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Las políticas extremistas en Europa del Este; una reacción a la transición

RESUMEN

El extremismo está asociado en Europa Central y del Este a la transición de estos países a la democracia y a la economía de mercado. La emergencia y resiliencia de fuerzas radicales se debe ver principalmente como una reacción a las reformas internas prescritas por los actores occidentales internacionales dominantes. El extremismo como fuerza política en Europa Central y del Este ha sido, en muchos casos, capaz de penetrar en las políticas dominantes y su discurso ideológico ha conseguido infiltrarse en amplias mentalidades sociales. Las fuerzas radicales de la región han estado capitalizando los aspectos negativos de la transición con el fin de atraer el apoyo más amplio posible para su discurso reaccionario. Si bien existen patrones transicionales comunes de extremismo con un núcleo ideológico común en todos los países de estas dos regiones, el nacionalismo tiene también especificidad nacional. El documento intenta esclarecer algunas diferencias importantes en el ámbito nacional. Finalmente, valora la respuesta internacional al extremismo con énfasis especial en el papel de la Unión Europea.

The Politics of Extremism in Eastern Europe; A Reaction to Transition

SUMMARY

Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe is associated with the transition of these countries to democracy and market economy. The emergence and resilience of radical forces should be seen primarily as a reaction to internal reforms prescribed by the

dominant western international actors. Extremism as a political force in Central and Eastern Europe has been, in many cases, able to penetrate mainstream politics, and its ideological discourse has managed to infiltrate the wider social mentalities. Radical forces in the region have been capitalising on the negative aspects of transition in order to attract the widest possible support for their reactionary discourse. While there is common transitional pattern of extremism with a common ideological core in all the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, extremism is also nationally specific. The paper attempts to highlight some important differences at the national level. It finally assesses the international response to extremism with special emphasis on the role of the European Union.

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The Politics of Extremism in Eastern Europe; A Reaction to Transition

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The following paper concentrates on the comparative study of extremism in post-communist Central and South East European countries. The post-1989 emergence of extreme political formations in Central and Eastern Europe is associated with the transition of these countries to democracy and market economy. While extreme parties and groups share some similarities with their western European counterparts, they also exhibit some particularities, which are distinct from those of the advanced post-industrial societies of the West. Central and South East European countries are, with various differences, party political functioning democracies where extreme parties compete in the elections and in some cases they are quite influential, and where there is a more liberal environment for their expression. All of these countries are either candidate EU countries or potential EU candidate countries and their future EU membership is subject to strict political criteria of democratic principles, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The paper adopts the wider definition of extremism, which includes a variety of ultra-nationalist political parties (radical right, ultra-nationalist, populist, nostalgic authoritarian), fringe organisations and clandestine groups and a wide range of racist manifestations. It argues that the emergence and resilience of radical forces in Central and East European countries should be seen primarily as a reaction to the transition process, the latter being dictated and guided from the advanced and influential democratic West. It also argues that extremism is not to be regarded as an exclusively fringe phenomenon but as a political force that can penetrate mainstream politics and an ideological discourse that can infiltrate wider social mentalities. While there is the common framework for all the post-communist societies at the same time the phenomenon of political extremism is nationally specific due to its xenophobic and ultra-nationalist character and the different domestic development of East European countries themselves. The paper finally assesses the international response to extremism in Central and Eastern Europe. Special emphasis is attributed to the role of the European

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Union as this presents the main framework for the consolidation of the new democracies and market economies and the eventual marginalisation of extremist forces.

The negative impact of the transition process

Transition in post-communist Europe has been defined as the simultaneous process of political and socio-economic reform,¹ within a fast changing international environment. Political reform aims at the establishment of multi-party systems and electoral procedures, the separation of powers, the freedom of expression, good governance, institution building, human rights and the development of civil society.² Economic reform aims at macro-economic stabilisation, market liberalisation, privatisation, development of market support institutions, currency convertibility and trade liberalisation.³ Transition in the new East European democracies has been a guided process of reform, aiming at the diffusion of western values, models and processes,⁴ following the end of the cold war and the victory of the western capitalist democracy over the authoritarian socialist experience. International organisations and major western states have been defining the parameters and guiding the reform process in Eastern Europe. They have been scrutinising, suggesting recommendations and even punishing the laggards. This has allowed them a high level of intervention into the internal affairs of the new democracies. The current post-communist situation is largely seen as the outcome of Western dominant influences, which prescribe the nature of the current domestic political and economic trajectory.⁵ And while there is a wider consensus as to the benefits of the current situation, there is always an annoying feeling that political and economic recipes are a direct foreign intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Transition in Eastern Europe has been regarded as the most positive and optimistic prospect following a rather turbulent and divisive 20th century. The post-communist region is currently part of the wider international community within a more united Europe, free of the previous bipolar division. All East European countries are members of international organisations and regional groupings, and they are integrated to various degrees with the European Union. At the political level, democratic institutions have

¹ On the 'simultaneity problem of transition' see Juan Linz & Alfred Stepan *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, The John Hopkins University Press, London 1996) pp. 435-453

² Pridham, Herring & Sanford (eds). *Building Democracy? The International Dimension of Democratisation in Eastern Europe*. Leicester University Press, London & Washington: 1997; Peter Burnell, (ed). *Democracy Assistance; International Co-operation for Democratisation*. Frank Cass, London 2000).

³ See Alan Meyhew *Recreating Europe; The European Union's Policy towards Central and Eastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998 and Oliver Blanchard et al *Reform in Eastern Europe*, The United Nations University, 1991.

⁴ Hans Peter Schmitz and Katrin Sell "International Factors in Processes of Political Democratisation; Towards a Theoretical Integration" in *Democracy without Borders; Transnationalisation and Conditionality in New Democracies*, Jean Grugel ed, Routledge, London: 1999. p.37

⁵ See Adrian G.V. Hyde-Price "Democratization in Eastern Europe; The External Dimension" in *Democratization in Eastern Europe; Domestic and International Perspectives*, edited by Geoffrey Pridham and Tatu Vanhanen, Routledge, London: 1994, pp. 220-252.

been adopted, elections are held, constitutions have been redrafted and multi-party politics have emerged, press is more open and many citizens' rights are guaranteed. In most cases, transition has led to the dismantling and depoliticising of an inefficient state sector and has provided the opportunity for the emergence of a more dynamic private sector. Moreover, the new economies have been adapting to the exigencies of the post-industrial era of international services, trade and rapid technological changes.

There have been some undeniably negative aspects in the transition process caused by the internalisation of such radical economic and political changes. Transition has brought significant losses not only to previously dominant political and economic interests but also to various social groups. It brought growing unemployment, widening social and economic inequalities, inflationary pressures and a high degree of personal risk and insecurity. A UN report states that "in 1989 approximately 14 million people in the former communist bloc lived on less than \$4 a day. By the mid-1990s that number has risen to about 147 million".⁶ In some transition countries national incomes are currently lower than the levels of 1989. Transition in Eastern Europe is also associated with a new form of corruption, linked to privatisation and liberalisation and the control of the main assets in the hands of the few 'political friends'. Corrupt political elites and administrative systems have allowed for the spread of organised fraud, illegal border trafficking, bribery and money laundering, posing a direct threat to the fragile democratic institutions.

The negative effects of the transition process have been a major cause for discontent and frustration for many individuals and social groups. Unemployment, or the fear of unemployment, high inflation rates, large-scale de-industrialisation and huge increases in prices and rents, slow or modest gains in real wages, and a minimal protection by a reduced state have caused public pessimism, anxieties and disaffection among individuals in the transition countries.⁷ Within this climate, nationalistic choices that profess an introvert, anti-market and xenophobic philosophy and question the premises of market economic policies can be legitimised as viable alternatives. Contemporary extremism is a form of protest politics against not only the perceived injustices of the market system but also against a climate of political incompetence, corruption and patronage. Political incompetence is linked with the inability of the political elites to deliver political, economic and social benefits to the people. It is also connected with corruption and patronage a phenomenon to be found in all East European societies and many western ones, as well. A prevalent perception in most European societies is that politicians are too absorbed with their own advancement and as a result they have either lost contact with the electorates or they have been unable to adapt to the changing circumstances. This perceived climate of social disaffection and corruption offers the political opportunity for extreme parties and populist leaders to expand their particular strategies. Extreme right parties and populist politicians in Central and East European countries have been able to capitalise on the negative aspects of transition in order to attract the widest possible supporters for their reactionary discourse.

⁶ *Human Development Report for Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS*, UNDP, New York, 1999

⁷ See Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right Wing Populism in Western Europe*, St Martin's Press, New York: 1994. p 41.

East European extreme political formations

As electoral systems and party structures have been adopted from the very early stages of transition, electoral coalitions and party politics have constituted the essence of political processes in the countries of Eastern Europe. One of the main elements of the East European party system is the high level of party fractionalisation.⁸ This is the outcome of the simultaneous post-communist transition at the economic, political and social levels, and the variety of economic, national, ethnic, cultural and political issues that have been raised. Questions of national identity, cultural expression, economic practice and political reform are all part of the current transition/consolidation process. The uncertainty of the socio-economic interests, the fragmentation and weak institutionalisation of the party system and the variety of issues to be solved produce new opportunities for aspiring political actors.⁹ As a result, the East European region has witnessed the emergence of a large number of extremist political formations.

With variations nationalistic and extremist political forces have influenced developments in many countries in the region in one way or another. Among the most prominent cases the ultra-nationalistic parties of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia have been able to monopolise for a long period the overall domestic political process. Other parties have been able to a greater or lesser degree, to influence the political agendas and orientations of mainstream parties and governments towards more extreme and ultra-nationalistic positions. In Slovakia, the Slovak National Party has participated as a coalition partner in the governments of Prime Minister Meciar in the mid-1990s.¹⁰ The Slovenian National Party (SNS) looked for a time as a possible contender gaining 10% in the 1992 parliamentary elections. Similarly, the Serbian Radical Party under Seselj was at some point a participant in Milosevic's governmental coalition. In Romania, the Greater Romania Party gained impressive electoral results (28.4%) in the 2000 parliamentary elections.¹¹

The fragmented character of the Eastern European party system is also reflected in the composition of the wider extremist political family comprising a large number of parties, groups and movements, espousing ultra-nationalist positions, authoritarian and populist ideas. In Poland, there are extreme parties of a traditionalist-clerical character (Christian National Union), of a populist character (KPN, Patria X) or of an openly racist orientation (Polish National Commonwealth-Polish National Party and Polish National Front sharing links with extremist extra-parliamentary groups).¹² In Romania

⁸ Robert Moser, "Electoral systems and the number of parties in post communist states" in *World Politics* 51.3 (1999), pp. 359-384.

⁹ Jack Bielasiak, "Substance and Process in the Development of Party Systems in East Central Europe" in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 30, No 1 (1997), pp.23-44.

¹⁰ See Frank Cibulka, "The Radical Right in Slovakia" in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, edited by Sabrina Pedra Ramet. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, pp. 109-132.

¹¹ 'Dissillusion and anger open door to rise of Romanian demagogue' in *Financial Times*, November 24, 2000

¹² See David Ost "The Radical Right in Poland" in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, op.cit., pp. 85-107.

where the extreme right has had a significant presence in relation to the other East European countries, there are extreme parties of an Orthodox Christian orientation (National Union for Christian Revival) with an openly anti-Semitic discourse or of a radical nationalist orientation (Romania National Unity and the Greater Romania Party).¹³ The legacy of fascism has been also visible in other extreme political formations. In fact, in most countries one can witness parties, which seek inspiration in monarchical or fascist pre-war ideas. The cases of the Bulgarian Revivalist Movement, the National Union for Christian Revival in Romania, the Party of Rights (HSP) or the Polish National Party (PSN), have made direct references to the inter-war context. These parties, more prominent during the early stages of transition, are currently small and marginal formations without a real impact or political relevance.¹⁴ A skinhead sub-culture reminiscent of neo-nazi and symbols has also developed in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia.¹⁵

A reactionary ideological platform

Overall, the extreme parties are mostly marginal within East European societies, in view of the wider consensus on the currently adopted socio-economic, political and ideological post-communist orientation. Moreover, the fragmentation of extreme parties prevents them from becoming an accountable political force. Yet their ideological impact has been more influential than their strictly speaking electoral impact, converging in some respects with beliefs, attitudes and mentalities held by larger sections of the populations and the mainstream parties in those countries. East European extremism is xenophobic and verbally aggressive like its Western counterpart, but it is also ethnically intolerant towards other ethnic groups and minorities, irredentist, anti-Semitic and fearful of external/foreign domination. It operates within a perceived conspiratorial context and adopts manichaistic conceptions of the man and society. Extremism breeds a fanatical, racist and exclusionary discourse, which is heterogeneous, changeable and nationally specific. All too often extremist discourse is an amalgam of themes and topics of an opportunistic and populist nature.

Its most prominent ideological feature is its intolerance towards the 'other' and the 'different' and "the refusal to allow that alternative ideas have a right to exist".¹⁶ Contemporary extremism breeds within a growing multicultural context marked by the rapid exchange of people and ideas. In Western societies this is the outcome of waves of immigration from third countries. In Eastern societies, multiculturalism is primarily

¹³ Catherine Lovatt, "Iron Guard Revival" in *Central European Review*, Vol 1, No 3, July 1999.

¹⁴ Cas Mudde describes these cases as pre-communist extreme right parties which situate their ideological identity in the political culture and ideas of the pre-communist period Cas Mudde, "Extreme-right Parties in Eastern Europe" in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol 34, no.1, (2000) pp. 5-27

¹⁵ 'Uncivil Society; Are racist skinheads just a symptom or a larger problem in Slovenia' in *Central Europe Review*, Vol 2, No 17, May 2000

¹⁶ Sabrina P. Ramet, "Defining the Radical Right" in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, op.cit, p. 13.

associated with the existence of a multi-ethnic environment, the product of an on-going historical process. In Eastern Europe, there is a prevalent conception of the nation where citizenship is defined in narrow ethnic terms and ethnic nationalism has formed the ideological justification for a violent and exclusionary approach towards other minorities and ethnic groups. However, while ethnic intolerance is a necessary defining characteristic of the Eastern European extreme right, it is not the sole property of the extreme right and can be shared by other political groups which do not belong to the extreme right family. Political formations in former Yugoslavia have repeatedly espoused ideas of ethnic intolerance leading their countries to destructive wars. In many other cases, the politics of identity have resulted in deliberate governmental policies to exclude the ethnic minorities from power as in Latvia and Estonia with the rights of the Russian minorities, or in Romania with the rights of the Hungarian minority.¹⁷ Furthermore, in all East European countries, attitudes towards the Roma minorities surpass the ideological territory of the strictly defined extreme right. What this shows is that ethnic intolerance is embedded to a greater or a lesser degree in the political and cultural discourse in East European countries, offering the extreme parties and groups a fertile ideological ground for infiltration. What distinguishes however, the ideology of extremism is an aggressive verbalism regarding the inferior status of the other ethnic populations. Many citizens consider the Roma as uncivilised and instigators of crime, but the extremists openly declare them as "pollutant" and "a threat to the national existence" of their respective populations.

Anti-Semitism is another expression of ethnic intolerance and a common feature of the Eastern European extreme discourse. In Eastern Europe, the numbers of Jews today cannot justify and reactivate the anti-Semitic feelings of previous periods, as the numbers of Jews are limited to a few thousands. Current anti-Semitism has less to do with actual Jews than with the abstract image of "the Jew", generating the interesting phenomenon of anti-Semitism without Jews. The Jew represents the international over the national, the imported and foreign over the domestic, the control over national economies. Anti-Semitism is, therefore, based on a conspiracy theory, or rather clichés about international Jewish conspiracies and plots of world domination, it is quite resilient and is not confined solely in the mentalities of extremists, in the form of widespread negative stereotypes about the influence and affluence of the international Jewry.¹⁸ This is one of the reasons why extremism in Europe has been lately associated with wider global terrorism following the

Extremism is also directed against the role of the "international factor", a predominant dimension that has defined developments in the region. All East European societies have been, in one way or the other, exposed either to direct foreign domination (Ottoman and Habsburg rule, Nazi occupation) or indirect rule (Soviet domination). As argued earlier, people strongly feel that the reform process is being imposed from abroad. Such a perception is easily exploited by the extreme political formations of both the right and the left, as a way of resistance towards the influence of Western

¹⁷ Such governmental discriminations have tended to diminish due in large part to the close scrutiny of relevant international organisations and the EU strict criteria for closer integration.

¹⁸ See Paul Hockenos, *Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*. Routledge, London 1993, pp. 271-299

international forces. They look with suspicion any foreign participation in the economy that could harm the security of the state. They are totally sceptical of all supra-national organisations and especially EU integration and they reject foreign participation or investment in their respective economies. East European ultra-nationalists who glorify their state and its institutions may view the infiltration of foreign structures or reform based on foreign strategies as a denigration of their institutional and cultural framework and are likely to reject democracy in the interest of preserving traditional more authoritarian political structures.¹⁹ There is, for instance, in most Central and East European countries a widespread fear that wealthy westerners will buy up land and houses of their countries. There is a particular fear in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary on a possible German 'invasion' to buy up properties and are therefore asking for long transition periods once they become members of the EU. Having said that the anti-internationalist feeling has been expressed not just by extremist politicians but by mainstream political elites as well. Even neo-liberal politicians such as Vaclav Klaus have often criticised the 'Brussels bureaucracy' or the aggressive pressure from international capital and liberalised global markets, in the face of the IMF and other international financial organisations.²⁰

Due to the authoritarian post-war and inter-war tradition, East European extremism espouses more openly and effortlessly the rejection of pluralism and democratic institutions with a propensity towards authoritarian ways of rule. All too often there is a glorification of the pre-communist past as for example in Poland for the authoritarian Pilsudski regime, in Hungary for the Horthy government and the Arrow Cross, in Romania for Antonescu or in Slovakia for Josef Tiso and his wartime Slovak state. In these countries there is 'a dangerous romanticising of a repressive past that can inhibit the development of a democratic political culture, encourage the worst antidemocratic instincts of the population and make people more vulnerable again to the preaching of demagogues who are so readily willing to take advantage of any political, economic and social crisis'²¹ Such tendencies suppressed for long by the communist regimes sought in the post-communist context a political and ideological space to express themselves openly, many of them seeking inspiration from the inter-war era. More important however, is the legacy of the communist totalitarianism, which greatly influences the nature of extremism, due to the endurance of authoritarian mentalities and perceptions and most of the times, a nostalgic feeling towards the more state protective climate of the previous regimes. In this respect, the extreme right may share some statist views with the unreformed communists against the imported models of market economy.

Ultra-nationalist parties in many countries have also been openly irredentist. The countries in the former Yugoslav region are the most obvious examples where irredentism was held as the state official ideology of the Croatian, Serbian and Albanian

¹⁹ Pamela Waldron-Moore, "Eastern Europe at the Crossroads of Democratic Transition" in *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol 32, No1 (February 1999) pp. 36-62.

²⁰ 'Evaluating a Decade; Poland, Hungary the Czech Republic: People's situation has worsened since the fall of Communism. Is this what the West intended?' in *Central Europe Review*, Vol 1, No 22, November 1999

²¹ See Aurel Braun, "The Incomplete Revolutions: The Rise of Extremist in East-Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union" in *The Extreme Right; Freedom and Security at Risk*, Braun & Scheinberg (eds), Westview Press, p.152.

political elites. The creation of new states and the undefined character of borders have legitimised such concerns which are directly related with the fate of their unresolved national questions. But even in countries with stable borders, extreme political formations have openly espoused irredentist projects. Hungarian nationalism revolves around the fate of the Hungarian minorities in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia and there is still a bitter feeling at the perceived injustices of the Trianon peace treaty in 1920, which separated Hungarian minorities from their homeland.

Having identified the common exclusionary, xenophobic and anti-internationalist features of the ideological discourse of the extreme political formations, one should also stress the changeable and opportunistic nature of the ideological discourse. In fact, contemporary extreme parties have been addressing wider political and economic issues, as well as the day-to-day concerns of many citizens. In Slovenia, the Social Democratic Party and its leader Janez Jansa, a populist figure of the urban radical right uses a mix of xenophobic rhetoric with modernising tones.²² In Romania, Vadim Tudor a well-known demagogue is strongly anti-Semite, nationalist and xenophobic, supporting the renationalisation of some industries, the reestablishment of Stalinist work programmes for young people and reinstating martial law in areas with ethnic Hungarians. At the same time, he supports integration into the EU and NATO structures and the development of the private sector.²³ By and large, extreme parties tend to play down their most reactionary principles once they perceive that this will help them widen their electoral appeal. Their belief system lacks a cohesive and powerful ideological framework, opting most of the times for a volatile and highly opportunistic, and a more or less pronounced fanatical and exclusionary discourse, according to the circumstances. Such notions are rather a set of disparate mentalities, which may at times have an impact on wider audiences.

Extremism and national specificities

While Eastern Europe shares a seemingly common political and economic trajectory, there are also striking national differences based on prior histories, cultures and developments.²⁴ The transition has been uneven among the countries of Eastern Europe themselves despite the simultaneous demise of communism in all of them and the apparently common starting point in 1989. Success has varied from country to country in the way they have embraced the neo-liberal model and democratic processes. On the one hand, the countries of Central Europe, led by Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, have been able to show some promising signs of adjustment in terms of democratic developments and market economics.²⁵ They are perceived as more consolidated democratic systems and better functioning market economies. However,

²² 'The Re-Austrianisation of Central Europe' in *Central European Review*, Vol 2, No 14, April 2000

²³ 'Banking on a nationalist' in *Transition Online* at <http://www.tol.cz>

²⁴ Anna Seleny, 'Old Political Rationalities and New Democracies: Compromise and Confrontation in Hungary and Poland' in *World Politics* 51.4 (1999) pp. 484-519.

²⁵ See *The Political Economy of Transition in Central and Eastern Europe* edited by Jen Bastian (Ashgate, 1998)

even the most advanced cases have not escaped the negative effects of transition, facing corruption, financial scandals, difficulties with their agricultural sectors and the economic ups and downs of a radical transformation process, allowing for the emergence of more extreme political options.

Hungary since the start of the transition has looked as one of the favourites of East European countries to join the EU, having achieved satisfactory growth levels and substantial foreign direct investment. There seems to be a widespread consensus on free market reform, privatisation and EU membership. Hungarian political culture is characterised by its moderation, voters prefer moderate parties, centrist politics and oppose extremist solutions.²⁶ Yet, transition has also brought disillusionment with democratic politics over allegations on political and economic corruption. Furthermore, nationalism is still a delicate issue within Hungarian society associated with the fate and well being of Hungarians living in neighbouring countries. Hungary is a society with a particularly big Roma community of 600,000, (approximately 6% of the total population) and the biggest Jewish community in Eastern Europe of around 100,000. Parties committed to parliamentary politics and neo-liberal at times feel prone towards the adoption of nationalist positions. One example is the influential Federation of Young Democrats FIDESZ that has often launched populist attacks against big foreign owned businesses.²⁷ Moreover, the democratic commitment of the Independent Smallholders' Party of Jozsef Torgyan, partner in the governmental coalition, has also been questioned by some. Populist politicians such as Istvan Csurka, Chairman of the ultra-chauvinistic party of Justice and Life Party have been aiming at apathetic voters but also influencing the moderate character of Hungarian politics.

Poland being a sizeable country at the heart of Europe had from the start of the transition a particular significance for the West and the East, in that EU enlargement is not conceivable without it. Democracy has been functioning quite adequately marked by an impressive number of political parties many of them short-lived. Economically, Poland has been responding well to the required economic reforms. Poland is probably the only country in Central and Eastern Europe that has insignificant numbers of national minorities and nationalism is mostly related with Roman Catholicism, than with other ethnic groups. While the Catholic hierarchy has never criticised openly the new post-communist secularism, consumerism and internationalism, there are more traditional tendencies within Polish Catholicism that have expressed their anxieties and what they perceive as threats to the Polish national tradition.²⁸ Nationalist and exclusionary racist expressions have been rather marginal, with no persuasive enemy, coherent economic program or organisational infrastructure and no great impact in electoral politics, despite the substantial number of extreme parties and movements.²⁹ The main reaction to international pressure and the exigencies of the transition process

²⁶ Andras Bozoki, "Democracy in Hungary" in *Democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe*, Kaldor & Vejvoda (eds), Pinter, London: 1999, p 109

²⁷ "Hungarian Politics: Landscape mired with controversy" in *Financial Times*, November 22, 2000

²⁸ Frances Millard, 'Polish domestic politics and accession to the European Union' in *Back to Europe* edited by Karen Henderson. UCL Press 1999. P.210

²⁹ See David Ost "The Radical Right in Poland" in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989*, op.cit pp. 85-107.

has come from its large agricultural sector that is resistant to radical changes imposed by the European Union while there is always an implicit and historical fear of the German influence on the country.

The Czech Republic is generally considered to be a case of a successful transition. Democratic politics have been functioning well and market economy has been growing steadily. It is also among the front-runners in the race for the EU. The country has also escaped the damaging repercussions of the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, unlike the similar East European cases of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.³⁰ However, the Czech Republic has also witnessed the negative aspects of transition in the emergence of financial scandals and frauds raising doubts on the way in which privatisation and liberalisation have been pursued. While formal democracy has been successfully established in the Czech Republic there have been some worries regarding the quality of its substantive democracy. One of the most controversial issues in Czech politics has to do with the attitude towards the Roma minority and the country has been criticised by external forces for the treatment of its Roma people. Moreover, being a country-destination for immigrants from poorer third states, there is the potential of developing a more openly xenophobic mentality. Its politics on the extreme -the Republican Party and a skinhead subculture- have been looking on Western Europe models.³¹ But there is ideological space even within the neo-liberal Civic Democratic party for anti-internationalist tones and a statist orientation in particular matters of governmental policies combined with a strong sense of national identity.

While all post-communist countries have tended to view membership in the EU and NATO as a clear cut foreign policy objective, in Slovakia integration in the western structures has been much more contested and problematic. Slovakia is a country, which in many respects has suffered from the 'stigma' of the EU's 1997 opinion on its 'defective democracy', as it was the only East European candidate country to be excluded from the first wave of candidate countries on problematic political grounds. Indeed, a high level of political and personalised conflicts has marked post-1989 Slovak politics. Vladimir Meciar, the Prime Minister who dominated the country for most of the 1990s was frequently criticised for his authoritarian tendencies. Moreover, Slovakia witnessed the participation of the Slovak National Party (SNS), a traditional far right movement, with an ultra-nationalist, anti-Hungarian and anti-Roma mentality and links with western extreme parties, in the government as a minority partner. Slovakia is a multi-ethnic society with a numerous Hungarian minority (10.76% of the populations), a sizeable Roma minority, a Czech community, some Ukrainians, Poles, Russians and Jews. International pressure has mostly focused on the treatment of Roma, their poor living conditions and low level of education.³² Within this multi-ethnic context, ethnic intolerance has been exacerbated by the existence of a large number of extreme right organisations, nostalgic fascist movements and skinhead groups. Slovakia is a country, which has been suffering in many respects from the negative aspects of transition in political, economic and social terms. Lately, however, the country seems to be

³⁰ Valerie Bruce, "Peaceful versus Violent State Dismemberment: A Comparison of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia" in *Politics and Society*, Vol. 27, No 2, June 1999. 217-237

³¹ 'Czech Republic Radical Right Revival' in *Central Europe Review*, Vol 0, No 19, February 1999

³² Stefan Wagstyl, 'Need to improve living conditions' in *Financial Times*, May 25, 2000.

recovering economically, its leadership has been more moderate and western oriented, facing a more receptive international community.

Slovenia, a 'former Southeast and currently Central European country' in terms impressive economic success, is the wealthiest country in Eastern Europe with a per capita GDP similar to Greece and Portugal. Slovenian society has safely escaped the disintegration and the destructive wars in former Yugoslavia, and looks confident towards its accession into the European Union. While there is a consensus on the European orientation of the country, there have also been reservations on the degree of integration, particularly in land matters, due mostly to the small size of the country and a perceived national vulnerability.³³ Some political formations in the country have openly adopted a xenophobic discourse against the non-Slovenes, claiming that Slovenes have priority over foreigners on employment and housing, and have held irredentist claims vis a vis Croatia. There has also been a growing resentment against the other former Yugoslav people, as a result of the high influx of refugees fleeing from the Yugoslav conflict.³⁴

The countries of the Southeast of Europe have been seen as the losers of the transition being in a chronic state of political and economic crisis, institutional weakness, social and nationalist upheaval.³⁵ The area of former Yugoslavia plus Albania (or the Western Balkan region in EU terms) is the region mostly identified with the phenomenon of extremism. Indeed, extremism is mainstream politics despite the appearances of many formal characteristics of democracy. Transition in the Western Balkans is directly linked with ethnic politics and the lack of security. Ethnic politics in that part of Europe are perceived by the external factor as 'aggressive and barbarian', whereas in Central Europe they are regarded as more 'civilised' and 'European'.³⁶ Successive conflicts have convinced the international community that the region is composed by 'unviable, antagonistic and internally intolerant states'.³⁷ Democratisation is marked by the resilience of the old communist elites, the predominance of ethnic parties and extremist leaders, and a weak legal framework. Due to open constitutional questions and undefined state borders, populations are divided along ethnic lines and minorities are excluded from the political process and discriminated against. Moreover, transition to market economy has proved uneven and protracted with negative growth rates, high inflation, large external and internal debts, high levels of unemployment and an extended informal sector.³⁸ Corruption in that part of Europe is linked with a predominant informal sector which mostly benefits the extreme nationalist elites. In that sense, extremism in the former Yugoslav region has been defining political and economic developments. In Southeast Europe, it is worth reflecting to what extent we

³³ Irena Brinar, 'Slovenia: From Yugoslavia to the European Union' in *Back to Europe*, op.cit, pp. 241-257

³⁴ Cas Mudde, 'Extreme Right Parties in Eastern Europe', op.cit., p.19

³⁵ See Carl-Ulrik Schierup "The Spectre of Balkanism" in *Scramble for the Balkans; Nationalism, Globalism and the Political Economy of Reconstruction* edited by Carl-Ulrik Schierup, (Macmillan Press, London 1999), p 22.

³⁶ George Schopflin. *Nations, Identity, Power. The New Politics of Europe* (London: Hurst & Co 2000)

³⁷ Mark Mazower, *The Balkans*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. London 2000

³⁸ Thanos Veremis and Daniel Daianu (eds). *Balkan Reconstruction*. Frank Cass. London: 2001

are dealing with a classical case of transition in the sense adopted for the Central European countries.

In Romania, one can see widespread disillusion with the country's political establishment and a decade of economic mismanagement. The former communist Iliescu was thrown out of office in 1996 amid allegations of corruption and incompetence. The following centre-right coalition presided over further economic decline and corruption. Moreover, Romania is considered the laggard in the list of the 10 EU candidate countries from Eastern Europe.³⁹ In Romania one can see the influence and resilience of many different streams of thought from liberalism to socialism, nationalism and fascism. The legacy of national communist of the Ceausescu era has been observed in the resilience of certain economic and political mentalities. Extremism has found a fertile ground in this country and has been adopted by both the forces of the right and left. Finally, Bulgaria is a country with uneven economic performance and a vulnerable political context. However, it is a society committed to its European and internationalist orientation⁴⁰ although the public is not always convinced by the quality of its political leadership. The June 2001 parliamentary elections resulted in a surprise vote whereby the former King Simeon II was elected to form the government. By and large, although Romania and Bulgaria are more politically stable and promising than the rest of the countries in Southeastern Europe, they are perceived to be experiencing the most problematic transition from the rest of the candidate East European countries.

The EU response to the phenomenon of extremism

The role of the European Union in the transition of the post-communist countries has been predominant and it has been the most influential external influence on domestic political and economic developments. For the post-communist transition countries, the European Union stands out as the most comprehensive framework which will guarantee their security, stability and prosperity. As a result, EU membership has been the primary foreign policy objective of all the countries in the East European region. This has allowed the EU to set economic and political conditions and criteria to evaluate the preparedness of East European countries to become members.

Mainstream West European democratic elites tend to perceive the nature of the extreme right on the basis of two prevailing assumptions: First, that those who hold extremist views are marginal, backward and ill-intentioned⁴¹ and second, that the current process of democratisation, economic reform and European integration will lead to democratic stability and the marginalisation of any extremist tendencies. However, the Austrian experience of the vote for the Freedom Party of Haider has left the European elites bewildered with the actual influence of an extreme right party in a prosperous and stable

³⁹ European Commission Evaluation Report, November 2001

⁴⁰ Vesselin Dimitrov, "Learning to Play the Game: Bulgaria's Relations with Multilateral Organisations" in *Southeast European Politics*, Vol. 1, No.2, December 2000. 101-114

⁴¹ Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience*. Polity Press, Cambridge: 1996

European country. It goes against both prevailing assumptions and indicates the ability of the extreme right to infiltrate mainstream politics. On the other hand, the Austrian experience has revealed the inability of policy makers to appreciate the factors that can lead to the rise of extreme right forces, and the lack of a consistent and unanimous course of action towards such forces.

In theory, the logic of democracy is inclusionary and consensual with respect to all political forces and ideological alternatives. In reality, democracy is faced with major dilemmas when dealing with the forces of extremism. European democratic elites have adopted two strategies towards extremism in Europe; the inclusionary of incorporation and the exclusionary approach of isolation. The inclusionary school of thought argues that extremists should be enticed into mainstream politics in the hope that the process of political compromise will strip them of their appeal or will render them harmless. The exclusionary school of thought opposes any deal with extreme parties arguing that these have their roots in "Europe's bloody past".

The European Union, a union of European democratic states claims to be based on the "principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law".⁴² Based on this legal/political justification, the EU reacted immediately with respect to the sanctions against the OVP-FPO Austrian government, although not all its member states were in absolute agreement.⁴³ Proponents of the sanctions have heralded them as a milestone in the development of the EU as a community of political and moral values, a step beyond economic and monetary integration. On the other hand, critics have viewed them as an unprecedented intervention in the domestic affairs of a member state against the will of a substantial part of the Austrian population, which voted for the Freedom Party. So far, the EU and its democratic member states have adopted a selective attitude towards extreme right forces. While their values are condemned, extreme right parties are represented in the European elections and hold seats in the European Parliament.

As regards extremism in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the issue of extremism is more or less a *terra incognita* for the European democratic governments. One example is the policy of the EU towards the former Yugoslav region. Faced with a series of conflicts caused by powerful extremist groups, the EU has been unable to devise the right strategy, which would marginalize such forces. In Bulgaria and Romania, the international community has been surprised by electoral results, which do not fit the more conventional continuum of right-centre-left; this despite their candidate status for EU membership. In fact, the whole of Eastern Europe offers a fertile political and economic ground for the emergence and success of populist leaders. Transition in East European countries has meant not only a transformation of political and economic structures but it has also been a cumbersome experience of state and nation building within a rapidly changing and increasingly demanding international environment. The

⁴² Article 6 of the Treaty of the European Union.

⁴³ Michael Merlingen, Cas Mudde & Ulrich G. Siegel, "The Right and the Righteous? European Norms, Domestic Politics and the Sanctions Against Austria" in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol 39, No.1, March 2001, pp. 59-77

EU has been asking from these countries to become part of a supra-national economic and political entity at a time when these countries have been rediscovering and redefining their national identities. Moreover, by assuming the deterministic and unilineal character of East European development, the EU has been underestimating the potential influence of ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and anti-internationalist tendencies.

The European elites should, therefore, appreciate more carefully the new phenomenon of extremism in Eastern Europe by examining the roots and causes of current discontent among East European societies. It is clearly not enough to perceive extremism as a marginal and backward phenomenon. It has to be understood that the internalisation of radical demands by external factors may generate reactions and disagreements. The EU enlargement strategy would have to devise the means of dealing with a potential euro-sceptic, ultra-nationalistic opposition rather than strictly aiming at the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* by the candidate and prospective candidate countries. The wider concept of transition in Eastern Europe has to be constantly evaluated and adapted to the regional and national specificities. The EU and the European national governments have to realise that extreme forces are part of the political landscape in Eastern Europe and at some points may be critically influential in the transition/consolidation process. One hopes, however, that when the new democracies and market economies of Eastern Europe are consolidated the forces of extremism will be marginalised irreversibly.