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# **SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY**

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Michael Minkenberg (ed.)

**HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND THE RADICAL RIGHT  
IN POST-COLD WAR CENTRAL  
AND EASTERN EUROPE**

With an afterword by Sabrina P. Ramet

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*Michael Minkenberg*  
Berlin/New York  
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# Leninist beneficiaries? Pre-1989 legacies and the radical right in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe

## Some introductory observations

*Michael Minkenberg*

*ABSTRACT: A central topos in the study of Central and Eastern European contemporary politics in general, and of its radical right politics in particular is the emphasis on the extraordinary relevance of history and geography. In fact, the entire transformation process after 1989 is often clothed in terms of historical and geographical categories, either as “return of history” or a “return to Europe”, or both. In these various scenarios, the radical right claims a prominent place in this politics of return, and the study of this current echoes the more general concern, in the analysis of the region, with historical analogies and the role of legacies. Sometimes analogies are drawn between the post-1989 radical right and interwar fascism, in terms of “Weimarization” of the transformation countries and the return of the pre-socialist, ultranationalist or even fascist past – “the return of history”. Others argue that since some Central and Eastern European party systems increasingly resemble their Western European counterparts, so does the radical right, at least where it is electorally successful – the “return to Europe”. According to yet another line of thought, the radical right in the region is a phenomenon sui generis, inherently shaped by the historical forces of state socialism and the transformation process and, as a result and in contrast to Western Europe, ideologically more extreme and anti-democratic while organizationally more a movement than a party phenomenon. In all these approaches, the key concept “legacies” and the radical right are often underspecified. This volume takes a closer look at the intersection of history or particular legacies, and the mobilization of the radical right in the post-1989 world of the region, while attempting to provide a sharper focus on key concepts. Regardless of the different approaches, all contributions show that with the radical right, a peculiar “syncretic construct” (Tismaneanu) has emerged in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, which is derived from both pre-communist and communist legacies.*

“The ideological extinction of Leninist formations left behind a vacuum that has been filled by syncretic constructs drawing from the region’s pre-communist and communist heritage” (Tismaneanu, 2007, p. 35). Such is a recent assessment of the political trajectory in Central and Eastern Europe by one of the experts of the region. Among these “syncretic constructs” Vladimir Tismaneanu lists “nationalism in both its civic and ethnic incarnations, liberalism, democratic socialism, conservatism, populism, neo-Leninism, and even more or less refurbished fascism” (*ibid.*). This seems more or less the inventory of Western party politics minus the Green movement, plus a somewhat reconstructed Leninism. However, the emphasis is not on the equivalence of the situation with “the West” but with “the past”, the region’s heritage. And equally important, almost half of the phenomena identified as filling the post-Leninist vacuum constitute what can be summarily described as the radical right (see below). Here, in a nutshell, lies a central topos in the study of the region’s contemporary politics in general, and of its radical right politics in particular: the emphasis on the extraordinary relevance of history and geography. It is this intersection of history or particular legacies, and the mobilization of the radical right in the post-1989 world of the region, which constitutes the core of this publication.

The entire transformation process after 1989 is often clothed in terms of historical and geographical categories, either as a “return of history” or a “return to Europe”, or both. On the one hand, historical analogies are invoked which cast the various countries’ development after the fall of communism in light of the remapping of the region in the wake of World War I and the 1919 peace treaties. Some authors see it even as the belated conclusion of the Wilsonian project of state and nation making after that war (Judt, 2005, pp. 637-638). As is well known, Europe’s Wilsonian order after World War I ended in the rise of fascism and a period of totalitarian politics and wartime destruction, and yet, the “legacy” of 1919 seemed to persist until and well beyond the 1989 upheavals. On the other hand, post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe are characterized as a region catching up with its Western counterpart – the “return to Europe” – while still being identified in terms of a distinct “otherness” which often includes notions of backwardness (Wolff, 1994; Kopstein, 2003). Whether this return can ever be completed under such a conceptual premise, remains an open question.

Either way, the radical right in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe claims a prominent place in this politics of return, and the study of this

current echoes the more general concern, in the analyses of the region, with historical analogies and the role of legacies. Sometimes analogies are drawn between the post-1989 radical right and interwar fascism, in terms of a "Weimarization" of the transformation countries and the return of the pre-socialist, ultranationalist or even fascist past – the "return of history". Another interpretation argues that since some Central and East European party systems increasingly resemble their West European counterparts, so does the radical right, at least where it is electorally successful – the "return to Europe". A third line of thought states that the radical right in the region is a phenomenon *sui generis*, inherently shaped by the historical forces of state socialism and the transformation process and, as a result and in contrast to Western Europe, ideologically more extreme and anti-democratic while organizationally more a movement than a party phenomenon (Minkenberg, 2002; Mudde, 2000, 2007).

But while these historical arguments or the reference to legacies are widespread in the comparative analysis of the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe (not to mention the single-case country studies which all too readily explain the radical right's features and mobilization by the respective country's particular past and heritage), there remains a fuzziness how this past is operationalized in such explanations, and what kind of legacies are held relevant. Therefore, a few general remarks about the legacy approach in the study of Central and Eastern European politics after 1989, its variants and its limits, seem appropriate. A first distinction to be made is that between the more sweeping claims that "history matters" and a narrow focus on a particular legacy, such as the experience of Leninism.

In his programmatic essay "why and how history matters", Charles Tilly provides a number of reasons why explanations in political science cannot do without careful historical analysis (Tilly, 2006). The usefulness of historical analysis ranges from large-scale political processes, such as the effects of the so-called system of Westphalia on the patterns of war and international relations from its inception in the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the present, to the more narrow phenomenon of the modularity of one particular political process or outcome for subsequent political action and programs, for example the French revolution or the nation building processes, from macro-processes of state formation to micro-processes of social movement formation (Anderson, 1983). Tilly acknowledges that in these processes spatial variation – due to the incorporation of locally prevalent and diverging culture (language, beliefs,

social categories) – is bounded by path dependency “such that events occurring at one state in a sequence contain the range of events that is possible at later stages” (Tilly, 2006, p. 421; Mahoney and Schensul, 2006). These categories seem quite useful in the explanation of the rise and performance of the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe. They have also been applied to the study of regime change and democratization in post-communist Europe, in the context of which the legacy approach was first developed.

In his seminal essay, Kenneth Jowitt argued that Leninist legacies which all former East Bloc countries in Europe share, favor an authoritarian rather than liberal, democratic and capitalist way of life (Jowitt, 1992a, p. 293). Leninism as an institutional arrangement (or political regime) and accompanying cultural traits (or cultural regime), consisted of a traditional culture and a sharp distinction between private and public realms and virtues, the institutionalization of charisma through the rule of “the Party”, the fragmentation of society, lack of established elites, and mutual distrust among members of society. Jowitt anticipated troubling effects of this system of rule on the prospects for democracy in the region: “The Leninist legacy in Eastern Europe consists largely – not exclusively – of fragmented, mutually suspicious, societies with little religio-cultural support for tolerant and individually self-reliant behaviour, and of a fragmented region made up of countries that view each other with animosity. The way Leninists ruled and the way Leninism collapsed contributed to this inheritance” (*ibid.*, p. 304). As the only effective way out of this situation, Jowitt hoped for a massive intervention of Western Europe and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The debate which followed Jowitt’s article shall not be recounted here (for an appraisal see Tismaneanu et al., 2006). But it is important to note how this legacy concept in the study of Central and East European politics after 1989 developed over time. On the one hand, a number of scholars, though at times quite critical of Jowitt’s own approach and pessimism, followed the logic of his argument and focused on the communist era as the independent variable in studying the prospects of liberalization, capitalism and democracy in the region (Ekiert and Hanson, 2003; Tismaneanu et al., 2006). Here, the variation of post-communist outcomes, such as successful or unsuccessful regime change, is related to the nature of post-communist regimes. A particularly instructive application of this approach is the comparative analysis of

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1 Although Jowitt’s pessimistic prediction did not come true, his emphasis on the crucial role of the West was seen by some as one of the accomplishments of his analysis (Howard, 2006, p. 41).

party competition in selected countries, relating the degree of structured party systems to the role of bureaucracy and rationality in the old regime (Kitschelt et al. 1999). However, in a critical essay, Herbert Kitschelt (2003) warns of two “excesses” in the explanation of post-communist regime diversity: that of deep explanations, that is, going back far into history and accounting for a variety of causes next to Leninist legacies, such as religion, geographic location and others, and that of shallow explanations, that is, focusing on the patterns set by the transformation process itself, by bargaining dynamics etc. In his conclusion, Kitschelt seems to follow Tilly’s recommendation to focus on both macro and micro processes, on path dependency and agency, to combine causal mechanism with causal depth, including cultural mechanisms (*ibid.*, p. 80).

A rather different approach is taken by those who widen the concept of legacies to various dimensions and layers. For example, in the introduction to their book on “Liberalization and Leninist Legacies”, Crawford and Lijphart (1997) identify and explore six key legacies (*ibid.*, pp. 11-12): (a) the cultural legacy: the history of backwardness, victimization, and intolerance; (b) the social legacy: the absence of an established successor elite; (c) the political legacy: weak party systems with shallow roots in society; (d) the national legacy: the interrupted process of nation-building; (e) the institutional legacy: the survival of Leninist institutions; and (f) the administrative and economic legacy: centralized states and command economies. At the end of their survey of the legacies and relevant literature, the two authors conclude that if the goal is to trace the impact of these legacies, it makes little sense to study them in isolation from the immediate context of the transformation process. Rather, they argue that this context is salient for any such analysis because it provides the conditions under which past legacies will or will not play a role in shaping the direction of regime change. In their own words:

New institutions shaped by these forces have the power to create a competitive political system where once there was none, and in doing so, to weaken the past legacies of political intolerance and inability to negotiate and compromise. They also can provide incentives for the rise of oppositional elites ... New institutions also provide society with incentives to participate in the political process. But their norms, rules and procedures do not always tell us which social divisions will become politically central” (*ibid.* p. 34).

However, their enumeration of legacy types betrays Jowitt's rather narrow focus on Leninism: at least two of the six legacies can be attributed to the pre-communist past. Hence, these legacies should not be studied in isolation of their immediate context of pre- and post-1989 developments, they should also be studied in their interaction with each other if one is interested in their effects on post-1989 politics.

That the concept of legacy is rather slippery, has been observed many times. As the introductory quote by Tismaneanu illustrates, it may encompass anything that precedes the post-communist regime change. But "if the weight of the past affects the present, at a minimum it is necessary to specify which past" (Kopstein, 2003, p. 233). With regard to Central and Eastern Europe, the relevant past comprises three basic layers: that of 1989-1992 or the immediate context of transformation; that of 1949-1989, or the experience of Leninism as a political and cultural regime; and that of 1919-1949, or the Wilsonian order after World War I and the experience of interwar regimes which, in the region of interest, have been predominantly non-democratic and non-communist. The exception to that are Czechoslovakia at one extreme, that is, a democratic regime, and the Soviet Union on the other, that is, a communist regime. The question here is: "how can a legacy be recognized? How far back in the past is it necessary to go before theoretical traction is lost?" (*ibid.*).

This question becomes particularly important for the analysis of the radical right in the region. Clearly, this is a shift in the application of the legacy approach which, in all its variety, was conceptualized for explanations of regime change, not for a particular movement or party family. Yet, measures of successful regime change often include the indicator of support for anti-democratic, or anti-system parties or movements (Auer, 2000; Beichelt, 2001). Already Jowitt himself identified – as one of the outcomes of the "Leninist extinction" – nativist and violent reactions to the costs of the transformation process (Jowitt, 1992b, p. 275; Howard, 2006, p. 39). But the conceptual links and causal connections warrant further specification.

Regardless of its particular historical positioning, the radical right is, almost by definition, a prime agent, as well as target, in the business of reinventing or instrumentalizing a country's past. In any of these interpretations, history – in its more recent (state-socialist and regime transformative) and more distant (pre-socialist) manifestations – can be accredited with a crucial role in the shape and development of the radical right. It seems that in con-



trast to its Western European counterpart, whether it is catching up or not, the Central and Eastern European radical right is particularly conditioned by the force of history, that the histories of state socialism and of pre-socialist (non-democratic) experiences can be seen as major factors in shaping both the contents and the opportunities of the radical right in these new or emerging democracies.

The argument that the Central and East European radical right is particularly susceptible to historical legacies is related to both the region's and the radical right's characteristics. Most experts agree that the radical right can be defined as a radically exclusionist political force, which, more than other political currents and movements, employs rigid historical references in the imagination of the community it claims to fight for. In this vein, the core political program or ideology of the radical right is a populist and romantic ultranationalism. More specifically, the radical right is involved in an effort to construct an idea of nation and national belonging by radicalizing ethnic, religious, lingual, other cultural and political criteria of inclusion and exclusion, that is to condense the idea of nation into an image of extreme collective homogeneity and to bring about a congruence between the state and the nation in these exclusionary terms (Minkenberg, 1998, pp. 29-47; *idem*, 2000; 2008; Carter, 2005, pp. 14-20; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995, chap.1; Kitschelt, 2007, p. 1179; Mudde, 2007, pp. 15-26). As the main criterion is not the opposition to democracy, this concept of the radical right is rather inclusive in that it covers more extreme variants of openly anti-democratic or fascist movements and parties, as well as the more vaguely defined currents of right-wing populism, or religiously based nationalism (Minkenberg, 2008, pp. 12-15; Mudde, 2007, pp. 138-157).

The comparative literature on the radical right in post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe employs some or most of these definitional characteristics and combines them with the region's experience of regime change and transformation and its particular state-socialist or Leninist past (Minkenberg, 2002; Mudde, 2000; Ost, 2005; Ramet, 1999). But while the importance of history or particular legacies for the trajectory of the radical right in the region is regularly emphasized in the literature, there is both a fuzziness in the application of the legacy concept and the lack of a more conceptually grounded analysis or a systematic testing of its effects (or absence thereof). Such research is still in its infancy (Tismaneanu, 1998). If at all, the role of the past is typically operationalized in sequential terms, as historical reference points, such as

when some experts suggest to create new typologies of right-wing radical parties in Central and Eastern Europe by classifying them according to the (historical) origins of their ideological identity. For example, Cas Mudde proposes to distinguish pre-communist radical right parties which are rooted in the political culture and ideas of the period before communism (such as the Russian Pamyat or Polish PWN-PSN), communist radical right parties that are characterized by a combination of nationalism and nostalgia for the communist past (like the Romanian PRM and PUNR), and post-communist radical right parties which are newly established and focus on current issues (like the Serbian Radical Party or the Russian LDPR) (Mudde, 2000; Shafir, 2000).

While it is plausible to characterize such parties according to their *historical* origins (except for most cases of the pre-communist radical right), it makes less sense *ideologically*. Radical right parties which emerged in Eastern Europe after 1989 may or may not nurture a strong longing for a particular part of the country's past, they may focus on current issues *and* cultivate the (re-invented) nationalist image of some part of the country's non-democratic past. That is, the categories of pre- and post-communist radical right seem ideologically unspecified. In his more recent study on the radical right in Europe, Mudde (2007) not only drops this typology but refrains altogether from testing regional effects on, or the relevance of the East-West divide for, the radical right – let alone distinct legacy effects, which could be subsumed under regional effects. The regional particularities of post-socialist Europe are only marginally identified, as when Mudde compares levels of democratic support and ethnic diversity in the region's aspiring democracies during the 1990s and finds only little evidence for a causal effect on electoral success of the radical right (Mudde, 2007, pp. 205-216). And the argument of the effect of an authoritarian or Leninist legacy on the radical right is settled with a few remarks and a broad brushstroke: "The obvious problem with this general thesis is that it cannot account for the striking absence of populist radical right success in most of the post-communist world or for the intra-regional differences" (*ibid.*, p. 217).

Indeed, when held at such an abstract and general level, the legacy argument evaporates. But the obvious next step would be to ask if different "pasts" or legacies account for variation of radical right success, or of radical right formations, in light of the legacy approaches which strive to explain variations of regimes (as the systemic equivalent to types of radical right groups) and success of democratization (equivalent to the electoral success

of the radical right). One such effort was suggested by Timm Beichelt and Michael Minkenberg. Based on earlier work by the present author (Minkenberg, 2000, 2002), they identified a number of region-specific legacies as part of the opportunity structures for the radical right and sought to explain both variation in electoral support and ideological type of the dominant radical right actor in the respective country (Beichelt and Minkenberg, 2002; see also discussion in Ishiyama, in this volume). Among these were the type of nation: civic, cultural, or ethnic (Minkenberg, 1998; Hobsbawm, 1990), the existence of external homelands, the presence of a national minority (Brubaker, 1997; Smith, 2001), and the nature of the regime conflict in the early transition (Beichelt, 2001; Linz and Stepan, 1996). They also included the more current variables of social and cultural costs of transformation to their analysis. The following table summarizes the results of the analysis for a number of transition countries in the 1990s (Table 1).

The empirical overview revealed some patterns while allowing also for striking peculiarities. In general, in cases with more than two facilitating variables the radical right could count on higher levels of electoral support, and *vice versa*. This was true for the Czech Republic and Hungary on the one hand, where right-wing radical parties played only a minor role, and for Romania and Russia on the other, where strong right-wing radical groups coexist with communist-nationalist parties. Here a striking role of particular legacies appeared: countries with a strong pre-1989 communist-nationalist tradition seemed to produce the fascist-autocratic variant of right-wing radicalism as the major party type, and the radical right had a problematic effect on the development of democracy. Due to the interplay of the radical right and the post-communist left, a "Weimarization" of these regimes remains a possible path for further development. In Russia the election of Putin slowed down this process but right-wing radicalism continued to obscure the chances of democracy (Beichelt, in this volume). The Romanian presidential elections of 2000, with the former Ceaușescu ally Iliescu and the fascist-autocratic Tudor taking a large share of the votes, confirmed the trend, but in subsequent elections until EU accession in 2007, it faded (Frusetta and Glont, in this volume). Thirdly, racist or ethnocentrist types of right-wing radical parties dominate the scene in the cases where democracy has taken root.

Table 1. Legacies, opportunity structures and right-wing radical electoral potential in post-socialist Europe (1990s)

	<i>Legacies and opportunity structures</i>					<i>Electoral potential</i>			
	Nation type	Existence of external homelands	Existence of a strong national minority	Regime conflict: Regime contested by major political forces	Transformation costs	Non reformed post-communist parties with "communist-nationalist" predecessors (pre-1989) (a)(b)	Nationalist parties (a)(c)	Sum	Dominant party type (e)
<i>Bulgaria (1990-2000)</i>	Culture	No	Yes	Yes	Very high	0	0	0	
<i>Estonia (1992-2000)</i>	Ethnic	No	Yes	No	Very high	0	0	0	
<i>Hungary (1990-2000)</i>	Ethnic	Yes	Yes	No	High	0	3.6	3.6	Racist
<i>Czech Rep. (1992-2000)</i>	Ethnic	No	No	No	(Very) high	0	6.0	6.0	Racist
<i>Slovakia (1992-2000)</i>	In flux	No	Yes	Yes	High	0	7.2	7.2	Racist
<i>Poland (1991-2000)</i>	Culture	No	No	No	High	0	9.0 (d)	9.0	Racist, fundamentalist
<i>Russia (1993-2000)</i>	Culture	Yes	Yes	Yes	Very high	23.3	8.6	31.9	Fascist-autocratic
<i>Romania (1990-2000)</i>	Ethnic	Yes	Yes	Yes	High	29.1	14.4	43.5	Fascist-autocratic

(a) Average result of the last two elections until end of 2000 in national parliamentary elections.

(b) Parties included: Romania: PDSR, Russia: KPRF.

(c) Parties included: Czech Republic: SPR-RSC, Hungary: MIÉP; Poland: KPN, ZChN, Slovakia: SNS, Romania: PUNR, PRM, Russia: LDPR.

(d) Difficult to determine because in 1997 right-wing radicals ran on the AWS ticket which cannot be characterized as a radical party altogether.

(e) For classification see Minkenberg (2002).

Source: Beichelt and Minkenberg (2002, p. 16).