Civil Society and Regime Type in European Post-communist Countries
The Perspective Two Decades after 1989-1991

Michael Bernhard and Ruchan Kaya

Abstract

This essay addresses two controversies on the relationship between civil society and democratization in post-communist countries. It contradicts a tendency to dismiss civil society as a myth, ideology, or framing device for social movements and instead demonstrates that civil society is a real material force that has played a critical role in democratic breakthroughs in the region. It also criticizes the tendency to characterize post-communist civil society as either strong or weak in a blanket fashion. Instead, it shows that looking at differences in the strength of civil society at moments of transition is a good indicator of how durable that transition will be. This is illustrated with empirical work on both the breakthrough years of 1989-1991 and the period of the color revolutions in the 2000s.

Key words: Democratization, civil society, post-communism, electoral authoritarianism, mobilization.

One of the central theoretical innovations of post-communist regime change has been the foregrounding of civil society in the explanation of outcomes in the region. The idea of civil society as a consequent actor emerged prior to the annus mirabilis of 1989 in the discussion of dissent from communist rule by authors such as Andrew Arato and Jacques Rupnik. The enhanced role of civil

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society in transitions within the region led a number of authors to challenge the established wisdom that the origins of democratic transition begin with splits in the authoritarian regime, and instead to posit the possibility of civil-society-led transition from below, particularly in light of the events in cases such as Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. There has been a recent tendency in the literature to downplay the importance of civil society to democratization in the post-communist area. There are some who dismiss the importance of civil society as an actor in the process of democratization. Kotkin is the most extreme, arguing that civil society is an imaginary construct of Eastern European dissidents and their intellectual friends in the West to increase the influence of the former. Rather, he posits the definitive role of the failure of the party-state and downplays insurgency from below as the proximate explanation for regime change.

Others argue that civil society is more important as an ideological construct than an organizational presence, a realm of politics, or consequent set of actors. Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley see it almost exclusively as a kind of liberal fig leaf that was used to justify and provide cover for neo-liberal economic adjustments. Glenn’s approach is more of mixture of the material and ideological. He acknowledges the sphere of civil society and the role of organizations, but he regards the rhetoric of civil society most importantly as a framing mechanism that contributes to the success of social movements.

In marked contrast to the aforementioned authors, this essay argues that civil society is not a myth or an ideology but a real material force that plays a significant role in regime outcomes. This piece will also move beyond debates on the strength of post-communist civil society. There are those of us who have argued that civil society in the region was relatively weak compared to that of other democracies, whether due to a demobilization that followed intense periods of civil society activism, or a function of systemic legacies.

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of communism. However, there are those who argue that weakness of post-communist civil society is overstated, and that the strength of civil society provides an alternative path to the consolidation of democracy in a region where party systems are fragile and underdeveloped.

The problem in these two conflicting sets of findings is that they rely on distinct sources of data to draw their conclusions. The weak civil society arguments rely on survey data based on *post hoc* individual reporting of action, or willingness to engage in action. In contrast, the strong civil society argument is based on protest-event coding derived from news sources. Neither is ideal in that we have very few bases to compare what we observe at a given moment with the historical development of regimes that democratized in earlier time periods. The perspective of the survey data-based research is cross-sectional. We know that post-communist countries at a specific point in time seem to have less citizen involvement in organizations or protests than in other groups of countries with different regime trajectories. Therefore, this analysis does not definitely tell us whether post-communist civil societies are weak, because we are comparing them to countries which are often further along in their democratization sequences. Because they democratized earlier, the latter should be more advanced in the institutionalization of systems of interest articulation or repertoires of protest activity. If we compare fledgling and consolidated democracies, we should not be surprised to find the former less developed than the latter.

While event data have done a better job of allowing us to track change in individual countries over time, the costs of collection make it unlikely that we will have data on a broad cross-section of countries for a long period of time anytime soon. Thus, event data provide to us a good picture of how

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11 An exemplary account of this sort is Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Michal Wenzel, “Civil Society in Poland after the Fall of Communism: A Diachronic Perspective,” presented at the training program, A Liberal Challenge? Civil Society and Grass-roots Politics in New Democratic, Authoritarian, and Hybrid Regimes, January 5-13, 2012, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea.

12 Public opinion surveys tend to be repeated every few years, complicating country-year explorations. The World Values Survey (WVS), the most well-known, sometimes alternates batteries of questions in different areas, and while it has become more comprehensive geographically over time, the number of countries included varies over time, and not all previous participants take part in subsequent surveys. In principle, improvements in frequency and sample consistency would overcome this. Again, the main issue is the expense and not any defect of design or research program. Some researchers have tried with some success to
civil society changes over time in individual national contexts. They are suited to contextualized causal theorization by process tracing; however, without a broader cross-section of countries, they are limited in how far they will support broad-based generalization.

Because of these limitations, we propose to move away from blanket characterizations of the strength or development status of civil society. One other way to get inferential leverage to explore the role of civil society is to make use of in-region variation. In this essay, we use such variation to demonstrate the continued relevance of an approach that treats civil society as a real material force that continues to be relevant for democratic outcomes. To do so, we rely on the findings and implications of two ongoing projects in which within-region variation is used to explain regime outcomes.

The two propositions framed here relate to the impact of the initial democratic breakthrough phase in 1989 (or 1991) and on the persistence of neo-authoritarian but electoral regimes in the region. In both cases, the variations in the strength of civil society make a tangible difference:

Proposition 1: The strength of civil society at the point of transition was the major determinant of liberal democracy regionally.

Proposition 2: The ability of neo-authoritarian leaderships to control civil society is a major factor in the persistence of nondemocratic regimes.

**Civil Society in 1989**

The first proposition is in large measure supported by the variation in outcomes across the region, though the explanation is not fully comprehensive and needs a more complex and contingent causal logic to explain the full variation in outcomes. In those countries with well-established oppositional civil society organizations (Poland, Hungary, the Baltics, and Slovenia) or a combination of more modest oppositional organization and large demonstrations in support of democratization (Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic),

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13 The substance of this essay is drawn from two manuscripts by the authors in progress: “The Moore Thesis: What’s Left after 1989?” and “Are Elections Mechanisms of Authoritarian Stability or Democratization? Evidence from Postcommunist Eurasia.” The section on 1989 is drawn from the former, and the section on post-communist authoritarian regimes is drawn from the latter.
liberal democracy was much more likely to emerge. The logic behind this is a product of inter-elite politics during the final stages of communism. If we think in terms of the key elite players being the cultural, technical-managerial, and administrative-police strata, changing patterns of alliance among these groups had important ramifications for regime outcomes. On balance, the cultural elites (professors, writers, artists, and journalists) were the first to abandon the system in large numbers and to support the political opposition that emerged under late communism. The administrative and police strata were the most conservative. The critical balance was decided by the position of the technical and managerial elite who faced the prospect of defecting to the opposition and embracing the greater uncertainty but potentially higher payoff of economic reform, or of supporting the status quo in alliance with the administrative and police stratum.

Where civil society was better organized and/or could turn out large demonstrations, the prospect of supporting the status quo became substantially riskier and pushed the economic and technical stratum toward defection. Where civil society was weaker, elements of the political elite were able to paint themselves as newly reborn nationalists or as moderate reformists, keep the allegiance of the economic stratum, and slow down (Romania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia), derail (Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, and most of the former Yugoslavia), or ultimately defeat democratic reform (Russia, Belarus, and Central Asia). The patterns also had important ramifications for the type of economy that emerged following the demise of communism. Where civil society was stronger, there were greater countervailing pressures which prevented the wholesale appropriation of state assets. Where it was weaker, elites who maintained political control over the transition were able to convert that political power into private control of state assets. This elite control led to political capitalism rather than to a market-driven version. The post-communism that resulted was less egalitarian and thus less conducive to democracy.

Evidence of this can be seen in table 1 below, which looks at political and economic performance in post-communist countries according to the level of civil-society mobilization at the point of transition. The indicators in the table include the two most commonly used measures of the level of democracy—the Polity and Freedom House scores. Economic performance is gauged on the basis of whether and how soon a country recovered its pretransition level of development. Socio-economic distribution is measured by the conventional Gini score for income inequality, and basic needs satisfaction on the basis of food supply (measured in [kcal/capital/day]).

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14 This notion of elite structure is adapted from George Konrád and Ivan Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979).

Table 1. Group Indicators of Aggregate Political, Economic, and Social Performance, 1989-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength of Civil Society at Transition</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Economic Recovery</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FH (mean)</td>
<td>Polity (mean)</td>
<td>none (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


High Cases: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia

Medium Cases: Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Ukraine

Low Cases: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

Rank: Mean of Ordinal Placement from 1-28.

* 2009 used in calculating the mean, when countries had not recovered to pretransition GDP levels.

** 2008, or last observation in series.

*** 2008, Kcal/capita
Note that the countries which had organizationally stronger or more mobilized oppositional civil societies at the point of transition in 1989-1991 have much higher democracy ratings.\(^\text{16}\) Furthermore, all recovered from post-transitional recessions, and did so at a faster pace, and, as a group, they are more egalitarian compared to the countries whose civil societies were less strong and mobilized. The medium- and low-level countries also rank correspondingly, except in the economic dimension, where the lowest category slightly outperforms the medium level.

Variation at the medium and low levels is less predictable. The reason for this is that the balance of intra-elite power in the societies with weaker civil societies was less conducive to democratic outcomes. Still, some of the countries in the medium- and low-level categories managed to reach democratic outcomes, and this is where the impact of the global system comes into play. The work by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, which elaborates on how the leverage exercised by the West as well as the linkage that less than fully democratic regimes have with the West, explains a great deal.\(^\text{17}\) Evidence for this is presented in the next figure which makes use of Levitsky and Way’s work on leverage and linkage in competitive authoritarian regimes. Briefly, leverage is the direct pressure that the West applies to adhere to norms of democratic politics, whereas linkage is a complex set of relationships (e.g., trade, culture, science, assistance, investment, and so on) which bind the West to other countries. Table 2 below utilizes Way and Levitsky’s characterization of leverage and linkage for countries with medium and low levels of civil society mobilization at transition and how that translates into regime outcomes.

There are several patterns discernible here. At the medium level, Romania with high leverage and linkage became democratic. A similar outcome was also achieved in Bulgaria (not in Levitsky and Way’s sample), which is in many ways analogous to Romania in terms of leverage and linkage. Russia, with low leverage and linkage, eventually moved in an authoritarian direction. Ukraine with low linkage would seem to have low probability as a candidate for democracy, despite strong Western leverage. Levitsky and Way’s assessment seems to be based on the wave of optimism that followed the Orange Revolution. Since then, particularly with the election of Viktor Yanukovych in 2010 and the imprisonment of his main rival, Yulia Tymoshenko, much of that optimism seems misplaced; Ukraine seems to be sliding back in the direction of competitive authoritarianism. All told, the variation in this category suggests that a medium level of mobilization and strong linkage and leverage with the West explains a democratic outcome.

\(^{16}\) Freedom House runs from 2 to 14, with lower scores signifying greater protection of civil liberties and political rights. Polity runs from -10 to 10, with higher scores signifying a greater degree of democracy.

Table 2. Explaining Variation in Democratic Outcomes at the Middle and Low Levels of Civil Society Mobilization via Linkage and Leverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil Society at Transition</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Linkage</th>
<th>Leverage</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Macedonia</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


At low levels of mobilization, the pattern is also quite stark. The sample is subdivided between five small Balkan countries and four Soviet successor states. All five Balkan states, due to their proximity to Western Europe, were high-linkage and high-leverage cases, and all with the exception of Albania had democratic outcomes. The Soviet successor states all had medium or low linkage and authoritarian outcomes. The five low mobilization cases from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) are not in the Levitsky and Way sample. They, too, are not particularly high-linkage or -leverage cases and are not democracies.

The final upshot of this exploration is that those cases which had high civil society mobilization at the point of transition in post-communist Eurasia had a strong propensity for a democratic outcome. For those that did not, the outcome was far more uncertain. And in this subsample, high linkage to the West assuming strong Western interest in democratic outcomes (leverage) represents an alternative path to a democracy where the domestic constellation of political and social forces made such outcomes more doubtful.

**Civil Society in Authoritarian Post-communist States**

The second proposition ventured earlier was “the ability of neo-authoritarian leaderships to control civil society is a major factor in the persistence
of nondemocratic regimes.” The finding presented here grew out of an investigation on the role of elections in regime types in the post-Cold War era. In an attempt to adjudicate between two sides of a debate on whether elections can serve as a mechanism for democratization\textsuperscript{18} or a means for authoritarian control of the polity,\textsuperscript{19} we examined the evidence for a comprehensive sample of post-communist states for the period 1990 to 2011.

We felt that the post-communist area represented a particularly good choice for such a test because a number of observers have noted how in electoral authoritarian or competitive authoritarian regimes dictators seem to be vulnerable to civil society mobilizations in conjunction with elections.\textsuperscript{20} This literature has argued that popular mobilization of civil society is a particularly effective means for political oppositions to contest falsified electoral outcomes and even to get dictators to respect the outcomes of elections. Despite the success of such electoral models in removing dictators through color revolutions in the post-communist region, the democratic gains have not been lasting. Table 3 looks at changes in Freedom House democracy scores since those events.

The only color revolution that seems to have been an unambiguous democratic success was that in the former Yugoslavia. The other three cases brought little change in the medium term, despite unseating dictators. There were, however, other cases in the region that were not cast as revolutions, where the combination of civil society mobilization and electoral contestation yielded more democratic outcomes, such as the ousting of Meciar in Slovakia in 1998, the turnover in power in Romania in 1996, and democratization in Croatia following the death of Franjo Tudman through the elections of 2000.\textsuperscript{21}

In our investigation, we looked at two critical questions about the relationship of elections to democracy: (1) does the repeated holding of elections have a positive effect on the quality of democracy (measured in civil-liberties scores), and (2) does the quality of elections (measured in competitiveness and level of


\textsuperscript{21} Bunce and Wolchik, \textit{Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries}. 

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Table 3. Was the Impact of the Color Revolutions Durable? (Freedom House Democracy Scores)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year of Showdown</th>
<th>Democracy Score Prior to Revolution</th>
<th>Democracy Score in 2011</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


participation) have a positive effect on the quality of democracy? We did not find that the number of consecutive elections improved civil liberties. Instead, we found that more competitive elections, measured as the runner-up’s share of the vote (e.g., elections where losers fared better) brought improvements in civil liberties. Our oddest finding was that greater participation also hurt civil liberties when we measured its impact in a linear fashion. However, we found that the relationship of electoral participation to protection of civil liberties in the region actually had a curvilinear relationship. When we corrected for this, we found that increased participation up to 50 percent improved the probability of greater protection of civil rights, as seen in figure 1 below. And turnout up to 60 percent still brought a high probability (~60 percent) of a civil rights score of three or lower (seen as a kind of minimum level for democracy by many).

Please note in reading the figure that the lines represent cumulative probabilities (e.g., the line with triangles shows the probability of having a civil liberties score of three or below; the actual probability of having a score of three would be determined by subtracting the \( CL \leq 2 \) line from \( CL=3 \)) and lower CL scores represent a higher level of protection of civil liberties. The finding that in the post-communist region both low and very high turnout is worse for protection of civil liberties than moderate levels (~40-60 percent) diverges from findings for other regions such as Western Europe and Africa, where increased turnout has been shown to enhance the quality of democracy.\(^{22}\)

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We have two findings here which seem to be at odds with each other and appear to throw a monkey wrench into the logic of the electoral model of change. However, with the proper contextualization, this proves not to be the case; rather, it highlights the importance of the battle between regime and opposition over civil society as central to what McFaul has called the fourth wave of regime change in post-communist Europe.\textsuperscript{23} First, the strength of political opposition leads to improvement in the quality of democracy, thus greater protection of civil liberties. Where civil society supports the political opposition, we expect power-holders to respect civil liberties more. But second, the curvilinear relationship between electoral participation and quality of democracy seems to contradict this, implying that the mobilization of society is associated with the persistence of authoritarian regimes that do not respect civil liberties.

However, the electoral model continues to make sense if the finding on electoral participation is carefully contextualized. The question of mobilization is not only an “if” question but also a “who-whom” question. It is essential to remember that, in communist political systems, elections were largely façade

procedures in which populations were mobilized to vote their approval of
the ruling elite. They were, by and large, empty rituals of compliance. The
same was true of organizational life in state-controlled transmission-belt
organizations, except for moments of crisis when autonomous action became
possible. In those countries where the elite were able to convert their political
assets under the old system into continued control in the post-communist
period through nationalist political programs and conversion of state assets into
private fortunes, the mobilization capacities of the state and its ancillary social
organizations have to some extent been preserved.24 While such capacities
have not been preserved in a wholesale fashion, certain elements have
persisted and have been supplemented with the glue of patronage generated
by the privatization of state assets and the rentier capacity in resource-rich
post-communist economies.25 This capacity lies at the heart of the electoral
authoritarianism so common in the region. Post-communist elites rely on it to
mobilize society for plebiscitary elections and other forms of ritual support.
And, this explains why the highest levels of participation are associated with
weaker protection of civil liberties. Thus, where civil society remains subject
to prerogative state power, there is a lower quality of democracy.

Despite this seemingly contradictory finding, we believe the electoral
model of change continues to hold water if we look at civil society as a realm of
contestation between regime incumbents and their opposition. It is not absolute
levels of mobilization that matter but relative levels. Regime incumbents seek
to continue to keep civil society passive and quiescent, or at least depoliticized,
and use their mobilization capacity to block the emergence of oppositional
civil society activity. Such capacities also serve to turn uncritical, fatalistic, and
cowed populations out to support the regime in the biased elections common to
all forms of electoral authoritarianism.

For opposition politicians, the mobilization of forces within civil society
is fundamental both to support their electoral challenges and to thwart the
attempts by the authoritarian incumbents to steal elections when they are
defeated. In this, the proponents of the electoral model of contestation are
correct. Yet, there is one dimension of this struggle that they underplay, and
this why we emphasize relative mobilization of civil society in our account.
The mobilization of civil society by the opposition serves not only to enhance
its own support, but also to diminish the capacity of the incumbents to turn out

University Press, 2011), and Scott Radnitz, Weapons of the Wealthy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 2010).

25 Keith Darden, “The Integrity of Corrupt States: Graft as an Informal State Institution,” Politics
from the Central Asian Trajectories,” World Politics 56, no. 2 (2004): 224-261; Michael
McGlinchey, Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia (Pittsburgh, PA:
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); and Radnitz, Weapons of the Wealthy.
the masses in acts of electoral acquiescence.

One can see this in the turnout figures for the key elections around which the color revolutions revolved. In the elections that were central to the four color revolutions, turnout dropped in two cases in comparison to the previous election and registered only a slight uptick in the other two. In the Georgian parliamentary election of 2003, turnout fell to 60 percent from 68 percent in 1999. The corresponding figure in Kyrgyzstan dropped from 64 to 57 percent from 2000 to 2005. Both Ukraine, from 75 to 77 percent turnout in the presidential election of 2004, and Yugoslavia from 63 to 64 percent in the parliamentary contest of 2000, stayed essentially the same.26 The battle of relative mobilization in civil society is thus not only a question of mobilizing opposition but also of neutralizing the mobilization capacity of the incumbents.

There are also cases of electoral turnover in which the opposition won the battle of relative mobilization, but also produced a large absolute change in turnout. In Slovakia, turnout grew from 75 to 84 percent from 1994 to 1998. In Croatia, the corresponding figures were from 69 to 77 percent from 1995 to 2000.27 In these two cases, the democratic gains of electoral contestation have proven to be more durable. While this is suggestive, more research is required to ascertain whether this helps to explain that durability. Here, too, it seems that the empowerment of civil society, and the cutting of its bonds to prerogative state power, has been the key to democratic success in the region. This seems no less true today than it was in 1989.

Conclusion

Thus, despite recent skepticism about the role of civil society in successful democratization efforts, our research finds such conclusions unjustified. Blanket characterizations of civil society hide more than they elucidate. In this essay, we developed a conditional explanation of the role of civil society at the onset of transition from communism and afterward, depending on the level of strength of civil society mobilization. Our examination of variation in the strength of civil society across the region both in 1989 and since then, supports our two contentions: (1) countries that had weaker civil societies at the point of exit from communism had a lower chance of creating and maintaining liberal democratic political and economic systems; and (2) after the transition, those countries that manage to keep viable political oppositions, and whose civil societies can escape the trap of post-communist state control, have a better chance of disrupting authoritarian state power and creating more democratic societies after a neo-authoritarian exit from communism.

27 Ibid.