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## **The gap between the liberal rhetoric and the socio-political reality of contemporary international relations – the example of East-Central Europe**

**Abstract:** This paper refers to the gap between the liberal rhetoric and the reality of contemporary international relations. It maintains that liberalism remains a leading explanatory perspective, yet contemporary international affairs are too dynamic and too complicated to analyse them within liberal perspectives alone. In addition, liberalism tends to fall into dogmatism. Thus, the adequate analysis of today's democracy, as well as the political and economic aspects of contemporary international relations becomes incomplete without a reference to some realist, constructivist and even postmodernist conclusions. The example of the East-Central European democratic transformation clearly illustrates this thesis. The liberal reforms in the region still clash with the illiberal attitudes inherited from the communist past. Additionally, liberal values are misconceived and misunderstood. The explanation of those processes reaches far beyond liberal confines, and even the analysis of the Eastern enlargement of the European Union would be more complete with some realist, critical theoretical or postmodernist remarks added to it.

**Key words:** liberalism, democracy, international relations, East-Central Europe, European Union

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### **Introduction**

The fall of the bipolar order marked a symbolic victory of liberalism in the inter-paradigmatic debate in international relations during the 1980s. The liberal claims about the power of democracy, the role of economic interdependencies or the strength of international regimes became more attractive than the static and power-oriented vision of structural realists (Smith, 1999, p. 106–107). Nevertheless, the dynamic evolution of international relations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has contributed to the complexity and unpredictability of international processes in both political and economic sense. Liberalism remains the key theoretical per-

spective to analyse the problem of today's world. Yet liberal explanations become incomplete and some previous optimistic claims about the domination of the liberal logic of international affairs after the end of the cold war sound a bit exaggerated (Fukuyama, 1989, pp. 3–18). Without some realist, constructivist, critical theoretical or even postmodernist conclusions the full picture of the complex socio-political reality of contemporary international relations will be impossible.

Besides, liberalism tends to fall into dogmatism. The complex character of today's world illustrates a growing gap between the liberal rhetoric and the more dynamic reality of international political and economic affairs. The case of East-Central European transformation is a good example in this regard. Liberal philosophy and liberal values have considerably contributed to democratic reforms in the region. Yet in many instances they are misconceived or misunderstood and the liberal slogans serve to cover the limited effectiveness of East-Central European political elites. Liberal creativity still meets some illiberal tendencies among the East-Central European societies and a pure liberal perspective of analysis will not reveal the complex reality of the region.

The aim of this article is to indicate the gap between the liberal rhetoric and the socio-political reality of today's world. The first part of the text refers to some general conclusions about the problems of contemporary democracy, international political and economic relations. The second refers to the clash of liberal values and the specific socio-political reality of East-Central Europe. Finally the article refers to the Eastern enlargement of the European Union and the political reality of the enlarged EU. The example of the East-Central European democratic transformation illustrates that the liberal perspective remains the leading theoretical approach yet the full and adequate picture of contemporary international relations must reach beyond the liberal confines and absorb some realist, constructivist and even postmodernist insights. The liberal perspective alone will be incomplete and sometimes misleading.

### **The liberal assumptions and the reality of the world affairs after the fall of the bipolar order**

The fall of the bipolar order has proved the adequacy of the fundamental liberal assumptions. Liberalism remains the most inspiring perspective for the analysis of the post cold war international relations. Yet its domina-

tion is certainly not as unambiguous as at the beginning of the 1990s. The liberal slogans meet much more complex international reality today and the full picture of the international affairs reaches beyond the liberal confines. This becomes true in both international relations and domestic politics.

In the case of domestic politics liberalism emphasizes the role of democracy as a guarantee of a just social order, the power of people and socio-political stability. The liberals are right that effective democracy ensures just social order and mitigates the excessive ambitions of political elites. It helps to keep the domestic and international peace (Russett, 2010, p. 102–103). The liberal thesis that democracies do not fight each other because of the power of people that limits the aggressive policy of the ruling elites has for a long time been a challenge for the realists. Yet even the liberals tend to fall into simplifications today. The liberal perspective misses the evolution of democracy towards a more populist order based on the mechanisms of political propaganda and socio-technical instruments. The real political competition becomes in this regard limited to short periods before the elections and, even then, refer more to some propaganda slogans than serious political programs. Besides, as postmodernists would emphasize, politics becomes today less a case of the Aristotelian activity for citizens and community. It is more a competition over the dominant vision of truth or, as Richard Devetak notes, “the struggle to impose authoritative interpretations” of social and political events, to include international relations” (Devetak, 2005, p. 167).

Discussing the state of American democracy Hans J. Morgenthau indicated in the 1960s some real and more general problems of democratic order. They revolved around the arrogance and alienation of governing elites, the concentration of economic power as well as the social trends of conformism and excessive consumerism (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 244–245, 251). The most important, however, was the tendency among the ruling elites to limit the public debate and to ignore the voice of minority (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 262–263, 311–312; Williams, 2005, p. 113–114). He noted that “The majority, as long as it lasts, tends to become the absolute master, the tyrant, of the body politic, stifling in that body the vital spirit of questioning and initiative, and evoking instead the submissiveness of conformity” (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 250). Today this last tendency becomes even more dangerous, especially for unconsolidated democracies, to include the countries of East-Central Europe. The problems of weak East-Central European mechanisms of civil society and weak social control over the political class contribute to the tendency among the gov-

erning elites in the region to replace the real political debate with some PR tricks and electoral promises that will never be fulfilled (Morgenthau, 1947, p. 53–54; Rose-Ackerman, 2005, p. 126–130). Besides, the liberal slogans have usually served here to mask the limited effectiveness of political elites. This is, for example, the case of the liberal principle of free-market and free competition. Misconceived, or perceived in dogmatic terms, both have for a long time served to justify the problems with regulative functions of some East-Central European states.

Furthermore, the liberals tend to miss that some democratic institutions and mechanisms may have a declarative and façade character, especially in the case of the countries in transition. They seem to forget that building a democratic order is a long and difficult process and any single democratic elections (or a single law following international standards) may not testify to the democratic character of the entire political system. The studies of democratic transformation after the end of the cold war, to include the works of Guillermo O'Donnell on some countries of Latin America (O'Donnell, 1996, p. 34–37), illustrate the existence of the so-called declarative democracy. It is the order that remains democratic in formal terms. It refers to democratic institutions, mechanisms and law that are in formal compliance with democratic standards. In practice, however, those institutions hardly function and serve as a facade for much deeper and (sometimes) less democratic processes.

Thus, it seems difficult to analyse the evolution of the democratic order from the liberal position alone. The liberal perspective of contemporary democratic processes should be supplemented by some realist, constructivist and even postmodernist remarks. They are necessary to adequately reflect the socio-political reality of the today's world and they may protect the liberals from falling into dogmatism.

In the case of international economic relations liberalism emphasizes globalisation and economic interdependencies. It correctly points out that closer economic ties among the members of the international community prevent conflicts and the worst emanations of the power politics. They stabilize international relations and make them more predictable (Burchill, 2005, p. 62–64). Nevertheless, liberalism tends to forget about inequalities among the countries on the international scene. The liberals miss that globalization does not mean equal opportunities for all participants of this process. This is not only the case of theoretical debates between the liberals and the globalists about the most developed core of globalization as well as much less competitive semi-periphery and periphery of the world

economic processes (Wallerstein, 1996, p. 87–92). It is the case of the real domination of the most powerful international actors in economic, financial and technological aspects of this process and the real difficulties to compete on the global market for much less developed states (Stiglitz, 2004, p. 25–26).

Liberalism underestimates that globalization facilitates the concentration of economic benefits in a limited number of participants and usually the most powerful ones. They are at the core of the global economic processes and benefit from the growing international dependencies most. The countries of the periphery (and most of the semi-peripheral states) benefit from the globalization in a limited way or do not derive any benefits at all. Yet they share the same risks of global crises and turbulences. Hence, the reality of international economic relations departs from the liberal view of common benefits and the liberal assumptions about the harmonizing role of economic interdependencies. They may exert positive influence on contemporary international affairs yet their assessment may not be as positive as the liberals claim. The problem is certainly a bit more complicated and it would be difficult to adequately explain it without supplementary references to some conclusions of the realists and the globalists.

In the case of international political relations liberalism correctly emphasizes the stabilizing role of international law and international regimes (Burchill, 2005, p. 59–60). Yet it ignores the tendency among the most powerful members of the international community to use the international law instrumentally (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 217–219). It underestimates the role of national interests as a driving force of contemporary international relations, despite the domination of the liberal rhetoric in the post cold-war world. The international law and international institutions play a crucial role in stabilizing the post cold-war order yet they are prone to the game of conflicting national interests. This game has so far accompanied not only the most controversial issues discussed in the frame of the United Nations (as the examples of the wars in Iraq or Syria illustrate) but also the flagship institutions of the liberal order, to include the European Union.

In fact, most of the cold-war period world political institutions tend to take on the character of the façade masking the game of national interests today and the real political dialogue shifts towards more flexible and less institutionalized platforms – pragmatic and less dogmatic in ideological terms. Besides, the example of Russia and its foreign policy illustrates that some powerful actors on the international scene reject the liberal identity and liberal philosophy at all (Oliker, Crane et al., 2009, p. 9–16). Here,

again, liberalism may not be convincing enough to analyse the power-related aspects of contemporary international relations and the liberal explanations need some supplementary realist considerations.

**The gap between the liberal rhetoric and the socio-political reality  
– the case of democratic transformation  
in East-Central Europe**

The gap between the liberal slogans and more complex social reality becomes clear in the case of East-Central European states and their democratic transformation. The liberal perspective is important to analyse the democratic processes in the region yet it is hardly able to reveal all complicated questions of social identities there. The liberals face some serious challenges to adequately reflect the game between the social passivity inherited from the communist past and the creativity strengthened by the new liberal order.

Indeed, the communist period caused the changes in the peoples' mentality. The empty communist slogans about the social justice, combined with the brutal and oppressive character of the communist system, contributed to social passivity. The scarcity of basic goods and pervasive poverty focused the activity of people on the problems of everyday life. Yet the rhetoric of the power of the working class contributed to expectations of social privileges among many professional groups. In the same vein, the control of the state over the distribution of goods strengthened the demanding attitudes among some segments of the society. They have expected further distributive and protecting role of the state even after the fall of the communist order (Vanhuysse, 2006, p. 13–15).

The collapse of the communist system did not automatically change the mentality of post-communist societies. The last 25 years of democratic transformation in East-Central Europe illustrate the clash of the liberal dynamism and creativity and the legacy of the communist past deeply rooted in the social attitudes of East-Central European societies. The scale of the problem differs yet it practically touches every country in the region and Robert Brier is right when he notes that "The actors who shape the post-communist condition bring with them the notions, ideas, and identities they acquired under communist rule" (Brier, 2010, p. 154).

The new, liberal-oriented, economic reforms entailed high social costs, to include the growing unemployment, the loss of the previous privileges

by professional groups and the process of dismantling of the large communist-period industrial plants (Vanhuysse, 2006, p. 9–10; Jackson, Klich, Poznańska, 2005, p. 98). Hence, the reception of the liberal rhetoric accompanying the reforms has largely departed from the picture of successful liberal transformation (Galasińska, Galasiński, 2010, p. 2, 12). On the contrary, David Ost identifies some “tendencies for political illiberalism” in East-Central Europe, to include populism, demanding attitudes and difficulties of many social and professional groups to define their interests (Ost, 1993, p. 454). Besides, the transformation has, at least at its first stage, marked the strong influence of the previous communist elites – more interested in their own particular aims than the stable liberal order. (Stachura, 1999, p. 137; Cox, 2003, p. 234, 241–243).

Furthermore, the new liberal slogans, to include those about the value of personal career or the stimulating role of competitiveness, become misconceived or misunderstood at all. The clash of the communist past with the new liberal rhetoric has resulted in different and sometimes distorted patterns of social behaviour. Hence, the entrepreneurship of the younger generation has contrasted growing disappointment with the new liberal order among the older generation. The aims of personal career meet the “rat race” and “wild competition” on the labour market. The misconceived liberal value of personal wealth has resulted in the struggle for money and the lack of respect for those weaker and poorer. They break the previous traditional social ties. All in all the social backgrounds of East-Central European transformation seems more the case of constructivist research and conclusions than pure liberal studies.

The political evolution of East-Central European states confirms the progress of their democratic transformation. Yet the political systems of many countries in the region remain far from consolidation (Rupnik, 2007, p. 17). The transformation is accompanied by weak state institutions and underdeveloped civic society as well as weak institutions of public accountability hardly able to ensure the responsibility of political elites to the people (Rose-Ackerman, 2005, p. 24–26, 126–127). O’Donnell remarks about the declarative character of democracy (O’Donnell, 1996, p. 34–37) may sound a bit exaggerated for East-Central Europe yet even in this region the permanent political debates are replaced by populist promises right before the elections and some PR tricks. They serve the governing elites to cover their limited effectiveness. The law remains overregulated, incoherent and too complicated to be understood by ordinary people (Winiecki, 1997, p. 3–4, 12). The bureaucracies of East-Central Europe

are still affected by a culture of patronage (Jablonski, 2000, p. 136) and some new examples of economic and political scandals cause social anger and apathy.

This picture is certainly far from a few general liberal assumptions. Liberalism and the liberal emphasis on the stabilizing role of democracy remain important in the analysis of the transformation in the region. Yet the portrayal of East-Central Europe is much more complicated and it is impossible to close it in the liberal frames. Without some constructivist or realist conclusions the adequate understanding of social and political processes there becomes difficult. Besides, liberalism tends to fall into dogmatism in East-Central Europe. It refers to liberal slogans but misses some serious socio-political processes in the region that contradict the liberal foundations. This is not only the problem of illiberal attitudes or the distorted picture of liberalism among the people in East-Central Europe. This is a more dangerous question of populism that grows and attracts more attention in the region.

Indeed, as Daniel Smilov and Ivan Krastev indicate, populism remains a clear tendency accompanying the evolution of the social identities in the post-communist states. (Smilov, Krastev, 2008, p. 7). Besides, the recent elections to the European Parliament confirm that populism in Europe is the tendency not limited to the East-Central part of the continent (Higgins, 2014). The populists criticize the ineffectiveness of the current political elites and the social costs of the reforms but simultaneously the liberal philosophy of transformation and liberal democratic values (Smilov, Krastev, 2008, p. 7). In practice, they propose nothing but the empty slogans and promises yet they exploit peoples' disappointment with the liberal reforms and uncertainty. They attract the attention of those who felt marginalized and excluded by the liberal transformation. The problem is, however, that the populist slogans in the socio-political reality of East-Central Europe are likely to prevail over the liberal rhetoric, especially in the case of further economic problems and instability of the whole continent.

This growing danger of populism (not only in East-Central Europe) needs much deeper and comprehensive analysis than the liberal perspective alone. Its explanations should absorb the conclusions proposed by the realists and the constructivists. Some postmodernist remarks about the politics in the region that becomes the rivalry over the interpretations of the post cold-war transformation sound quite right in this regard as well.



### **The liberal rhetoric and the Eastern enlargement of the European Union**

The case of East-Central Europe, serving as the example of the gap between the liberal slogans and the dynamic reality of contemporary international relations, returns in the process of the Eastern enlargement of the European Union and the political practices in the enlarged EU. The liberal arguments accompanying the accession of the countries from the region have usually emphasized the strengthening of the European values and the contribution to the sense of the European community. Those arguments remain valid, important and true. Yet, again, the reference to liberal values alone does not explain the entire picture of the problem. The course of the European integration after the fall of the bipolar order has always been a complex phenomenon reaching beyond the liberal explanations. Besides, it has never been a purely economic process but a result of more complicated political, social and economic decisions. The single European currency is a good illustration in this regard as the introduction of the Euro was accompanied by strong political and realist considerations that accompanied the liberal and economic arguments (Erlanger, 2011).

Considering the Eastern enlargement of the European Union the liberals rightly argue that it has strengthened the democratic processes in the region. They correctly emphasize the extension of the zone of stability and predictability to the East. Finally they are right when they indicate that the enlarged EU changes the character of political relations in East-Central Europe and introduces new standards of political dialogue. Nevertheless, the liberal perspective misses or underestimates some specific aspects of the enlargement process and the current state of the European integration. The aspects that realists, critical theorists or even postmodernists will explain better.

First, the realists will indicate a deep divergence of power between the old and the new members of the European Union. Despite the progress in the economic development of the new member states this difference will remain a source of potential problems that may seriously affect the political relations within the EU. The most obvious in this regard is the case of immigration and the complaints of the reach EU countries about the massive influx of workers from the new member states. The new members, for their part, raise the issue of their limited ability to influence the real decision making in the European Union. They point out a tendency among the wealthiest European societies to consider the East-Central Europeans as

the EU citizens of the second category or a “reservoir” of the cheap workforce. Thus, the complaints of both sides and the debate between them are certainly not about liberal values but realist interests.

Second, the realist perspective will better analyse the game of national interests among the member states in the European Union. Despite the liberal slogans about the community of interests the difference of national interests has always accompanied the history of the European integration and remains a specific feature of this process today. The recent difficulties of the European Union with the common and co-ordinated reaction to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict seem to illustrate this game clearly (Waterfield, Freeman, 2014). Besides, the problems with the European Union’s response to the Russian-Georgian and the Russian-Ukrainian conflicts confirm the previous Morgenthau’s conclusion about the limited ability of the liberal powers to timely and adequately react to external threats (Morgenthau, 1947, p. 65–66; Williams, 2005, p. 103).

The liberals are right when they indicate that the process of the European integration has profoundly changed the political environment in Europe. Even some (classical and neoclassical) realists would emphasize that it considerably mitigated and tamed the struggle for power on the continent. It has reduced the potential of conflict and transformed the political rivalry in Europe into more peaceful and more consensual forms. For realism, however, the European integration is still a story about interests and a difference of interest and not about a liberal harmony of interest (Donnelly, 2000, p. 194). The potential of conflict in the European community still exists and the gradual fall of the European integration mechanisms may reveal more brutal aspects of international relations on the continent.

Third, the membership in the European Union does not automatically eliminate the previous socio-political problems in East-Central Europe, to include those with the post-communist identities and illiberal attitudes among the people and politicians. Milada Anna Vachudova and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi underline in this regard that the membership has considerably promoted pro-liberal and pro-democratic changes in social attitudes in the region. It has improved the quality of political competition as well. Nevertheless, it has not automatically changed the problems with illiberal practices of East-Central European elites. Similarly the massive legislation that has formally been accepted in the frame of the *acquis communautaire* does not necessarily improve the everyday work of East-Central European bureaucracy (Vachudova, 2010, p. 82–83, 102–104; Pippidi, 2010, p. 59–62, 71–76).

Considering the example of the European Union the critical theorists and the postmodernists, for their part, would emphasize the hidden interests behind the integration process that the official politics do not refer to (Rupert, 2010, p. 158–159; Devetak, 2005, p. 167–170, 176–182). They would notice that the Eastern enlargement of the European Union serves mainly the interests of the leading economic companies of the Western Europe and helps them to dominate the markets of the new members. The earlier collapse of the largest communist period industrial plants and the liberal slogans about the freedom of entrepreneurship promoted by the European Union make this expansion easier. They would point out the even some of the EU structural funds granted to the new member states come back to the Western European companies. They are much stronger and more competitive than the firms from East-Central Europe and are in a better position to win the public tenders. Some examples of grand infrastructural project in the region illustrate it clearly (Cienski, 2010).

The critical theorists and the postmodernists would emphasize that some of the democratic mechanisms in the new members of the European Union remain declarative and formal but not necessarily efficient. They would indicate a relatively short period of a more in-depth conditionality and control of the EU over the democratic transformation in the candidate countries. This conditionality has practically ceased after the enlargement. Hence, the postmodernists and the critical theorists would claim that weak and façade institutions of East-Central Europe will not be able to eradicate the problems inherited from the communist past, to include the corruption, political clientelism or disrespect for the law by some interest groups. Finally they would point out that the decision about the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, if taken not by the Western politicians but by the Western societies in referendums, would probably be negative for this enlargement and the accession of the new members at all. All of this, again, illustrates the limited ability of liberalism to analyse the complex issues of contemporary international affairs alone and the need of the more comprehensive attitude reaching beyond the liberal confines.

## **Conclusion**

The fall of the bipolar order marked the prestigious victory of liberalism in the previous inter-paradigmatic debate. Nevertheless the dynamic evolution of international relations after the end of the cold war contrib-

utes to the growing gap between the liberal rhetoric and the socio-political reality of contemporary international affairs. Liberalism remains the leading explanatory perspective of today's world yet the full and adequate picture of contemporary international relations becomes impossible without the supplementary contribution of some realist, constructivist or even postmodernist conclusions. The liberal analysis, if considered alone, will be incomplete and may be misleading. This becomes true in the case of domestic political processes, to include the democratic transformation of East-Central Europe, as well as the political and economic aspects of contemporary international affairs.

The example of the countries in East-Central Europe contributes to those theses. The analysis of the socio-political reality of the region, and especially the game between the "new" liberal and the "old" communist-rooted patterns of social activity, reaches beyond the liberal frames. The popular reactions to liberalism in the region are mixed and the liberal values are often misconceived or misunderstood. Liberal dynamism and creativity, shared by some segments of East-Central European societies, still meet communist-rooted passivity, demanding attitudes and populism. Besides, liberal rhetoric serves to justify illiberal practices and limited effectiveness of East-Central European political elites, and liberalism tends to fall into dogmatism. It misses the dynamic changes in the social and political reality of the region, to include the growing populism. Thus, the full picture of the East-Central European democratic transformation will be incomplete without some strong realist, constructivist or critical theoretical conclusions.

In the same vein, liberalism remains the important perspective to study the Eastern enlargement of the European Union and the contemporary European integration. It tends, however, to miss some power-oriented aspects of the relations between the old and the new members as well as the game of national interests inside the EU. Some realist and postmodernist conclusions, or those coming from the critical theory, could help to reveal the complexity of the European integration after the accession of the new members from East-Central Europe.

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**Rozdźwięk pomiędzy liberalną retoryką a społeczno-polityczną  
rzeczywistością współczesnych stosunków międzynarodowych  
– przykład Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej**

**Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy rozdźwięku pomiędzy liberalną retoryką a społeczno-polityczną rzeczywistością współczesnych stosunków międzynarodowych. Autor twierdzi, że jakkolwiek liberalizm nadal zapewnia wiodącą perspektywę eksplanacyjną, współczesne stosunki międzynarodowe są zbyt dynamiczne i skomplikowane aby można było zanalizować je wyłącznie w ramach liberalizmu, który zresztą popada w dogmatyzm. Z tego powodu, adekwatna analiza współczesnej demokracji oraz politycznych i gospodarczych aspektów współczesnych stosunków międzynarodowych jest niepełna, jeśli nie uwzględni pewnych wniosków ze sfery realizmu, konstruktywizmu, a nawet postmodernizmu. Przykład transformacji demokratycznej w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej doskonale obrazuje tę tezę. Liberalne reformy w regionie wciąż zderzają się z rygorystycznymi poglądami wywodzącymi się z socjalistycznej przeszłości. Liberalne wartości są poza tym zniekształcane i błędnie pojmowane. Wyjaśnianie tych procesów wykracza daleko poza liberalizm i analiza nawet samego wschodniego poszerzenia Unii Europejskiej byłaby bardziej wyczerpująca gdyby uwzględniła pewne odniesienia do realizmu, krytyki teoretycznej czy postmodernizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** liberalizm, demokracja, stosunki międzynarodowe, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, Unia Europejska

