

TOWARDS CREATING A DISCIPLINE WITH A “REGIONAL STAMP”: CENTRAL-EAST EUROPEAN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND ETHNO-CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Abstract

The first section of the present article will contrast quantitative progress with major deficiencies in the substantive development of the discipline. The second part will argue in favour of a comparatively informed Central-East European variety of political science with a “regional stamp” that would focus on ethno-cultural pluralisation as a thematic issue. The third section will discuss several approaches and projects in the region which might point the way.

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On our continent, political science has recently made conspicuous advances in quantitative terms. During the 1990s, with the discipline’s institutionalization across Europe’s central and eastern regions, total academic staff engaged in political science in Europe approximately doubled. The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), established in 1970 and easily the discipline’s most important European association in terms of promoting cross-national cooperation, acquired new institutional members from Albania and Bulgaria through Croatia and Slovenia, Latvia and Lithuania to Poland, the Czech Republic and Russia. The European Confederation of Political Science Associations (ECPSA), founded in late 2007 to promote the discipline’s com-

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mon interests in teaching, research and funding, at present consists of 22 member organizations, including 8 from Central-East Europe.

However – and this may serve as a first caveat, - the ECPSA Executive Committee more than mirrors the numerical preponderance of Western European groups, with just two of its seven members coming from Central-East Europe – more precisely, from Hungary and Slovenia. Similarly, engagement in CEPSA, the Central European Political Science Association established as early as 1994, has remained restricted to a core group of 8 organizations. The simple reason is that, in a number of Central-East European countries, either no political science association has formed, or existing associations are largely inactive. The degree and effectiveness of professional representation indicate considerable intra-regional disparities in our discipline's evolution. A discussion of the problem will follow below.

The considerable quantitative progress which, nevertheless, has been visible is at odds with the discipline's modest contribution to addressing the salient contemporary issues of regulating financial and economic globalization, of making the best of regional and global migration, of not just combating terrorism, but promoting the reduction of its underlying grievances and causes. In summing up the country reports, which Canadian political scientist Leslie Pal and the author of the present article have recently compiled in a book, it may be safely stated that the influence of university departments and foundations from Western Europe and the United States has encouraged the merger of Central and Eastern Europe's nascent political science "cultures" into an empirically oriented "mainstream" focusing on national political systems, comparative politics, European studies and international relations. Across the region, the discipline's dominant approach is institutionalist, with emphasis on current policy-making and on applied research. This tendency has been favoured by the emergence of numerous non-governmental research institutes and analytical centres ("think tanks"), often financed by Western foundations, with the professed mission of contributing to the consolidation of democracy.

On the one hand, considerable advances have been made in the fields just mentioned. On the other hand, political studies have largely been reduced to a functionalist science of "managing" parliamentary and party government. In a way, that is hardly surprising. Establishing a new political system means that, once institutionalized, political science will rather automatically turn to ex-

plaining the workings of that system. To a certain extent, political science in any country with new political institutions will be descriptive and institutionalist. The problem, obviously, is to what extent, and how can it grow beyond that focus?

In post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, political science has been marked by an “almost total absence of critical theory”.¹ No systematic reflection of the “state of the art” occurred after the collapse of “actually existing socialism”. Instead, the discredit wrought upon Marxist-Leninist ideology and its anti-empirical normativism was rather automatically extended to normative conceptions of any kind. The baby was thrown out with the bath-water.

In large parts of the region, political science has been facing an additional problem: more often than not, the discipline is suffering from extreme theoretical and methodological fragmentation, accompanied by low research standards. In almost half of the 19 post-Communist societies included in Pal/Eisfeld’s collected volume, the authors – without exception experts from the countries under survey – found individual and institutional cooperation deficient, research networks underdeveloped, professional interests insufficiently represented.²

Absence of internal cohesion has its analogy in a lack of sustained regional cooperation. By reason of the earlier transfer of resources and conceptual approaches, international links established by Central and East European political scientists are typically East-West. The sort of fragmentation just referred to often implies a divide between a minority of internationally connected and a majority of inward-looking academics.

Three major challenges, it would seem, are at present facing political science disciplines in the region: A paucity of normative theory-building (which is not meant to imply a regression to more diffuse conceptions with less empirical content); a need for a thematic focus, around which a major part of segmented research efforts in a number of countries might crystallize; and a comparatively informed, decidedly “regional stamp” of that focus, which might serve to strengthen the cross-border cooperation of political scientists.

¹ Hankiss E., “Brilliant Ideas or Brilliant Errors? Twelve Years of Social Science Research in Eastern Europe”, in Kaase M., Sparschuh V., eds., *Three Social Science Disciplines in Central and Eastern Europe*, Berlin/Budapest: Social Science Information Centre (IZ)/Collegium Budapest, 2002, p. 17-24, quote on p. 22.

² Eisfeld R., Pal L. A., “Political Science in Central-East Europe and the Impact of Politics: Factors of Diversity – Forces of Convergence”, in id., eds., *Political Science in Central-East Europe: Diversity and Convergence*, Opladen/Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich, 2010, p. 9-35, esp. 21-25.

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The article started out by arguing that too few political scientists have so far concerned themselves with the increasing ethno-cultural “pluralization”, in William Connolly’s pertinent words, of already pluralist polities,³ with millennialist terrorist violence, with the required robust international regulation of business and finance. Bringing these pressing regional and global challenges even remotely closer to their solution is a political project that involves many years (history), many levels (structure), and many players (“agency”, in political science terminology). Addressing them requires the re-emergence of normative notions as an indispensable part of the discipline, though – again – definitely not at the cost of empirical rigor in researching constraints and perspectives.

The discipline once again needs to go beyond conceptions of what “good governance” should be – a notion that should by no means be held in low regard, but which has more to do with administrative “efficiency” and the rule of law, than with parliamentary or other forms of democracy. Generally speaking, political science should develop “visions” how a “good society” might be designed and politically attained. In doing so, the discipline (as has just been emphasized) needs to incorporate history, structure and agency: historical changes and their dynamics;⁴ embedded socio-economic and political power relations; individuals, associations, business corporations, political parties and social movements as players.

As Lithuanian scholars Dovilė Jakniūnaitė and Inga Vinogradnaitė have noted, in Central-East Europe, the evolving political science might reasonably start “challeng[ing] the ‘mechanical’ application” of Western concepts, looking for “a more elaborate conceptualization” of the region’s own “experienced ‘realities’”.⁵ Several reasons suggest selecting ethno-cultural pluralisation from among a number of such realities – and from among the triad of pressing

³ Connolly W. E., *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. XIX-XXIV.

⁴ Cf. Smith R. M., “Still Blowing in the Wind: the American Quest for a Democratic, Scientific Political Science”, *Daedalus* 126, 1997, p. 253-278, esp. 273.

⁵ Jakniūnaitė, D., Vinogradnaitė, I., “Political Science in Lithuania: A Maturing Discipline”, in Eisfeld, Pal, *ibid.*, p. 177-191, quotes on p. 186-187.

issues earlier referred to in this paper - as a major, in fact, the major thematic focus of a political science with a "regional stamp".

In the first place, policies shaping the position of ethno-cultural minorities have been a perennial issue in Central and Eastern European countries since the Habsburg and Czarist empires. Secondly, "learning to live with the... institutionalization of ethno-cultural diversity" may well be considered "a key condition for [any] stable and just democracy".⁶ Finally, "virtually all aspects of the transition from Communism to democracy... have displayed ethno-cultural dimensions which cannot be ignored".⁷

Most conspicuous among these, of course, were the civil wars in Serbia and Croatia, which shocked the world with their levels of brutality. The atrocities of "ethnic cleansing" dramatically disproved the hopes pronounced a decade and a half earlier, when cautious optimism in assessing societal levels of toleration had still seemed indicated: "A multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society like Yugoslavia may exhibit considerable frictions between its constituent units, but those frictions will not necessarily threaten the existence of the society itself".⁸ Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, for their part, also experienced ethnically driven struggles. In the Ukrainian case, these were settled by the establishment of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine (60% Russians, 25% Ukrainians, 12% Crimean Tatars). In the other instances, conflicts continue to linger - Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria. In 1993, Czechoslovakia split over the question how to satisfy the demands of the Slovaks as the largest minority group.

In newly independent Slovakia, sizable minorities have emerged again: Hungarians (10% of the population) and Roma. Russian minorities account for 28% of the Latvian and 25% of the Estonian populations. Ukraine has a Russian population of some 17%, concentrated in the country's Eastern region. In Belarus, Russians comprise 11% of the population, and of the country's two official languages, Russian is much more widely used than Belarusian.

⁶ Kymlicka W., Opalski M., eds., *Can Liberal Pluralism be Exported? Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001, p. 1.

⁷ Kymlicka W., "Preface and Acknowledgments", in Kymlicka, Opalski, *ibid.*, p. XII-XVII, quote on p. XII.

⁸ Weale A., "Toleration, Individual Differences, and Respect for Persons", in Horton J., Mendus S., eds., *Aspects of Toleration*, London/New York: Methuen, 1985, p. 16-35, quote on p. 26.

The present situation may be summed up as follows: The numerical proportion of the region's ethno-cultural minorities has considerably declined since the 1930s. Still, the socio-economic and political problems associated with such minorities have not abated proportionally.⁹ On the contrary, ideological disorientation, economic anxiety and mounting social inequality have fueled the "rediscovery" of ethnicity as a source of belonging, of identity, of imagined "certainty in an uncertain world".¹⁰

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A Central-East European political science focusing on ethno-cultural diversity might seek to advance integration and cultural cross-fertilization, in contrast to discrimination, segmentation, and ensuing socio-political cleavages. Some recent approaches in the region which might point the way toward such a project will now be provided.

A moment ago, the article referred to the compact Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia. Political science disciplines in these two Baltic states have been setting examples regarding comparative, policy-oriented studies on ethno-cultural conflict and accommodation. In the case of the Tallinn University's Department of Government, this work has led to involvement in the conceptualization and drafting of Estonia's minority integration policy.¹¹ In Latvia, led by the non-governmental Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, several institutions have been focusing their research on the role of ethnicity in politics, minority rights and societal integration.¹²

In Ukraine, too, the discipline's evolution has included a focus on ethno-politics, "born out of the specific need for political science to offer proposals for... preserving territorial unity", against the backdrop of the tendencies for

⁹ Liebich A., "Ethnic Minorities and Long-Term Implications of EU Enlargement", in Zielonka J., ed., *Europe Unbound*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 117-136, esp. p. 117.

¹⁰ Durando D., "The Rediscovery of Identity", *Telos* No. 97, 1993, 21-31, quote on p. 26.

¹¹ Pettai V., "Political Science in Estonia: Advantages of Being Small", in Eisfeld, Pal, *ibid.*, p. 119-133, esp. p. 123, 130.

¹² Ikstens J., "Political Science in Latvia: Learning the Basics", in Eisfeld, Pal, *ibid.*, p. 163-175, esp. p. 164-165.

ethnic separatism mentioned earlier.¹³ Political science has not produced a comparable thrust in Bulgaria, with its Turkish (nearly 10%) and Roma (5%) populations, nor in Romania and Slovakia with their ethnic Hungarian minorities of 6.5 and 10% respectively.

A decade ago, the noted Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka, widely known for his work on multicultural societies, along with East European Studies specialist Magdalena Opalski, undertook the project of inviting a number of academics and writers from Central-East Europe to comment on a liberal-pluralist model of managing ethno-cultural diversity which Kymlicka had prepared. The commentators hailed from Russia, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Romania, Ukraine. None of the issues they raised and discussed have lost their saliency over the intervening years: perspectives for the further development of civil societies and civic cultures as counterforces to ethnic nationalism; status and conceivable rights of ethno-cultural groups in relation to those of individuals on the one hand, and of civil and political associations on the other hand; instances of ethno-cultural minorities holding oppressive values vis-à-vis other – internal or external – minorities; different formal and (hardly less important) informal practices in the handling of language interests; pros and cons of federal arrangements and/or territorial autonomy as minority rights regimes.

The resulting volume remains a rich source of sophisticated observations on ethnic relations in the region, including public discourses at popular and elite levels; on the challenges and dilemmas facing attempts to apply the liberal-pluralist approach to Central-East Europe; and – in the two editors' concluding words – on "the immense potential of, and the great need for, new work in this area".¹⁴

The substantive context of the debate initiated by Kymlicka and Opalski was transition from Communism and consolidation of democracy in the region. In 2008, *Politics and Central Europe*, the journal of the Central European Political Science Association, in a thematic issue entitled "Values and Diversity in Contemporary Europe" shifted the focus to European integration,

¹³ Kruglashov A. M., "Ukrainian Political Science: From Quantity to Quality", in: Eisfeld, Pal, *ibid.*, p. 291-304, quote on p. 294.

¹⁴ Kymlicka, Opalski, *ibid.*, p. 9.

and, more specifically, toward the quest for an eventual European identity. In an environment characterized by the increasing value pluralism of European societies, how should cultural differences be reconciled? Should Europe seek consistency in the ways such issues were tackled by different countries?¹⁵

The example selected for discussion was religious symbols in the public space as a salient expression of cultural pluralisation. Two instances must suffice here to indicate the character of the problems scrutinized in the journal's issue. How might religious freedom of expression be guaranteed, and yet the discrimination of certain lifestyles by a specific religion be avoided? On what grounds should religious minorities be allowed to claim special treatment, up to being granted exemptions from general law?

While highly significant for the region, these questions are, of course, not peculiar to Central-East Europe. Rather, their treatment may be hoped to help putting in a better perspective challenges which have emerged across the entire European continent, and also to help dealing with them more reasonably, flexibly and equitably. A regional focus would absolutely not involve detaching political science from its West European or American counterparts, but would – quite the contrary – emphasize its particular contribution to a global scholarly effort.

This has been illustrated by a recent (June, 2010) St. Petersburg conference on “Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the Problem of Tolerance”, jointly organized by the Russian Political Science Association, the non-governmental Saint Petersburg Centre for Humanities and Political Studies, and the International Political Science Association's Research Committee on Politics and Ethnicity. Several of the major presentations focused on a central feature of present societies, already mentioned earlier, which the migration component of globalisation may be safely predicted to produce on an increasing, rather than a lessening, scale: the resort to ethnicity as a source of social identification and identity – not just for these societies' minorities, but also for their majorities.

How much heterogeneity will these majorities accept? How may cultural narratives be advanced, which promote mutual “recognition” and tolerance, rather than separation and conflict? Might “symbolic” politics help in developing such discourses – politics, for instance, which emphasize a civic “Rossijskij”

¹⁵ Strnadová L., “Editorial”, *Politics in Central Europe* 4 (2), 2008, p. 2-7, esp. p. 5-6.

rather than an ethno-cultural "Russian" polity? Should political science, along the lines of the sociological role model, attempt to develop concepts replacing the idea of a single identity by the notion of "a set of identities", allowing the individual "to participate in various [cultural] communities"?¹⁶

The issues raised in the cases cited here concern a plethora of challenges with which both policy-makers and any number of individual citizens grapple. Political science should particularly support the latter in their search, "help[ing] citizens [to] prepare themselves for various possible futures".¹⁷ Otherwise, "perplexity, distrust, fear" and the intolerance born out of distrust and fear may overwhelm large segments of society.¹⁸

Finally, the discipline should, whenever necessary – not merely, but certainly also in the Central-East European region, – play the admittedly uncomfortable part of a critical, even an oppositional force. It should be publicly critical of power structures skewed in favour of ethnically privileged majorities (or, for that matter, of politically and economically privileged minorities). In 2007, Estonian political scientists were among those who warned against the removal of the Bronze Soldier memorial in Tallinn, whose razing later sparked two days of violent protest among Russian-speaking youth.¹⁹ If the xenophobic "All for Latvia" Party had been included in that country's next governing coalition, as originally announced by Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, Latvian political scientists might have had reasons for a similar move.

In a region where "hybrid" regimes with more or less authoritarian elements have been emerging alongside consolidated democracies, a discipline, such as the one portrayed here, might emerge as a science of democracy. Such a science would be partisan insofar, as it would pursue research and teaching in a humanist spirit, emphasizing broad societal participation in the shaping of public policies, which would not least be informed by a vision of ethno-cultural non-domination and cross-fertilization.

¹⁶ Kuznetsov A., "Political Science Before a Challenge of Ethno-Cultural Pluralism", in: *Ethno-cultural Diversity and the Problem of Tolerance in a Globalizing World* (Conference Proceedings), St. Petersburg: n. p., 2010, p. 96-110.

¹⁷ Hankiss (note 1), p. 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Pettai (note 11), p. 130.