

REVIEWS

ZENONAS NORKUS, ON BALTIC SLOVENIA AND ADRIATIC LITHUANIA¹

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Several years ago, the 20th anniversary of the fall of Communism prompted a considerable number of academic meetings and publication. By that time, most ex-communist states had already made their new identities clear and familiar to the world – or so it seemed. Transitology was slowly growing out of intellectual fashion, and the whole region affected by the post-communist transformation was more and more frequently regarded as stable and comparatively uninteresting. Amid this fading interest, conferences that aimed to re-examine of the post-communist transition were considered, even by the participants themselves, more of a ritual commemoration than a necessary attempt to solve pressing issues.

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At that time, hardly anyone could foresee that, ironically, soon after the anniversary passed, the crisis in Ukraine would cause a profound controversy between Russia and the West and turn the notion of the second Cold War into an almost trivial catchphrase. Like Sovietologists facing the fall of the socialist camp, transitologists were caught unaware at the end of the post-Soviet transition. Hence the tone of most publications, both academic and analytical, on the ex-communist region has suddenly become reminiscent of Cold War rhetoric. Amid a range of emotions including indignation at the rapidity of the change (as much as its actual content), engaged observers, both within and outside academia, feel the need more than ever for a comprehensive, rational and methodologically transparent analysis of post-communist history.

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¹ Norkus, Z. 2012. *On Baltic Slovenia and Adriatic Lithuania: a qualitative comparative analysis of patterns in post-communist transformation*. Vilnius, Budapest: Apostrofa/Central European University Press, 375 p.

The book under review, more than most other publications on the same subject, satisfies this new demand for understanding. The ambitious purpose of the research presented in Zenonas Norkus' work, explicitly stated, amounts to no less than developing a strong, empirically grounded theory of post-communist transformation – a theory that would coherently reveal definitive conditions for success or failure in each country case of transformation. Intriguingly, the author starts his contribution to transitology by putting aside its main concept – that of transition. According to Norkus, the notion of transition implies movement from the point A to point B. Post-communist transformations, Norkus argues, do not follow the path of transition, because the intent driving these transformations was not to reach a certain final point, but to escape from the disastrous consequences of the communist experience. In every ex-communist country, multiple opinions of the ideal “point B” appeared and their number and variety increased as the newly liberated societies gained more and more experience of transformation. Instead of attempting to fit this diversity into a unified model of transition, Norkus embraces the comparative perspective. He defines the subject of his study – and probably also redefines the subject of the studies of post-communism in general – not as transition, but as an exit from Communism. Defined as such, the process has a shared starting point, A, but various, and often not too obvious, points B. The explanation of the logic behind the exit from communism includes: first, determining the most and least widespread patterns of the process, and second, revealing those distinctive features of the transformation patterns that operate as definitive criteria for success.

The researcher takes into account all the variety of patterns, both historically observed and only potentially possible. The comprehensive approach is enabled by the use of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). This method combines the subtlety and sensitivity of the qualitative approach with the precision of formal logic. The starting point in the application of QCA in the study is the selection of criteria for classification of the patterns of exit from communism and the establishment of alternatives for each of these criteria. This starting point is similar to identifying categorical variables and their values in a quantitative research design. Norkus decides on four key characteristics, which he defines in the following way: “1) *orientation of transformation (continuational, restorative (restitutive), mimetic (imitative, emulative), innovative)*; 2) *mode of political transformation (conservative, reforms from above, revolution from below, “refolution” (pacted democratization))*; 3) *mode of economic transformation (minimal reforms, partial reforms gradual incremental reforms, shock therapy)*; 4) *outcomes of transformation (liberal democratic capitalism created in the first post-communist transformation decade, no liberal democratic capitalism created)”* (p. 58). Taken together, these four characteristics give a number of hypothetical outcomes that equal the product of the number of alternatives for each characteristic: $4 \cdot 4 \cdot 4 \cdot 2 = 128$. Obviously, this number surpasses the number of ex-communist countries, meaning that most of these combinations could not have been realized, even if no two countries had followed exactly the same pattern. The multitude of imaginary patterns points out one of the most significant achievements of the book – the methodologically rigorous and therefore persuasive and transparent use of counterfactuals. Transitology abounds in “what if” deliberations of the

consequences of historic decisions that could have been made differently, but usually depend on little else besides the analyst's imagination. Norkus, on the other hand, managed to produce a list of counterfactuals that is as firmly grounded in the historical reality as the actual, observed patterns of post-communist transformation. The researcher contrasts counterfactuals with the least and most frequently registered patterns, discerns and explains the most typical combination of alternatives, and concludes by singling out the most crucial pre-condition for a successful exit from communism. Like the whole account of the post-communist history, Norkus' conclusion implicitly contradicts the conventional romanticized vision of an uncompromising struggle for freedom. Instead, the results of the QCA show the ultimate prerequisite for success is the ability of anti-communist and post-communist elites to reach and maintain compromise long enough for the necessary transformation to occur without damaging the country's long-term prospects. Different initial conditions may make other prerequisites just as necessary in particular country cases, but the need for compromise despite ideological differences appears to be the single common denominator in all varieties of exits from communism.

The presentation of the process and outcome of the QCA of all country cases and counterfactuals gives way to a detailed comparison between two states unexpectedly paired together. The second chapter provides an explanation of the book's mysterious title. Both "Baltic Slovenia" and "Adriatic Lithuania" refer to counterfactuals opening the floor to a discussion on the historic choices, especially in the strategies of economic development. As Norkus zooms in on the case of a single ex-communist state, his own country of Lithuania, he remains faithful to his sober critical stance when asking why Lithuania achieved relatively less success in its transformation than the other two Baltic countries. As a counter example, Lithuania is contrasted to Slovenia – the most successful country in its region, the Balkans. Throughout the comparison, Norkus challenges the view of neoliberals who evoked the experience of "the Baltic tigers" to support their claim that Slovenia's success would have been even greater had it followed a more radical course of market reforms. Norkus provides evidence against this recipe, showing the Baltic success to be short-lived and suggesting that the adoption of neoliberal policy would have turned Slovenia into an "Adriatic Lithuania," that is, a relative outsider in the region. He argued that neoliberal radical reforms would not make Lithuania a "Baltic Slovenia," or a regional leader. In retrospect, the latest developments in the years since the book has been written demonstrate that if Slovenia, due to its initial favourable conditions, didn't have much to gain from neoliberal economic reforms, then it certainly had much to lose from its subsequent left-wing policy choice. At a more abstract level, Norkus' conclusion might read as a caution against the search for an ideological panacea for whatever part of a political specter. Those who have been following the recent history of the region know only too well that seeking an ideology to replace communism has been a persistent preoccupation among elites and the whole populations of most, if not all, ex-communist countries. A caution against oversimplification cannot be amiss.

The study as a whole, despite its ambitious goal, broad scope, and thoroughness, appears to raise a range of unanswered questions. The list of 128 different patterns of transformations

appears exhaustive and even intimidating – but surely exit from communism also had crucial characteristics that were not economic or political, such as social stratification, international relations, and nation-building, to name only a few that first come to mind. Incorporating more characteristics into the QCA framework would have certainly boosted the total number of patterns to an absurdly long list of options, but that is another question. Aside from revealing the opportunities and limitations of the QCA, the study not only improves received theories of the varieties of capitalism, but also integrates the experience of the exit from communism into the broader European and even global framework. Most importantly, Norkus managed to catch, in slow motion, the elusive moment when a policy becomes history. In view of the growing instability and incomprehensibility in the region, we may only hope that more books of comparable quality appear and those that have already been published get the widest audience.