ‘illiberal’ democracy, where democratic institutions and economic reform were thwarted. Political power became concentrated in the hands of rent-seeking elites who, unchecked by other political forces, were able to mislead electorates about the long-term costs of halting economic reform. Mečiar’s *Movement for a Democratic Slovakia* (HZDS) used nationalist discourse, but not because that was the party ideology, but because ethnic nationalism could be used as an effective tool for authoritarian concentration of power (Fisher 2006). HZDS members operated on the basis of communist-era networks, perpetuating a kind of continuity with the old regime that was ‘masked by the drama of the independence movement’ (Vachudova 2005:44).

Summarising the arguments presented so far, among the European post-communist countries there are the successful reformers – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the laggards – Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. These differences in democratic performance are attributed to the speed of transformation of the political party space into a competitive party system. In all cases some credible opposition developed eventually, but as the argument goes, countries in which this happened right away were faster and more successful democratic reformers.

How does this logic of political party competition as driver of democratisation apply to Croatia?

With respect to the first step, *communist exit*, Croatia fulfilled this condition at the first parliamentary election in May 1990, when the Communist party lost to the Croatian Democratic Union (CDU), ‘a nationalist party that pursued the programme of Croatian national independence with determination’ (Zakošek 2007: 39). This first election was held still within Yugoslavia, and its key dynamics revolved around the issue of Croatia’s position within the federation (Kasapović and Zakošek 1997), initially structuring political party space in a bipolar system of pro-confederation and pro-independence forces (Zakošek 2002). Croatia had undergone moderate political liberalisation and some economic reform during the 1980s within Yugoslavia, and it had a negotiated democratic transition, which, according to Kitschelt’s framework (1999), initially created favourable conditions for democratisation and the development of programmatic political party competition. During its first term in opposition, the former communist party shed its communist ideology and transformed into a centre-left democratic party, renamed the *Social Democratic Party*. In subsequent rounds of elections during the 1990s Croatia maintained features of a relatively stable political party system, with the SDP gaining popular support over time and becoming a credible opposition to the CDU. It did not manage however to win enough votes to come to power until 2000, when it succeeded for the first time, by forming a broad coalition with political parties of the centre and the left, in winning a term in office.

Grzymala Busse’s framework assumes that if the former communists transform successfully and early on, this facilitates a competitive political party system, with main parties taking turns in power. While the former communist party of Croatia had an early and successful transformation, and provided a democratic political alternative throughout the 1990s, for a whole decade the CDU was not replaced as a party in power. The CDU ruled Croatia on a nationalist platform not dissimilar to that of Mečiar in Slovakia (Fisher 2006). As a result, Croatia in the 1990s belongs with ‘illiberal democracies’ of Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Like them, it was characterised by postponed economic and political reforms, clientelism and cor-

ruption in government. So, even though among these four cases Romania and Bulgaria did not have *communist exit*, while Slovakia and Croatia did, all the countries have in common a long, uninterrupted rule of one party in office, and unfortunately similar democratic governance outcomes. Tables 2 and 3 below show results of the *World Bank Governance Indicators* (2008) for control of corruption and strength of rule of law in the country cases examined. Since these are very recent calculations, Slovakia is doing better than it did in the analysed period, but Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania still show consistently lower results than the Central European group.

Table 2: Control of Corruption (2007)

Country	Percentile Rank (0-100)
Hungary	70.5
Slovakia	65.2
Czech Republic	64.7
Poland	61.4
Croatia	58.9
Romania	55.6
Bulgaria	53.1

Source: Kaufmann D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi 2008: Governance Matters VII: Governance Indicators for 1996-2007

Table 3: Rule of Law (2007)

Country	Percentile Rank (0-100)
Czech Republic	73.8
Hungary	72.9
Slovakia	60.5
Poland	59.0
Croatia	55.2
Bulgaria	51.4
Romania	50.5

Source: Kaufmann D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi 2008: Governance Matters VII: Governance Indicators for 1996-2007

Reflecting on the proposed theoretical framework, evidence from the illiberal democracies seems to suggest that the communist exit is not the crucial element – Croatia and Slovakia had a reconstructed centre-left party, and in the case of Croatia it was a major party that represented a credible opposition to CDU rule. Instead, it was the absence of alternation of parties in power that led to a convergence with Bulgaria and Romania on negative de-

mocratisation outcomes, corroborated above with indicators of the strength of the rule of law and the presence of corruption.

Why did the CDU rule Croatia uninterruptedly from 1990 to 2000? The fall of communism in Croatia did not entail only a regime change, even though that in itself is a 'momentous political and economic transition' (Ekier and Hanson 2003:15), but also state building, and under violent circumstances. The CDU emerged in 1990 as the national movement for independence, and then developed into a charismatic-clientelist type of political party, centred around the image of its leader (Kasapović 2001). The year 2000 is the first time that the CDU was removed from power, and a centre-left coalition came into power led by the Social Democratic Party. The 2000 election marked the beginning of consolidation of democracy in Croatia (Člar 2005) and it is only in 2001, after Tuđman's death and the removal of the CDU that Croatia moved from a semi-free to a free country according to Freedom House ratings<sup>5</sup>.

The war that Croatia fought on its territory from 1991 to 1995 slowed down democratic developments and removed many reform issues from the political agenda. The CDU was equated with the nation-building project, and it grew into the dominant party in Croatia whose rule went uninterrupted for almost ten years. During this period Croatia did not experience alternations in power as the crucial mechanism against state exploitation, postponing of necessary reforms, clientelism and corruption. Therefore, Croatia initially had the preconditions for a competitive party system since it went through communist exit and subsequent reform of the main centre-left party. This could have led to rapid democratisation and kept Croatia en par with democratic developments of the most successful reformers. Instead, communist exit was followed by ten years of uninterrupted CDU rule, and this absence of alternation in power during the 1990s contributed to such a strong lag in democratic developments that Croatia ended up in the group of least successful reformers among the post-communist consolidated democracies. This argument however leaves open the question of comparing Croatia to, for instance, the Czech Republic, which also did not experience alternations in power immediately after 1989. The ODS won the election alone in 1990, and in coalition again in 1992 and 1996, and still the Czech Republic underwent economic and democratic reform through the 1990s (albeit perhaps slower than Hungary or Poland) and did not end up in the 'illiberal' group of post-communist democratisers. The difference between these two cases is in the fact that the Czech Republic had an overwhelmingly liberal constellation of political parties competing for office, while Croatia's CDU was exhibiting authoritarian and ethno-nationalist characteristics. Hence it is not only the

<sup>5</sup> More information about Freedom House ratings is available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.

presence of party competition and alternation in power that matters, but also the composition of political party space. Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006) call such a constellation of domestic political space that has both liberal and illiberal parties a ‘mixed party constellation’. I return to this concept in more detail in the next section.

Going back to comparisons with Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, according to the 2007 *World Bank* scores cited above Slovakia is doing somewhat better than the rest of the group. Slovakia joined the EU in 2004, while Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007. Croatia on the other hand missed its chance for accession both in the first and second round of EU Eastern enlargements. How does the process of Europeanization play into this framework of political party system development and democratisation? Ten post-communist countries have since 2004 become European Union members<sup>6</sup>. Croatia is currently the only post-communist country with EU candidate status and in the accession process for membership to the Union. The next stage of this analysis introduces the factor of Europeanization, attempting to answer the question of how the EU affected the development of political competition and subsequently the success of democratic reform in European post-communist countries.

### *Europeanization and democratisation in post-communist countries*

Scholars work with three main definitions of Europeanization (Heritier 2005). According to the first, Europeanization is equivalent to European integration, or in other words the pooling of national competences to supranational level. Secondly, Europeanization is also understood as the impact of clearly defined, individual EU policy measures on existing policies, political processes and institutions in Member States. Finally, in a specific strand of the literature, Europeanization is used to denote the influence of the EU on non-Member States.

This analysis focuses on Europeanization of non-Member States, with an overlapping concern with democratic transformation of post-communist societies. I work with country cases that are or have been credible future members of the European Union, and, following Schimmelfennig (2007), I assume that the credible promise of membership structures the relationship between the EU and aspiring members. Having in mind that democratic consolidation processes partially overlap with processes of accession to the EU, accounting for EU influence on the development of political institutions

<sup>6</sup> Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania

seems unavoidable for scholars of democratisation in post-communist countries. Democratisation and Europeanization are understood as related processes that have helped countries move from electoral democracy to institution building (Rupnik 2007). Among all post-communist countries the ones that have reached the stage of consolidated democracies are at the same time current or prospective EU members, which speaks in plain language of the strong ties between these two processes. However, are they EU members because they were successful democratisers, or are they successful democratisers because of the effect of Europeanization? In the next sections I present what I deem most convincing arguments addressing this relationship between Europeanization and democratisation. Since the studies I analyse do not include Croatia, I introduce elements of the Croatia country case into the analysis in hope of establishing to what extent this case can be illuminated with current conceptual tools and assessing it within a comparative framework.

Rupnik (2002) argues that in the last two decades the European Union moved from a 'reluctant empire' to a democratizing force in post-communist Europe, with its influence evolving from indirect to direct leverage through democratic conditionality. Vachudova (2005) takes up this distinction, terming the two types of EU 'leverage' – passive and active. Passive leverage is the attraction of EU membership, which the EU exercised in the first five years after 1989, while active leverage is the deliberate conditionality exercised in the EU's pre-accession process. Already by 1990 all six countries in Vachudova's analysis<sup>7</sup> proclaimed that joining the EU was their primary foreign policy goal. The ambiguities of what Europe means enabled diverse domestic political actors to use it as a political football (Batt 2002). Crucially however, the observed countries diverged substantially in following up on this objective by making requisite domestic policy adjustments. The illiberal countries were 'talking the talk' but not 'walking the walk' (Jacoby 2002), planning to 'pay lip service to the goal of rejoining Europe while ignoring its constraints at home' (Rupnik 2002:142). In theorising why this is so, Vachudova takes up arguments made by Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2005). According to them, the costs of domestic compliance prevented elites in illiberal democracies from implementing reforms necessary for EU accession. Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2005) studied reactions to political conditionality of the EU in Slovakia, Turkey and Latvia and they concluded that the likelihood of rule adoption varied mainly with the size of adaptation costs. If the credibility of EU political conditionality was high, it was the size of domestic political costs for the target government that determined its propensity to meet EU demands. As a rule, domestic political costs increase with negative effects of the EU for state security and

<sup>7</sup> Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia

integrity, for government's domestic power base, and for its political practices of power preservation (ibid.).

In the second half of the 1990s all three illiberal cases experienced democratic reversals that signalled a pro-European orientation and commitment to reform: Romania in 1996, Bulgaria in 1997, and Slovakia in 1998. Echoing arguments about political party systems that were presented in the first part of the paper, Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006) propose an argument according to which the *political party constellation* is crucial in explaining both why some countries were late reformers, and why they eventually came around. Countries with 'mixed' party constellations had both liberal and illiberal political parties and societal groups and these countries experienced prolonged periods of illiberal rule in the 1990s<sup>8</sup>. Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006) categorised Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia as mixed-party constellation countries, and did case studies of Serbia, Romania and Slovakia. In all five cases political parties ruled on platforms of ethnic nationalism which used inflammatory, exclusionary and defensive rhetoric<sup>9</sup>. The key to democratic reversals were the elections which brought pro-European, reform-oriented governments to power<sup>10</sup>. Once these governments initiated reforms, which included opening official talks and formal agreements with the EU, they created a lock-in effect that kept all subsequent governments on the path of EU integration. According to Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006), the actual change of government at these crucial 'democratic turn' elections was not influenced by the EU. Instead, from the perspective of Europeanization they were the result of a random factor, which the authors assign to economic dissatisfaction of the countries' electorates.

Vachudova (2005) proposes a slightly different argument. According to her, the EU exercised influence on democratising the reluctant reformers through two main avenues. First of all, it started changing the information environment by disseminating alternative information about optimal strategies for reform, by criticising rent-seeking and eroding the credibility of

<sup>8</sup> The idea itself is not new. A number of authors talk about post-communist countries as 'democracies with adjectives' – illiberal (W. Merkel), delegative (G. O'Donnell), low-level equilibrium (B. Greskovits), etc. What is new in Schimmelfennig et al. is their claim that whether the majority of political parties promote liberal democratic practice has far-reaching consequences on democratisation and subsequently Europeanization.

<sup>9</sup> The interesting difference is that in cases of Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia the ethno-nationalist parties were former communist parties, parties of the left, while in Slovakia and Croatia it was the communist opposition, parties of the right, which campaigned using ethnic nationalism.

<sup>10</sup> The 'democratic turn' elections took place in 1996 in Romania, 1997 in Bulgaria, 1998 in Slovakia, 2000 in Croatia, 2000 in Serbia

governments in the public eye. Furthermore, public criticism was coupled with EU threats of stalling or backing out of the accession process. Secondly, the EU worked to strengthen rival groups in society, creating incentives for fragmented and weak opposition groups to cooperate between themselves. This way the EU helped nurture a liberal opposition and indirectly strengthen the competitiveness of the party systems in these countries. In a review of studies of external influences on post-communist transformations, Jacoby (2006) distils a similar argument. He calls this process the *'coalition approach'*, emphasising the way outsiders can help insider minority groups gain influence. The key prerequisite in this conceptualisation of Europeanization influence is the existence of domestic factions or 'minority traditions' that outsiders can work with. However, Jacoby's argument differs from Vachudova's because, according to him, outsiders have little chance of affecting change where one domestic group is hegemonic, which was the case in, for instance, Milošević's government in Serbia and Tuđman's government in Croatia. It is only after minority traditions are already part of the governing body or well entrenched inside the state civil service that outsiders have a fair chance of affecting the balance of forces (ibid.). This is an important distinction which aligns Jacoby's argument with Schimmelfennig's, and the one that I find support for when examining the evidence for Croatia.

Finally, both Vachudova and Schimmelfennig argue that once a government becomes deeply involved in the process of accession, the 'high costs of pulling out of this process motivate even previously illiberal ruling parties to adopt a political strategy that embraces qualifying for EU membership' (Vachudova 2005:181). After the initial 'democratic turn' elections at the end of the 1990s, the following round of elections were in 2000 in Romania, in 2001 in Bulgaria and 2002 in Slovakia. Except for Slovakia, where the same reform government remained in office, in the two other cases reform governments were thrown out of office. In Romania it was replaced with another Iliescu government, and in Bulgaria the *National Movement Simeon II's* came into power. The same pattern was repeated in Croatia, where the 2003 election returned the CDU to power, but which came back as a reformed pro-European Christian Democratic party. Notwithstanding electoral developments, in all four cases the new incumbents continued to implement political and economic reforms to qualify for EU membership, supporting the logic of the 'lock-in' effect.

### *Evidence from Croatia*

Did EU leverage start only after pro-reform governments were elected in these mixed party constellation cases, as Schimmelfennig argues, or could the EU be credited with contributing to democratic reversals, as Vachudova

argues? Until 2000, Croatia had no experience with coalition governments, since all previous governments from 1990 to 2000 were majority CDU governments (Kasapović 2005). In 2000, for the first time an oversized coalition of six parties came to power. It was a pre-election coalition, where parties signed a written agreement ahead of election that stated the main rules of coalition conduct in parliament and in government. The programmatic priorities of the coalition, signed in the pre-election agreement, were to abolish semi-presidentialism and strengthen parliament, depoliticise the army and police forces, strengthen civilian control over the secret service, decentralise the state, revise suspect privatization cases, and pursue cases of corruption and abuse of power (*Vjesnik*, December 2, 1999<sup>11</sup>). Looking back, the coalition seems to have won the 2000 election primarily on domestic issues. In 1999, right before its ‘democratic turn’ elections, Croatia had a negative GDP growth of 0,4%, with unemployment rate at 19% and still not reaching 2/3 of industrial output it had in 1990 (Zakošek 2002). Election analyses have shown that economic dissatisfaction was the main reason behind the fact that almost half of CDU voters either abstained from voting or voted for another party (Zakošek 2001), further supporting this reasoning. So, even though the SDP-led coalition immediately made fast and determined advances towards European integration<sup>12</sup>, the available evidence does not suggest that the coalition was formed, directed or supported by external pro-EU influences as Vachudova suggests. Instead, the case of Croatia seems to confirm Schimmelfennig’s thesis according to which the EU started exerting influence on political and economic reforms only after a crucial re-shuffling of domestic political forces brought forth liberal, EU-oriented parties to power.

According to the proposed theoretical framework, what happened next was the *lock-in effect*. The governments that succeeded the democratic reform governments would have had prohibitively high political costs were they to thwart or subvert further EU integration. At this point in time it was simply politically prudent to stay the course, even if that meant changing the tune and adjusting the political party rhetoric so that it becomes actively pro-European. The case of Croatia, with the reformed CDU government that came to power in 2003 supports this line of reasoning. The new party leader after Franjo Tuđman’s death, Ivo Sanader, was reform-minded and he initiated the transformation of an ethno-nationalist organization into a Christian Democratic party (Zakošek 2002, Fish and Krickovic 2002). This internal

<sup>11</sup> <http://ns1.vjesnik.com/html/1999/12/02/Clanak.asp?r=unu&c=1>

<sup>12</sup> A few months after the SDP-led government came into office, the European Commission published a report saying Croatia can start negotiations for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The Zagreb Summit, where Croatia started negotiating the SAA was held in November 2000, and the SAA was signed already in May 2001. The speed of these events shows that closer relations between Croatia and the EU were a mutual political priority at the time.

transformation was clearly visible in the party ideology already in the 2003 parliamentary election. In the 2003 CDU programme there is a strong Europeanization of political objectives, as well as proposed policies. The CDU firmly declared European integration as a top political priority, describing Croatia as a 'pillar in the European house'. Furthermore, it explicitly related its political ideological position to European Christian Democracy, signalling an important political turning point in Croatia after which both of the dominant political parties become liberal and European-affiliated (Dolenec, 2009). The 2003 electoral victory further strengthened the European orientation of the CDU and by the time of the next 2007 parliamentary election the CDU completely shed its public image as an extreme-right, nationalist party. It reformed into a recognizable centre-right Christian Democratic party, with membership in the European People's Party. This further strengthened the direction of gradual political moderation and democratisation that began in 2000 (Zakošek 2007). Going back to the proposed theoretical framework of EU-assisted democratisation, while the initial 'pro-reform' SDP-led coalition could be labelled as the liberal element that put Croatia firmly on the path of European integration, it seems that the following electoral victory of the reformed CDU could be attributed to the lock-in effect.

At this point the effective political party space in Croatia transformed into a liberal political party constellation, and it is at this point that Europeanization research has a legitimate starting point. It is after all the main parties' practice falls within the liberal arch of political pluralism and EU orientation, that a country's choice of EU membership starts structuring political competition. Only after this crucial liberalisation of political space it becomes possible to analyse the Europeanization of political parties with respect to their 'adaptation strategies' (Ladrech 2002), changes in party positions on European integration (Vachudova and Hooghe 2008), and electoral competition platforms and policy choices for voters (Mair 2000). It is at this point, in other words, that we can start worrying about the narrowing down of policy space (Grzymala Busse and Innes 2003), the 'hollowing out' of competition (Mair 2000), the 'executive bias' in domestic politics (Poguntke et al 2007), and all the other aspects of Europeanization influence on consolidated democracies on their way to become EU members. Until their 'democratic turn' elections, mixed-party constellation countries, including Croatia, were not part of that group. The 'democratic turn' elections represent critical junctures (Collier and Collier 1991) in domestic political space that had a long-term effect on democratisation in these countries, effectively opening the route to the European Union for them.

## *Theory Building in Comparative Politics of Post-Communism*

The arguments of Grzymala Busse, Schimmelfennig and Vachudova, which are the backbones of this analysis, represent comparative historical analyses of democratisation. They focus on a limited set of countries (European, post-communist) in a particular historic period (from the 1989 communist breakup until today), representing contextualised comparisons within a temporally and spatially bound setting. For many political scientists this is a severe limitation, since the price of this approach is that findings do not easily ‘travel’ across settings. At the other end of this debate, and supported by this analysis, contextualisation of political research is understood as a ‘strategic retreat in the face of causal complexity’ (Pierson 2003:357). Political actors’ actions are understood as constrained by particular social contexts, and research that relies on ‘heroic’ simplifying assumptions devoid of any context is deemed not up to the task of illuminating social phenomena.

Grzymala Busse’s argument about communist exit and development of political party competition, and Schimmelfennig’s argument about the liberal, illiberal and mixed political party constellations represent attempts at middle-range level of generalisation (Sartori 1970), since they identify causal mechanisms which work within a specific context. In my attempt to distil, synthesise and weigh their arguments on the case of Croatia, I moved the analysis to the interactional level (Ekiert and Hanson 2003). This level of analysis allows for more contextual specification, but at the same time holds on to the imperative of formulating causal mechanisms. Interactional analysis crucially assumes the role of contingency to how historical events unfold and the existence of ‘critical junctures’ (Collier and Collier 1991). Post-communist countries underwent immense social and political change in a turbulently short period of time, which additionally justifies focusing on dynamic elements of change, as opposed to analysis of stable, long-term structural characteristics of political systems (Zakošek 2002). In comparing the case of Croatia with a number of European post-communist countries I tried to walk the line between acknowledging the undeniable complexity of political reality and abstracting from it enough to enable meaningful comparisons across countries.

## *Conclusion*

Assuming that political party system development has a crucial impact on democratisation, I analysed recent contributions that provide convincing accounts of democratisation and Europeanization in post-communist Europe and I investigated the case of Croatia within this comparative framework.

In the first part of the paper I argued that while communist exit was important for the initial formation of political party structure in Croatia, the following decade was, due to circumstances of violent conflict and postponed democratisation after the succession from the Yugoslav state, marked by hegemony of one political party. There was no alternation of parties in power and this affected negative democratisation outcomes during the 1990s: postponed economic reforms, corruption, and clientelism. I argued that the concept of political party competition was not sufficient to account for the diversity of outcomes in Central and Southeast Europe. Using only the concept of political party competition it is not possible to explain why democratisation outcomes in Croatia were so unlike those in the Czech Republic or Slovenia, which also did not have very competitive party systems. An essential piece of the puzzle was provided by Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel (2006) who distinguish domestic political institutions in post-communist countries based on whether their political practice furthers liberal democratic principles or thwarts them. This concept identifies mixed political party constellation countries in which the key precondition to democratisation was in achieving a prevalence of liberal political forces.

While the concept of political party competition specifies a political party system with an opposition that threatens the governing party with replacement, the concept of political party constellation brings in a new dimension. Competition is somehow presumed, and the focus is instead on the fact that in some of the new post-communist democracies important segments of the political party system were illiberal. In a merger of these analyses, I propose that political party competition is a necessary but not sufficient condition for propelling democratisation. Instead, the key is in tipping the balance between illiberal and liberal segments in the political party space in favour of liberal parties. Once pro-reform, liberal-oriented governments assumed power, the balance started turning in favour of liberal democracy. In four<sup>13</sup> out of five cases examined liberal, pro-European democratic practice was kept after these governments left office and the evidence from Croatia offers support for this theoretical framework. The 2000 parliamentary elections in Croatia represent the 'democratic turn' after which illiberal parties started internal reform and the practice of political parties became dominantly liberal-oriented and pro-EU. Finally, empirical insights from Croatia support the proposition that only after all major domestic political forces push forward a liberal democratic practice can the European Union start exerting influence on domestic political institutions. In response to the

<sup>13</sup> The exception is Serbia, where apparently the balance of political forces in 2003 still did not favour liberal democratic practice. If statebuilding takes precedence over other aspects of reform, then the fact that Serbia did not have a dominantly liberal political party space in 2003 can be attributed to it at that time still dealing with open issues of territorial sovereignty.

question posed earlier, evidence suggests that countries first democratise and only after that Europeanization of domestic political space starts taking place. The EU lacks the power, in Jacoby's words, to 'reach down inside societies and radically shift their domestic agendas in new directions' (2002:148).

Applying arguments of several authors to the case of Croatia, I found Vachudova's (2005) use of party competition for categorising regimes into liberal and illiberal somewhat lacking, since it does not leave space for internal, domestic factors to propel democratic change. In her framework it is the external influence of the European Union that strengthens liberal democratic forces in domestic settings and carries forward democratisation. The evidence from Croatia seems to show more support for Jacoby's and Schimmelfennig's arguments which assume that both liberal and illiberal segments operate in domestic political party space, and which propose that liberal parties and political groups must win the decisive battle at home before external factors such as the EU can begin to substantially influence democratisation.

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