Post-Soviet and Liberal Transitions: Wherefore, to What Effect, and How?

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The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union have arguably been the most important events in the contemporary international relations. They detonated momentous changes in the political, economic, and military landscapes of the formerly communist states thus setting off a natural experiment in broad transformations in the countries that endured decades of central planning and communism. Because of the unique and world-historic quality of these transformations and far-reaching implications of these reforms, they have attracted significant academic following, and have been a subject of growing scholarly concern. The early studies of liberal and post-Soviet transitions deliberated the optimal ways to transform the postcommunist states focusing on the sequence and pace of reforms as well as the country-specific initial conditions (Hardt and Kaufman 1995; Woo, Parker, and Sachs 1997). The recent scholarship expanded conceptual boundaries of transition and integrated the move toward a complex interdependence in Europe besides the democratic and market reform. It shifted accents from internal to transnational forces and began examining the precise role played by various international actors—non-governmental and international organizations, corporations, foundations, Church, just to name a few—in the transitional reforms. The books under review are a notable addition to this recent wave of literature on the transnational dimension of post-Soviet and liberal transitions.

Why do states liberalize despite the apparent contradiction of these reforms to their domestic preferences, political autonomy, and national tradition? This is the central puzzle of Rachel A. Epstein’s monograph, In Pursuit of Liberalism. She underscores the role played by international institutions in mobilizing domestic support for reforms, and elucidates the conditions for the success of mobilization. Epstein contends that the ability of international institutions to cultivate support for reforms hinges on the degree of uncertainty in the policies in transition, the desire of policymakers for international recognition, and the perceived credibility of external recommendations (p. 103). Epstein tests these propositions on four postcommunist states—Poland, Hungary, Romania, and
Ukraine—and across several issue areas, including central bank reforms, privatization of banks with foreign capital, democratization of civil-military relations, and denationalization of defense policy.

Keith A. Darden’s book, *Economic Liberalism and Its Rivals* examines the differences in institutional trajectories of the former Soviet Union states, and asks why these countries, despite their commonalities, chose membership in different international economic institutions? (p. 4). The author argues that the taproot of different pathways lies in the particular economic ideas of the governing elites (p. 7). When the leadership embraces “liberal” framework for understanding economic questions, those states pursue entry into the WTO. Where “integralist” ideas prevail, Darden finds greater support for regional economic institutions, and where mercantilist views dominate, the state policies exhibit autarkic and unilateral tendencies. Finally, in the edited volume, *Transnational Actors in Central and East European Transitions*, the leading scholars debate the role and extent of impact of various transnational actors on policies and politics of countries in transition. The primary book’s conclusion is that transnational actors were not only responsible for facilitating a move toward complex interdependencies in Europe; they also held together various aspects of transition—political, economic, and nation-statehood—in the postcommunist states.

There are several common themes that run through these volumes in addition to the shared subject of liberal and post-Soviet reforms. All books assume that states are social actors and scrutinize the role of social factors as independent variables in explaining economic, political, and social reforms. They all integrate international and domestic perspectives on postcommunist politics, and build analytical bridges of various sorts—between constructivist and rationalist approaches, comparative politics and international relations, and comparative and international political economy. The monographs and several chapters in the edited volume are theoretically innovative and methodologically robust, and Darden’s work is particularly notable in this regard. The author implements a multi-method and multi-stage research design to address methodological problems that are endemic to ideational arguments, and relies on a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with public officials, and the study of official documents.

Although, all books under review shed new theoretical light on the questions of postcommunist transition and bring forth original evidence meticulously researched, they leave possibilities for further investigation of this rapidly transforming region, and some theoretical issues remain unresolved. Epstein, for instance, purported to show the independent impact of social context, in which international institutions steer the post-Soviet countries toward the liberal path (p. 192). Throughout the book, however, the author departs from the original argument by admitting the a priori interest in “returning to Europe” espoused by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (p. 34), which emulate institutions and policies in order to achieve the desired aim (pp. 42, 77, 205). Uncertainty, status, and credibility are the circumstances of the social context under which the transitioning states weigh up the competing claims between autonomy and conformity to international institutions. These analytical concepts, however, as operationalized and employed by Epstein, are very inclusive and that moderates their efficacy as critical analytical tools. The lack of discussion over whether these circumstances are necessary or sufficient, and the nature of the relationship between them, make it difficult to ascertain strong regularities of these conditions across the various international institutions, issue areas and countries, and over time. The book does not illuminate how the postcommunist states select from among the competing policy models informed by the same or different ideologies available to them (p. 53), because the nature of the domestic processes of systemic transformations remain underspecified in the book.
Darden’s monograph, on the other hand, is conspicuous for its attention to micro-foundations of economic transition. Both Darden and Epstein rely on similar causal models in which ideas and beliefs shape nations’ preferences, thus influencing the extent of compliance with transnational agendas. Darden’s study, however, is critical of a kind of conceptualization adopted in the edited volume and Epstein’s book, which centers on the role of powerful global forces in constructing transition politics. Instead of assuming the existence of intersubjective international context and implying that states and their interests are constructed by this social space, Darden puts forth a micro-foundational theory of agents who use their causal ideas about the world to determine appropriate policies. It is these variable understandings of public officials about economic matters that play the critical role in the creation and maintenance of the international economic order. In Darden’s book, liberalism is not the only ideology available to states. The latter can enter non-liberal economic institutions or cling to autarkic policies that compete with liberalism. The causal ideas of policymakers are inherently subjective, and, according to Darden, the process of ideas selection can only be described, but not systematically explained (p. 13). As a result, Darden’s book is particularly good at underscoring the role of contingency in international relations.

Commitment to “ideational individualism” is an important asset of Darden’s book, but is also its weak point. The study would have gained from a greater attention to historical social context for the emergence of liberal, integralist, and, particularly, mercantilist ideas. Although, the author briefly reconstructs the history of these beliefs, the largest portion of the monograph examines economic ideas of the post-Soviet leaders, providing only scant consideration to how these beliefs have become part of the cultural repertoire of officials in the region.

All books under review could benefit from more deliberation over the relationship between material factors/power and ideas because they all describe circumstances in which power politics or security considerations prevail over the impact of ideas and norms. Darden, for example, affirms that Armenia’s economic policies, and, to a lesser extent, economic choices of other Caucasian states, have been influenced by their security and geopolitical situation. As a result, the regional politics and security aspects of relations with other nations can limit the policymakers’ freedom of choice (p. 199). The books leave ample space for theorizing about how power structures (both domestic and international) and instrumental rationality can affect a normative/institutional change in international relations, and, reversely, whether and how a particular set of ideas, institutions, or norms impact the structures of power in the world (Barkin 2003). Lindstrom’s chapter in Transnational Actors in Central and East European Transitions is an encouraging step toward this aim. The author considers political and material interests behind a specific set of ideas constituting different, competing anti-trafficking agendas in the Balkans, and argues that a specific policy paradigm can predominate based on the positional advantages of its main proponents within a given institutional framework. Access to material resources or an exogenous event can also influence the power of transnational actors to impose their paradigm over other competing frames (p. 42).

Instead of approaching transition from the standpoint of degrees of compliance with policies of transnational institutions, future research on this topic can look into the instances of divergence with them. Despite the consensus on goals and vision of post-Soviet transition, and the avowed commitment to transitional reforms, why did states still renegade on the policies and expectations of international institutions? David Ost, for example, in Transnational Actors in Central and East European Transitions inquires into this interesting question by asking why Poland sided so strongly with the United States in the conflict between America
and Europe in 2002–2003, despite the strong desire to rejoin Europe and strong economic ties with the European Union. The author discovered that Polish support for American policies had not been caused by a high regard for the United States. Instead, it had been triggered by deep dissatisfaction with transnational pressure applied by the European Union and the humiliating nature of the EU accession process (pp. 162–63).

Despite the criticisms I levied on the books in this review, I am convinced that these works fit well into a growing literature addressing interactions of transnational and domestic actors, ideas, and processes in affecting political, social, and economic outcomes of any sort. The single-authored monographs and many chapters in the edited volume offer superb analyses of distinct economic trajectories among the post-Soviet countries, novel theoretical thinking, and incisively argued accounts of reforms that enhance our understanding of postcommunist policymaking and the nature and outcome of post-Soviet and liberal reforms.

References

