Post-Communist Human Development in World-Historical Perspective

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For Presentation at the Annual Conference of the
Western Political Science Association, Atlanta, March 24, 2016

Abstract

Within a decade of the fall of communism, euphoric visions of markets and democracy flourishing with "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1989) as well as cautionary tales of problematic communist legacies (Jowitt 1992; Howard 2003) had given way to the realization that variations across the post-communist universe would be significant, enduring, and deserving of explanation. For certain countries, "exceptional" attributes are cited as the basis for supposedly distinctive outcomes, be Czech exceptionalism (in relation to social policy and party system stability), Slovenian exceptionalism (in relation to corporatism and low polarization), Romanian exceptionalism (in relation to labor militancy), and Polish exceptionalism (in relation to the proclaimed success of shock therapy and the salience of cultural agendas). We also find distinctive pathways associated with different clusters of countries, distinguished by policies and institutions as well as progress along dimensions of political and economic liberalization. Typically, the variation is linked to a geographic pattern of from Central Europe and Central Asia, a pattern that calls into the analytic significance of "post-communism" as a category. This paper does not reject these arguments so much as ask whether they fully capture the resilience of the clusters as we go back in time, at least in terms of the relative position of post-communist countries in overall human development. The Human Development Index (HDI), adopted by the UNDP in 1990 but extended backwards another 15 years, generates composite scores reflecting per capita income (per capita GDP), education (years of schooling), and health (life expectancy, infant mortality). Zooming back in time reveals that the relative standing of various clusters of post-communist countries has not changed significantly since either the start of transition or even the final decade of communism. To the extent some countries have made more progress than others over the past decade, it is those at the lower end of the HDI rankings -- countries that also score poorly on indices of democracy or on commitment to market reforms. If anything, the trajectories of progress follow the pattern seen across non-communist countries at different levels of human development. This begs the question of whether there may be long-acting geographic, geopolitical, demographic, and global-economic forces that combine to reproduce developmental hierarchies that can be only marginally altered through particular regime-types, institutional designs, economic policies, or regional (EU) influences.

Within a decade of the fall of communism, euphoric visions of markets and democracy flourishing with "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1989) as well as cautionary tales of problematic communist legacies (Jowitt 1992; Howard 2003) had given way to the realization that variations across the post-communist universe would be significant, enduring, and worthy of explanation. Indeed, post-communist space came to be viewed as a laboratory for analyzing puzzles having to do with distinctive pathways and outcomes across countries that had a shared communist legacy (Ekiert and Hanson 2003). For certain countries, "exceptional" attributes have been cited as the basis for supposedly distinctive outcomes, be Czech exceptionalism (in relation to social policy and party system stability), Slovenian exceptionalism (in relation to corporatism and social peace), Romanian exceptionalism (in relation to labor militancy), and Polish exceptionalism (in relation to the proclaimed success of shock therapy and the salience of cultural agendas). More common is to identify different clusters of countries, distinguished by policies, institutions, and progress in political and economic liberalization. From democratization, civic participation and state-building to economic growth and social policy, it became increasingly common to differentiate groups of countries by different trajectories associated with discrete regions (e.g. Cook 2008; Ekiert 2012; Howard 2003; Grzymala-Busse and Luong 2002; Katchanovski 2001; Kopstein and Reilly 2000; Orenstein 2008). For some, the variation has become so wide that it matches the extent of diversity worldwide, effectively obviating the category of "post-communism" (e.g. King 2000; Rupnik 1999). For others, the challenge is to trace the different outcomes back to variations in aspects of communist-era legacies and modes of transition (Beissinger and Kotkin 2014; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Grzymala-Busse 2014; Pop-Eleches 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2012; Sil 2006; Stark and Bruszt 1998) – sometimes stretching back to the period immediately preceding communism (Inglot 2008; Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski and Tóka 1999; Wittenberg 2006) or even to political and socioeconomic structures in 19th century Europe (Ekiert and Ziblatt 2013; Janos 2000).[1]

With certain exceptions (e.g. Belarus), the spatial dimension of these groupings is unmistakable. At one end, are most Central and East European (CEE) as well as Baltic countries that were not only among the first post-communist countries to join the European Union, but are

[1] For an excellent and comprehensive overview of arguments invoking different types of legacies, see Kotkin and Beissinger (2014) as well as other contributions to Beissinger and Kotkin (2014).

also converging with advanced industrial countries in Western Europe in terms of democratic practice, market institutions, and living standards. At the opposite end, we frequently find grouped together Central Asian nations that are seen as more authoritarian in character and more comparable to the developing world in terms of the level of economic development, the pervasiveness of corruption, and the extent of state intervention in the market. For those inclined to differentiate further, it is possible to identify an intermediate category that includes the non-Baltic countries of the Former Soviet Union and Southeast European countries such as Albania and Serbia, which exhibit elements of hybridity in the functioning of their political and/or economic institutions. This geographic pattern of covariation has understandably given rise to spatial diffusion models focusing on the transnational influences of neighboring countries (Kopstein and Reilly 2000), as well as to arguments about the relationship between the extent of democratization, the exposure to European or international organizations, and the effective functioning of markets and welfare institutions (Cook 2008; Orenstein 2008). It is also possible to identify discrete clusters of social and economic policies *within* these groupings as, for example, in the distinction between embedded liberalism of the Visegrad countries and the neoliberalism of the Baltic countries (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). In addition, the "exceptional" attributes of particular countries have been frequently invoked to explain distinctive outcomes – for example, Czech exceptionalism in employment policy and party competition dynamics (Saxonberg 2007; Vanhuysse 2006), Slovenian exceptionalism in the establishment of corporatist social democracy (Guardiancich 2012), and Romanian exceptionalism in relation to labor militancy (Vasi 2004; Gledhill 2005).

This paper has no quarrel with studies that emphasize the particular experiences of individual countries or the geographically spaced clusters of policies and institutions that have emerged across post-communist space. It does, however, seek to differentiate post-communist countries in more holistic terms – using the broad concept of "human development"– and to explore how their relative positions have (or have not) changed over different time frames dating back to the period immediately preceding the end of communism. While the general concept of human development stems from Amartya Sen's work on human capabilities, it is Mahbub ul Haq who is credited with establishing a standard formula for devising composite scores that could help to track developmental progress across time and space in terms of not only per capita wealth

but also education (average years of schooling) and health (life expectancy). The approach has its critics, including those who do not see the complexities of human well-being and life satisfaction captured by a numeric indicator. Moreover, the formulas to calculate the HDI scores have also been repeatedly updated, initially to take advantage of the World Bank's PPP (purchasing power parity) measure of per capita GDP and then to include measures for gender empowerment and socioeconomic inequality. Even so, for any given year, the UNDP's annual Human Development Reports (HDR) are regarded as the best available approximation of where countries stand relative to each other in that year. The scores and rankings are not intended to capture absolute levels of human development but to track how far countries have moved beyond the "lowest levels of achievement" on record and how close they are to "the present highest level of achievement on each of the three indicators" (UNDP 1992, 19). Thus, successive annual reports recalibrate scores in past years and facilitate comparisons among countries in terms of progress in overall human development as well as in the discrete components of the HDI (average wealth, education and health).

For post-communist countries, with scholars' and policymakers' attention squarely focused on indices of political and economic liberalization (such as the Freedom House scores for democracy and economic freedom), HDI has not been invoked very frequently to assess and differentiate transitions. It is true that HDI scores and rankings of most postcommunist countries at present follow the spatial distribution of outcomes in relation to democratization, economic liberalization and social policy. However, it is worth tracing the *long-term* progression of HDI scores and rankings of postcommunist countries – relative to each other and to other groupings of countries – back to the period of late communism (1970s-80s) when there was far less variation in political and economic institutions. The point of this exercise is not to suggest an immutable developmental hierarchy that locks in the fate of countries that have long been ranked towards the lower end of the HDI scale. Rather, it is to illuminate the possibility that broader global and historical forces may overwhelm the effects of variables that students of postcommunism most commonly focus on: progress in economic liberalization, the extent of democratization and civil society, and effects of EU membership. These latter mechanisms certainly generate variation on one dimension or another, but it is an open question as to how much they alter long-acting geographic, demobraphic, geopolitical, and global-economic forces

that may be sustaining a stable distribution of social development levels dating back to the Cold War era.

The first section below reviews the current positions of post-communist countries on the HDI scale. The second considers shifts in HDI scores over the course of post-communist transition. The third examines historical patterns prior to the fall of communism. The conclusion muses about what the data might suggest about the significance of policy and institutional choices in view of the resilience of the spatial distribution of human development levels across the communist and post-communist universe.

Variation in Current Human Development Levels

A snapshot of the latest rankings of post-communist countries points to substantial variation that by and large coincides with the more commonly noted variations in political and economic dimensions. Nine CEE countries, including the Visegrad countries and the Baltics, rank among the top 50 countries worldwide and are coded as belonging to the top category of "very high" human development. This is the same category in which we also find most OECD countries. In the next category of "high" human development, we find other countries of the FSU– including Russia, Ukraine and the countries of the Causasus – as well as several Southeast European countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. These occupy rankings between 50 and 100, where we also find countries like Brazil, China and Turkey. Further below, we find several Central Asian countries that fail to make it into the top 100 and are coded as "medium" human development. This is the same category in which we find countries like India and South Africa. No post-communist countries find themselves among the lowest-ranked 43 countries that comprise the category of "low" human development, which is populated mostly by countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Even so, as Table 1 illustrates, among the 28 post-communist countries listed, the spread we see is considerable, stretching from Slovenia, ranked 25th, to Tajikistan, ranked 133rd. Within the non-Baltic countries descended from the Soviet Union, there is a narrower but still significant gap between, say, Belarus and Russia, on the one hand, and Moldova and Kyrgyzstan, on the other.

Table 1

Post-Communist countries' ranked HDI scores (with overall ranking), 2013*

Very High HDI (1-49)	*High HDI (50-102)*	*Medium HDI (102-144)*
1. Slovenia: .874 (25)	10. Montenegro: .789 (51)	24. Turkmenistan: .698 (103)
2. Czech Rep.: .861 (28)	11. Belarus: .786 (53)	25. Moldova: .663 (114)
3. Estonia: .841 (33)	12. Romania: .785 (54)	26. Uzbekistan: .661 (116)
4. Lithuania: .834 (35-T)	13. Russian Fed.: .778(57)	27. Kyrgyzstan: .628 (125)
5. Poland: .834 (35-T)	14. Bulgaria: .777 (58)	28. Tajikistan: .607 (133)
6. Slovakia: .830 (37)	15. Kazakhstan: .757 (70)	
7. Hungary: .818 (43)	16. Azerbaijan: .747 (76)	
8. Croatia: .812 (47)	17. Serbia: .745 (77)	
9. Latvia: .810 (48)	18. Georgia: .744 (79)	
	19. Ukraine: .734 (83)	
	20. Macedonia: .732 (84)	
	21. Bosnia-Herz.: .731 (86)	
	22. Armenia: .730 (87)	
	23. Albania : .716 (95)	

** HDR 2014*

The geographic spread of these ranked countries for the most part corresponds with the table in Kopstein and Reilly (2000, 9) on distances of the various countries from the borders of non-communist Western Europe. Six of the first nine -- that, is all of the post-communist countries with "very high" HDI scores save the three Baltic countries – are between 35 and 500 miles from the West. All nine are less than 1000 miles away. Among the countries that fall in the "high" HDI category, if we take out Serbia and Montenegro (which are not listed by Kopstein and Reilly), eight of the twelve remaining countries are between 500 and 1500 miles away (Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are further away, Bosnia and Macedonia are a bit closer). And, in the remaining group of "medium" HDI countries, save Moldova, all are Central Asian countries are further away from Europe, anywhere from 1500 to 4000 miles. Along these lines, all nine of the "very high" HDI category are now members of the European Union, with eight having acceded in 2004 (Croatia joined in 2013). In the "high" HDI category, of the ten that count as clearly European, only Bulgaria and Romania have been admitted to the EU. The distribution also matches what we find in most studies of democratization, though the correlation is more robust among the "very high" HDI countries. All of the nine countries in that category score the top rating of "1" in the 2013 Freedom House rankings. At the other end, Moldova

scores a 3, Kyrgyzstan a 5, and Tajikistan a 6, with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan hitting the low point of 7. In between, the spread is wider, with Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria reaching as high as 2, Belarus bringing up the rear, and the other ten countries falling somewhere in between. The Economic Freedom Index follows a similar pattern, with clearer correlations within the top (very high HDI, more economic freedom) and bottom groups (medium HDI, less economic freedom), and a more mixed result in between (high HDI, wide range of economic freedom).

It is thus not surprising that explanations of variations in outcomes in one dimension frequently point to variations evident in other dimensions. The extent of democratization has been cited as a reason for the responsiveness of welfare programs (Cook 2008; Orenstein 2008), while the pursuit of EU accession and the influence of geographically proximate EU members have been seen as a reason for the more rapid consolidation of democracy (Ekiert, Kubik and Vachudova 2007; Kopstein and Reilly 2000). In the same vein, it might be tempting to conclude that, if higher HDI provides the most clear picture of human capabilities and well-being, then promoting more vibrant democracy, economic freedom, and wherever possible, closer ties to Europe, would hold the key to this outcomes. Such an inference is only warranted, however, if it can be shown that the present variation in the HDI scores of post-communist countries is actually the result of policies, strategies, and institutions adopted in the course of transition rather than some prior conditions. At the very least, one should be able to observe that changes in regime type or economic policy coincide (with a time lag) with shifts in a country's position on the HDI scale. The next section considers changes in HDI scores and rankings over the period of post-communist transition.

Human Development Through Post-Communist Transitions

Looking back over the past five years, the variations that we see in the improvement in HDI scores do not seem to point to any sort of systematic association with the extent of democratization, economic freedom, or even annual GDP growth rates. Between 2008 and 2013, with the singular exception of Latvia, which saw a slight dip, all post-communist countries have seen improvement in their HDI scores. If anything, over the five year period, the average

increase in HDI of postcommunist countries with lower ranks – which are also the countries that have made the least progress on political and economic liberalization – has been higher than the average increase in HDI for those at higher ranks, including democratic CEE countries that are EU members. As Table 2 shows, the nine post-communist countries in the "very high" HDI category saw an average gain of .006, while the fourteen "high" HDI countries saw gain of .010 and the four lowest-ranked countries have seen a gain of .014.

Table 2
HDI Improvement Across Post-Communist Countries, 2008-2013*

Very High HDI		High HDI		Medium HDI	
1. Slovenia	+ .003	10. Montenegro	+ .009	24. Turkmenistan	---
2. Czech Rep.	+ .005	11. Belarus	+ .022	25. Moldova	+ .011
3. Estonia	+ .008	12. Romania	+ .004	26. Uzbekistan	+ .018
4. Lithuania	+ .007	13. Russian Fed.	+ .008	27. Kyrgyzstan	+ .011
5. Poland	+ .017	14. Bulgaria	+ .011	28. Tajikistan	+ .016
6. Slovakia	+ .006	15. Kazakhstan	+ .013		
7. Hungary	+ .004	16. Azerbaijan	+ .023		
8. Croatia	+ .011	17. Serbia	+ .002		
9. Latvia	(- .003)	18. Georgia	+ .014		
		19. Ukraine	+ .005		
		20. Macedonia	+ .008		
		21. Bosnia-Herz.	+ .004		
		22. Armenia	+ .008		
		23. Albania	+ .013		
Avg. for above:	***+ .006***	***Avg. for above:***	***+ .010***	***Avg. for above:***	***+ .014***
Avg for category:	***+ .011***	***Avg. for category:***	***+ .025***	***Avg. for category:***	***+ .027***

** HDR 2014*

The higher rate of improvement at the bottom is neither a surprise, nor indicative of the success of some sort of authoritarian state-directed development model. The five-year trends among different clusters of post-communist countries matches the pattern of progress we see across the overall distribution of HDI rankings. This pattern reflects the basic developmental fact that it tends to be more difficult to record significant gains among higher-ranked countries that are already close to the level of highest possible achievement in human development, with GDP growth rates generally slowing down and gains in education and health becoming progressively more marginal (Korotayev and De Munck 2014). By contrast, lower-ranked countries have more room to move forward, even if there are some countries in the lowest classifications of human development that creep forward slowly, or even move backwards (e.g. Guinea-Bissau and

Central African Republic). Thus, in the overall category averages given in Table 2, the average gain of 0.027 in 2008-2013 among the 42 countries at "medium" HDI is more than double the average gain 0.011 among the 49 countries that comprise the "very high" HDI category in the same period.

What is surprising is that, more than two decades since the transition from communist rule, the 28 countries listed below collectively show gains in HDI scores that are quite modest relative to the average for the categories they are in. In fact, only two out of the 28, Poland and Croatia, are able to match or exceed their respective category average. All others have fallen well below this average, including CEE countries that have been admitted to the EU as well as the five countries of the FSU that have the lowest HDI scores among post-communist countries. There is also no clear correlation with shifts in regime type, at least insofar as democracies might be thought by some to be more responsive to citizens pushing for higher gains in welfare (Cook 2008). In fact, among the 19 post-communist countries in the "high" and "medium" HDI groups, the highest gains were posted by four countries (Belarus, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) that are frequently considered among the most authoritarian in the postcommunist world (with ratings of 6-7 on the Freedom House scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being least democratic). And even these four countries come in under the overall average in HDI gains for their respective groups.

Of course, the period between 2008 and 2013 included the years of a massive global financial crisis. Thus, before rushing to any conclusions about the success/failure of various post-communist countries (relative to each other and to their respective categories), it may be helpful to take a longer view that captures shifts over the entire period of the transition. Table 3 thus includes data for 1990 and 2000, with changes in HDI scores in the 1990-2000, 2000-2013, and 1990-2013 periods. While the rankings are based on the relative HDI scores first reported for a given year, the scores listed here are based on recalibrations done on the basis of current data on highest achieved levels in each of the components of the HDI (and are thus lower than those given in past HDRs). This enables us to consider where various post-communist countries stand relative to each other and to their respective category means in terms of their progress in human development.

Table 3
HDI Change in Post-Communist Transitions, 1990-2013

	------- *HDI Scores (Rank)** --------			--------- *Total HDI (Rank) Change* ----------		
Country	**2013**	**2000**	**1990**	**1990-2013**	**1990-2000**	**2000-2013**
1. Slovenia	.874 *(25)*	.821 *(29)*	.769 *(--)*	.105 *(--)*	.052 *(--)*	.053 *(+4)*
2. Czech Rep.	.861 *(28)*	.806 *(33)*	.762 *(26)***	.099 *(-2)*	.042 *(-7)*	.055 *(+5)*
3. Estonia	.840 *(33)*	.776 *(42)*	.730 *(34)*	.110 *(+1)*	.046 *(+1)*	.064 *(+9)*
4. Lithuania	.834 *(35)*	.757 *(49)*	.737 *(29)*	.097 *(-6)*	.020 *(-20)*	.077 *(+14)*
5. Poland	.834 *(35)*	.784 *(37)*	.714 *(48)*	.120 *(+13)*	.070 *(+11)*	.050 *(+2)*
6. Slovakia	.830 *(37)*	.776 *(36)*	.747 *(26)***	.083 *(-11)*	.029 *(-10)*	.054 *(-1)*
7. Hungary	.818 *(43)*	.774 *(35)*	.701 *(28)*	.117 *(-15)*	.073 *(-7)*	.044 *(-8)*
8. Croatia	.812 *(47)*	.748 *(48)*	.689 *(--)*	.123 *(--)*	.059 *(--)*	.064 *(+1)*
9. Latvia	.810 *(48)*	.729 *(53)*	.710 *(35)*	.100 *(-13)*	.019 *(-18)*	.081 *(+5)*
10. Montenegro	.789 *(51)*					
11. Belarus	.786 *(53)*	--- *(56)*	--- *(38)*	--- *(-15)*	--- *(-18)*	--- *(+3)*
12. Romania	.785 *(54)*	.706 *(63)*	.703 *(77)**	.082 *(+23)*	.003 *(+14)*	.079 *(+9)*
13. Russian Fed.	.778 *(57)*	.717 *(60)*	.729 *(37)*	.049 *(-20)*	-.012 *(-23)*	.061 *(+3)*
14. Bulgaria	.777 *(58)*	.714 *(62)*	.696 *(40)**	.081 *(-18)*	.018 *(-22)*	.063 *(+4)*
15. Kazakhstan	.757 *(70)*	.679 *(79)*	.686 *(54)*	.071 *(-16)*	-.007 *(-25)*	.078 *(+9)*
16. Azerbaijan	.747 *(76)*	.639 *(88)*	--- *(62)*	--- *(-14)*	--- *(-26)*	.108 *(+12)*
17. Serbia	.745 *(77)*	.713 *(--)*	.726 *(--)*	.019 *(--)*	-.013 *(--)*	.032 *(--)*
18. Georgia	.744 *(79)*	--- *(81)*	--- *(49)*	--- *(-30)*	--- *(-32)*	--- *(+2)*
19. Ukraine	.734 *(83)*	.668 *(80)*	.705 *(45)*	.029 *(-38)*	-.037 *(-35)*	.066 *(-3)*
20. Macedonia	.732 *(84)*	--- *(65)*	--- *(--)*	--- *(--)*	--- *(--)*	--- *(-19)*
21. Bosnia-Herz.	.731 *(86)*					
22. Armenia	.730 *(87)*	.648 *(76)*	.632 *(47)*	.098 *(-40)*	.016 *(-29)*	.082 *(-11)*
23. Albania	.716 *(95)*	.655 *(92)*	.609 *(78)*	.107 *(-17)*	.046 *(-14)*	.061 *(-3)*
24. Turkmenistan	.698 *(103)*	--- *(87)*	--- *(66)*	--- *(-37)*	--- *(-21)*	--- *(-16)*
25. Moldova	.663 *(114)*	.598 *(105)*	.645 *(64)*	.018 *(-50)*	-.047 *(-41)*	.065 *(-9)*
26. Uzbekistan	.661 *(116)*	--- *(95)*	--- *(80)*	--- *(-36)*	--- *(-15)*	--- *(-21)*
27. Kyrgyzstan	.628 *(125)*	.586 *(102)*	.607 *(83)**	.021 *(-42)*	-.021 *(-19)*	.042 *(-23)*
28. Tajikistan	.607 *(133)*	.529 *(112)*	.610 *(88)**	-.003 *(-45)*	-.081 *(-24)*	.078 *(-21)*
>> AVERAGES FOR:						
VERY HIGH HDI	.890	.849	.798	.092	.051	.041
HIGH HDI	.735	.643	.593	.142	.050	.092
MEDIUM HDI	.614	.528	.474	.140	.054	.086
LOW HDI	.493	.403	.367	.126	.036	.090
WORLD	.702	.639	.597	.105	.042	.073

** Scores are from HDR 2014, which also lists recalibrated scores for 1990 and 2000 based on the most recent formula. However, the rankings for 1990 and 2000 are as reported when scores for those years were first posted in the 1993 and 2002 HDRs. Those scores have been revised downward, more steeply for some. This is why Kyrgyzstan has a higher ranking than Tajikistan in 1990 though its recalibrated score for that year is lower. The same is true of Romania and Bulgaria. Even so, the original rankings are used for 1990 and 2000 since those tables included all countries scored in those years, while the later tables did not.*

*** Ranking for 1990 is for Czechoslovakia. Hence, the rank for Slovakia was initially tied to that for the Czech Republic, despite the difference in 1990 scores later calculated by the current formula.*

As with the first two tables, Table 3 also points to a number of observations that follow the spatial distribution of the different kinds of variations analyzed in recent studies of post-communist transition. The top five post-communist countries on the HDI index are all CEE countries that are coded as democracies, score high on economic freedom, and are members of the European Union. The bottom five are all countries descended from the Former Soviet Union, including four of the Central Asian "stans" (Kazakhstan being the outlier). Most of these countries are coded as authoritarian and are seen as lagging in economic liberalization. The gap in HDI between the averages of these highest five and lowest five countries has increased between 1990 and 2013. At the extremes, we find that the gap between Tajikistan and Slovenia has gone from 0.159 in 1990 to 0.267 in 2013. In fact, Tajikistan, which had a civil war to contend with during the 1990s, currently has an HDI score that is below what it was in 1990.[2] At first glance, these differences might seem to support the standard accounts of the positive, mutually reinforcing, benefits of democratic consolidation, deeper economic reform, and EU membership. Three points, however, are worth considering before inferring too much from this correlation.

First, the story becomes quite mixed once we look at the other 18 countries in the sample and at the variation within each group of countries (moving from "very high" to "high" to "medium" levels of HDI). Among many countries in the sample, there appears to be a greater likelihood of a slight convergence or a stable difference than of the kind of divergence evident in the extreme cases of Slovenia and Tajikistan. Between Latvia, the lowest ranked country in the "very high" HDI (currently ranked 48th overall), and Albania, the lowest ranked country in the "high" HDI category (currently ranked 95th overall), we see roughly the same gains between 1990 and 2013. Near opposite ends within the "high" HDI category – the intermediate category for the post-communist universe – the gap in scores has shrunk. Consider, for example, Albania and Romania: even though Romania has climbed 23 spots in the rankings while Albania has fallen 17 spots, the 2013 scores are closer by 0.025 than were the 1990 scores. Within the FSU, leaving aside the Baltics and the "stans," the gap in scores between the higher-ranked Russia and lower-ranked Armenia has diminished even though, as with Albania and Romania, the gap in

[2] This does not necessarily mean that human development has declined in absolute terms, but it does suggest that Tajikistan is further behind the highest achievable level than it was in 1990.

rankings has increased. Going back to the "very high" HDI group, we see that the maximum gap among the Visegrad countries – that between the Czech Republic and Hungary – has shrunk slightly, while Poland has leap-frogged Slovakia, increasing its HDI score by .037 more than the latter did. Thus, even if the overall current distribution of HDI scores might geographically map on to the position of countries on indices for democracy and economic freedom, once we look more closely at various permutation of countries within and across regions, regime-types, and HDI categories, the putative association becomes insignificant or even negative. In fact, for any pairs taken from any classificatory scheme - be it based on levels of democracy, progress of market reforms, or regional groupings -- there are cases of both convergence or divergence in the rankings and score differentials.

Second, the correlates of higher/lower gains in HDI during post-communist transition become even more difficult to establish when we take into account the differences between the first and second decades of transition. In fact, whatever gap exists between the median HDI gains of CEE and FSU countries between 1990 and 2013 is mostly driven by what happened during the first decade of transition, a decade during when many FSU countries currently considered "hybrid" or "authoritarian" were seen as moving forward on democratization and economic liberalization. Between 2000 and 2013, the story of HDI gains is quite a different one: the gap between the CEE and FSU countries' gains in HDI scores during this period virtually disappears, with most countries in both regions and in different HDI categories showing comparable rates of progress. In fact, the Visegrad four show gains of 0.44 (Hungary) to 0.55 (Czech Republic), which is surpassed by the gains seen among the non-Baltic FSU countries range from 0.61 (Russia) to 0.108 (Azerbaijan). The gains in the FSU are particularly noteworthy, as they are not limited to countries with oil and gas exports (with Ukraine and Armenia keeping pace with Russia and Kazakhstan). Of course, this is not to praise the turnaround seen in the FSU countries, as they do not fare as well in relation to the average gains posted by countries in the "high" HDI category, whereas the CEE countries in the "very high" HDI category do better than their category average. Nonetheless, the point remains that the story of divergence in HDI scores between 1990 and 2013 is really a story about what transpired during the 1990s, with FSU countries taking a much bigger hit.

The first decade of transition was certainly a difficult one for post-communist countries, most of which either saw a decline or a minimal gain in HDI scores (with only Poland, Estonia, and Romania able to improve their rankings). But, what most stands out about the 1990s is the much sharper fall of the non-Baltic FSU countries, both in terms of the slide in rankings and in the fact that all of these countries save Armenia saw their HDI composite scores actually decline. Russia and Kazakhstan droped 23 and 25 spots, respectively, while Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova dropped 32, 35 and 41 spots respectively. Except for Serbia, all of the countries to see a decline in their HDI scores during the 1990s were former countries of the FSU (we do not have 1990 scores for Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Georgia or Azerbaijan, though it is likely that all but Turkmenistan probably saw at least a small decline). Also telling is that, while most CEE countries kept up with their category averages and exceeded the world averages, most of the FSU countries lost ground against their respective category averages as well as the world average (see also Stuart and Panayotopoulous 1999).

Given that the 1990s were a period when much of the FSU, including Russia, was seen as moving forward on democratization and market reforms, the sharper drop in the relative position of FSU countries cannot be attributed to regime type or extent of liberalization, especially considering that the post-2000 story is one of improved performance in HDI coinciding with some backsliding in democratization and market reforms in many FSU countries. Far more compelling is an argument advanced in the 1990s emphasizing how the transition to a market economy took more of a toll in the FSU given that the Soviet command economy, much more so than countries that would later become part of the Soviet bloc, was organized around a particular system of specialization and interdependence in which exchange relations between buyers and suppliers would get completely upended by market reforms (Blanchard and Kramer 1997, cf. Katchanovski 2000, 60). In contrast, CEE already had a pre-communist economic base that was already productive and did not get fully or uniformly reshaped by the Soviet system of industrialization and central planning, with Poland bypassing collectivization, Czechoslovakia already with an advanced level of industrialization, and Hungary experimenting with price mechanisms during late communism. Moreover, as Kornai (2008, 29) has noted, between the late 19th century and the Second World War, the Visegrad countries were already in the process of converging with the most developed parts of Central Europe (i.e. Austria) prior to being

reorganized as planned economies. Thus, while Eastern Europe may have historically lagged behind Western Europe (Janos 2000), the gap was not nearly as significant as that between Western Europe and those regions that came to constitute the USSR and went through the experience of Stalinist industrialization and collectivization. It is thus entirely plausible that the 1990s transition impacted the latter regions more severely, accounting for the steeper drop in HDI positions, regardless of regime type or choice of transition strategy.[3]

This possibility is further supported by the third observation about Table 3, that those post-communist countries currently coded as being in the "very high" HDI category were already positioned well ahead of other communist countries in lower categories *before* their respective transitions. Some, such as Hungary, Latvia, and Slovakia, even enjoyed higher rankings in 1990 than at present. While some of the post-1990 fall in rankings may be attributed to the inclusion of more countries since 1990, this did not prevent other CEE countries (like Poland, Estonia and Romania) from improving their rankings or staying roughly in the same position. In any case, those post-communist countries currently in the "very high" HDI category, which includes the top 49 countries, were already in the top forty nine already in 1990. Even within this category, the top two post-communist countries at present (Slovenia and the Czech Republic) were also the top two back in 1990, whereas the bottom three of the group at present (Hungary, Croatia and Latvia) had the lowest scores of this group in 1990. Similarly, among the non-Baltic FSU, while we see that all of the countries have seen a decline in their rankings, it is interesting that the bottom three "stans" today were also at the bottom in 1990 (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Among the non-Baltic FSU, the highest-ranked today are Russia and Belarus, which also enjoyed the highest ranking of the group in 1990. In between are Kazakhstan, Ukraine and the Caucasus countries. Their positions have shifted since 1990, with Kazakhstan overtaking Ukraine and Georgia, but as a cluster, they remain today where they were in 1990, behind Russia and Belarus, but well ahead of the three "stans" bringing up the rear of the post-communist group. It is thus necessary to more closely examine trends going further back into the

[3] This argument about the special challenges faced by most FSU countries becomes more compelling when we consider that the worst performers in the "very high" HDI group during the 1990s are Baltic countries that were part of the USSR, and that the best performers in the "high" HDI group are countries that were not. Further, among the countries of the FSU, the Baltics, which saw a less steep slide in their relative positions in the 1990s, became republics of the USSR in 1940 rather than in 1921 at the end of the Russian Civil War.

period of late communism, with separate consideration given to progress in components of human development other than per capita income (i.e. education and health indicators).

Late Communism and Human Development

Janos Kornai (2008) and a host of other scholars have bemoaned the effects of communism on economic growth in CEE countries. In particular, Kornai (2008, 29) notes that prior to World War II, many CEE countries were on the path to convergence with West European countries in per capita income. Czechoslovakia, in particular, is seen as almost having caught up with Austria, the wealthiest country to have emerged out of the Hapsburg Empire, on the eve of the Second World War, with the gap increasing again under communism to the point it was in the late 19th century. Neither the convergence prior to communism nor the subsequent divergence under communism is as sharp in the case of Poland or even Hungary (which along with Austria and Czechoslovakia, was also part of the Hapsburg Empire). Even so, both trends are unmistakable and point to the counterfactual that, absent communism, growth rates in at least some CEE countries would have been higher, and convergence with West European countries would have been achieved sooner (see Table 4).

Table 4*

GDP Per Capita for Visegrad Countries in Relation to Austria
(Austria's GDP per capita = 100)

Year	*1870*	*1913*	*1937*	*1950*	*1980*	*1989*
Czechoslovakia	62	60	91	94	58	54
Hungary	59	61	81	67	46	42
Poland	51	50	61	66	42	35

** Adapted from Kornai (2008, 29), Table 1.5.*

Kornai's sweeping economic history is certainly revealing for some purposes, notably for tracing the story of variation in economic development over time across different parts of Europe. It is less helpful, however, if we (i) shift our attention to the extent and sources of

variation across communist or post-communist space (as opposed to within Europe), and (ii) shift the main metric for tracing convergence/divergence from per capita income to levels of overall human development under communism. This section considers whether these two shifts might generate a somewhat different narrative about the pathways of human development under communism at least on the eve of transition.

Around the time of the exit from communism, in 1990, not a single post-communist country (or would-be post-communist country in the case of the FSU) ranked among the top-forty worldwide in per capita wealth (HDR 1993). This is consistent with the position of most East European countries in relation to Western Europe as presented in Kornai's economic history. Focusing on this point, however, keeps us from noticing the sharp variation across communist space in levels of per capita income, whether using converted US dollars or the PPP (purchasing power parity) measure. In 1990, the best positioned in rankings of per capita GNP (as provided in HDR 1993) were Estonia (42nd), Latvia (43rd), Russia (47th), and Czechoslovakia (49th). Bringing up the rear were Azerbaijan (82nd), Kyrgyzstan (85th), Uzbekistan (92nd), and Tajikistan (94th). Of course, the fact that some 28 would-be post-communist countries were all clustered within a span of 52 spots (from 42nd to 94th) might be interpreted as evidence of a relative narrow spread of per capita GDP, at least considering the 170 odd countries ranked. As Table 5 indicates, however, there was a substantial and growing gap in the actual per capita GDP, even as calculated in PPP terms (which generally tends to narrow the differentials across countries). Table 5 does not include figures for every post-communist country, but offers a sample of CEE and FSU countries that cover the variation between the high, low and median figures in each of the two groups. For the sake of simplicity, the table leaves out the Baltic countries, which were annexed by the USSR in 1940, after the first two Five-Year plans had been completed (they were thus closer to the Visegrad countries in the length of their exposure to communist central planning and in having seen early industrialization take off prior to this exposure).

Table 5*

Per Capita GDP (PPP) of Select Countries in 1990

CEE		***FSU***	
Czech Rep.	12,731	Russia	8,014
Hungary	8,256	Ukraine	6,798
Poland	6,002	Belarus	5,230
Bulgaria	5,410	Azerbaijan	5,508
Romania	5,193	Armenia	2,417
Albania	2,844	Uzbekistan	1,969

** World Bank Data (http://data.worldbank.org), accessed June 30, 2015.*

At first glance, Table 5 appears to support Kornai's (2008) view of that communist development lagged behind development in the west, since FSU countries that spent substantially longer period under communist rule seem to be worse off on average than CEE countries. The spread also matches Kopstein and Reilly's (2000) argument on variations matched with geographic distance from non-communist Europe. However, the story becomes more ambiguous once we take out the high-end outlier in the CEE group (Czech Republic) and the low-end outlier in the FSU group (Uzbekistan), leaving us with comparable spreads between Albania and Hungary on one side, and between Armenia and Russia on the other side. Moreover, there is no simple formula for measuring the negative impact of communism once we consider the variations in per capita wealth *within* the two categories. In the CEE group, the Czech Republic's per capita wealth was more than 1.5 times that of Hungary (even though both had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire) and more than double that of Poland's and Bulgaria's, while Poland was more than double that of Albania's. Within the FSU group, leaving aside the Baltics, Russia's per capita income was 1.5 times that of Belarus, and more than four times that of Uzbekistan, while the per capita income of Azerbaijan was more than double that of Armenia. We also see a substantial overlap where the wealthiest countries to emerge out of the FSU were well ahead of the bottom half of the CEE countries in per capita income. Russia and Kazakhstan (not included on Table 5) trail the Czech Republic but are comparable to Hungary and ahead of Poland, whereas Belarus, Azerbaijan, and several other FSU countries not included on the table would match the per capita incomes of Southeast European countries of Bulgaria and Romania.

What this tells us is that there were vast inter-country differences among the countries of the Soviet bloc, whether they were part of the Russian empire or the Austro-Hungarian empire, and whether they experienced seven decades of communist rule (including Stalinist collectivization and industrialization) or four decades of communist rule (mostly coinciding with post-Stalin USSR). This does not contradict Kornai's position that communist rule may have slowed down economic growth in areas that had already begun to industrialize. Nor does it dismiss the possibility that key aspects of post-communist rule affected the subsequent changes in levels and rankings of per capita wealth (since some CEE countries and some FSU countries have made more gains than others). It does, however, raise questions about whether the impact of communist rule, however postive or negative, can be seen as having created a uniform baseline against which to measure variation in the growth of per capita income among post-communist countries.

When we turn to overall human development, this spread closely follows the HDI rankings for 1990, with the Baltics and Czechoslovakia in the lead, and the three aforementioned "stans" towards the bottom. But, what is noteworthy is that, except for Moldova, every communist or post-communist country managed a HDI rank that is higher, in some cases *far* higher, than its GNP per capita rank (see Table 6). This suggests that, prior to transition, some countries had already benefited tremendously from improvements in health and education, even in the absence of comparable improvements in their relative positions with respect to per capita income. At one level, this pattern makes sense given that communist central planning, particularly in the post-Stalin era, focused less on boosting wealth and consumption and more on extensive public infrastructure and social welfare guarantees. But, the result cannot be attributed solely to communist policies, since we see on Table 6 that many countries of the FSU, which spent a longer period of time under communist rule, do not do nearly as well as the CEE countries in moving up on the strength of the non-income portions of the HDI.

Table 6*

Differences between HDI and GNP Per Capita Rankings, 1990

Country	*HDI rank*	*GNP per capita rank*	*HDI rank higher by:*
Czechoslovakia	26	49	23
Hungary	28	52	24
Lithuania	29	51	22
Estonia	34	42	8
Latvia	35	43	8
Russian Fed.	37	47	10
Belarus	38	50	12
Bulgaria	40	67	27
Ukraine	45	58	13
Armenia	47	63	16
Poland	48	80	32
Albania	78	90	12
Georgia	49	72	23
Kazakhstan	54	55	1
Azerbaijan	62	82	20
Moldova	64	61	(- 3)
Turkmenistan	66	81	15
Romania	77	84	7
Albania	78	90	12
Uzbekistan	80	92	12
Kyrgyzstan	83	85	2
Tajikistan	88	94	6

** HDR 1993*

For the purposes of the argument (counter-argument) offered here on the origins of variation in post-communist outcomes, what is most relevant is that those transitional countries frequently considered to be the most successful by whatever metric at present were also among the countries that had the highest differentials between their higher HDI ranks and lower per capita GNP ranks. The large differentials are even more telling in the case of those countries in the top fifty or top sixty in terms of per capita income, since there is far less room to move up on HDI rankings than if the per capita GNP rank is closer to 100. Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Lithuania, in particular, stand out since they are ranked 49th, 52nd, and 51st respectively in per capita GNP and end up in the world's top-thirty in HDI. Bulgaria and Poland are ranked lower in per capita GNP, at 67th and 80th respectively, but gain 27 and 32 spots, respectively in the HDI rankings. At the lower end, the gap is narrower and less significant, as for example, in the case of

Tajikistan, which gains six spots on the HDI ranking relative to its per capita ranking of 94th. What this implies is that several CEE countries that had the highest per capita incomes in the communist bloc held an even bigger advantage in health and education prior to embarking upon transition.

While beyond the scope of this paper, this variance may point to the significance of differences in levels of *pre-communist* economic and social development which, in CEE countries, already begun to deliver an initial boost in public health and education that the communist state able to then build on over the next four decades. In any case, it seems that arguments about what drives variations in the post-communist universe cannot be advanced with confidence if they employ only per capita income as the baselines for measuring post-communist success or failure, particularly for countries that were explicitly committed to such social goods as full employment and universal education and healthcare. At a minimum, it is necessary to parse the differences that had emerged by the time of late communism, with due attention paid to the potential impact of non-income components of human development, which is precisely the point of stressing the differentials in HDI and per capita GDP rankings point to in Table 6.

Rankings for any one year, however, can be deceiving since that year may or may not be representatives of longer-term trends, and since differences in rankings may not be all that significant if they do not correspond to differentials in actual scores. Moreover, for estimations of where communist countries stood vis-à-vis each other, 1990 is not the best baseline to use since some countries had already embarked on significant reform efforts by the late 1980s, sometimes with negative short-term consequences for economic growth and human development. With this in mind Table 7 provides the available HDI scores for communist countries for 1980 (many countries do not have scores prior to this point anyway), along with scores for 1985, the year when Mikhail Gorbachev took the help in the USSR and ushered in a period of reform, and 1990, when communism had either just fallen or was on the verge of ending. The table suggests that, despite the sense of economic crisis throughout the eastern bloc, most communist countries continued to deliver gains in human development, with some overtaking the lowest-ranked West European country, Portugal.

Table 7

Human Development, 1980-1990: Select Countries*

	---------- *HDI Scores* ----------			------- *HDI Change* -------	
Country (1990 rank)	**1980**	**1985**	**1990**	**1980-85**	**1985-90**
>> CEE Countries					
Czech Rep. (26**)	--	.824	.830	--	.006
Slovakia (26**)	--	.806	.812	--	.006
Hungary (28)	.787	.799	.798	.012	*- .001*
Bulgaria (40)	.760	.781	.782	.020	.001
Poland (48)	.775	.779	.785	.004	.006
Romania (77)	.783	.789	.771	.006	*- .018*
Albania (78)	.670	.688	.697	.018	.009
>> FSU Countries					
Estonia (34)	.804	.812	.806	.008	*- .006*
Latvia (35)	.785	.797	.797	.012	*- .001*
Russian Fed. (37)	.804	.814	.812	.010	*- .002*
Ukraine (45)	--	--	.793	--	--
Moldova (64)	.717	.739	.757	.022	.018
Tajikistan (88)	--	--	.712	--	--
>> Select High HDI Countries***					
Japan (1)	.874	.888	.904	.015	.016
Italy (22)	.843	.853	.875	.010	.022
Portugal (41)	.756	.783	.813	.027	.030
>> Select Medium HDI Countries					
Brazil (70)	.674	.687	.706	.013	.019
China (101)	.548	.584	.619	.036	.034
India (134)	.431	.470	.510	.039	.039

* The scores for all countries is from HDR 2000, which provided the most number of retrospectively calculated scores for communist countries for 1980 and 1985 on the basis of the formula used for HDI scores for 1998. The rankings are for 1990, from HDR 1993, which was the first to rank FSU countries separately.

** The 1990 rank for the Czech Republic is based on the rank for Czechoslovakia in HDR 1993.

*** The category of "very high" HDI was introduced in HDR 2009. Until then, the UNDP had relied upon three broad categories: "high" (ranks 1-46), "medium" (ranks 46-139) and "low" (ranks 140-174). The countries selected for comparison to communist countries in High and Medium categories cover a spread of rankings in those categories, but with the ranks as reported for 1990 in HDR 1993.

It is true that the spread in rankings among the would-be postcommunist countries was narrower at the time that communism ended (ranks 26-88) than it is at present (ranks 25-133). It is true that more than a dozen additional countries to the HDI table between 1990 and 2013, but this does not account for the spread that we see by 1990, which is buttressed by the divergence in scores (see Table 3 for 2013 scores). For example, Tajikistan trailed the Czech Republic by .118 in 1990, but by 0.254 2013.[4] This might seem to support arguments that see divergent transitions following from post-transition variations in institutional structures, macroeconomic policies or reform strategies, since the range of outcomes has widened since late communism. However, as noted above (in the discussion of Table 3), the lower half of the post-communist sample, mostly FSU countries, tended to see a steep fall in HDI rankings during the *1990s,* when there was a more consistent push for political and economic liberalization throughout post-communist space. Thus, the more interesting point when we look at the rankings in 1990 is that both CEE and FSU countries were doing relatively well compared to their respective cohorts. That is, the rankings towards the top were close to where they are now (Czech Republic, Hungary, the Baltics), whereas the countries towards the bottom (Albania, Moldova, Tajikistan) were doing better than the larger emerging economies such as China and India, although the scores for the latter were rising more quickly (as is typical for lower-ranked countries pursuing peacetime development).

It is also worth distinguishing the early 1980s from the late 1980s, given that Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 ushered in a period of reform and restructuring that had varying effects on the trajectory of human development change. Thus, between 1985 and 1990, only Moldova managed significant gains that were comparable to gains posted by at least one key country in its category, Brazil. In many CEE countries or Soviet republics, continued economic stagnation combined with the unanticipated consequences of reform to produce a drop in HDI scores as, for example, in Hungary, Romania, Estonia, and Russia. Elsewhere, gains were extremely small at best, as in the case of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Bulgaria. Romania, Russia and Estonia. On the whole, the late 1980s saw the communist countries begin to lose their advantage against non-communist

[4] Granted Tajikistan had a civil war in the 1990s, which accounted for a steep drop, but substituting any of the five lowest ranked countries yields the same finding of a much narrower range of variation in 1990.

developing countries in the "medium" HDI category. Russia, for example, saw its lead over Brazil shrink from .127 to .106, and its lead over China shrink from .230 to .193.

Because lower-ranked developing countries have greater possibilities for posting larger gains (with more room to improve on all of the dimensions of human development), the more disturbing trend in 1985-1990 for communist elites would have been the growing gap between the leading countries of the communist world and the developed countries in the "high" HDI category. Japan, Italy, and Portugal – occupying ranks at the high, medium and low end of the "high" HDI category – all saw an increase in their advantages over Russia and the would-be Czech Republic (i.e. at the time the Czech region of Czechoslovakia). Italy, whose scores have typically tracked closely with the mean across Western Europe (the original EU-15), increased its lead over Russia from .039 to .063 and its lead over the would-be Czech Republic from .029 to .045. These trends suggest that the last four or five years of communist rule, frought with a sense of crisis that propelled all kinds of policy experiments, had already begun to set in motion a period of turmoil during which it was getting difficult for countries to maintain the progress in human development that had been seen earlier.

This becomes more evident when we go further back and consider the HDI scores assigned for 1980. Most of the CEE and several would-be FSU countries had scores well above Portugal, the lowest-ranked member of the original EU-15. Russia, the Baltics, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia were well ahead of Portugal.[5] If we were to go back further to 1975, the earliest year for which HDI scores have been assigned, the only two communist countries to be assigned scores -- Hungary and Romania – were again well ahead of Portugal and were only slightly below Greece and Spain. Among communist countries in the "medium" HDI category, most had moved towards the top half of that category by 1980. This is indicated by the advantage most post-communist countries had gained on Brazil. In the sample on Table 7, only Albania trailed Brazil in 1980, and the narrow margin would be erased by 1985.

In other words, moving away from comparisons of per capita wealth to the relative positions of communist and non-communist countries in overall human development points to a

[5] Although HDI scores for 1980 are not available for Czechoslovakia, the 1985 scores show that Czechoslovakia had a 0.041 edge over Poland and was the highest-ranked communist country.

quite different story than Kornai's account of communism's deleterious impact on Eastern Europe's position relative to Western Europe in terms of per capita income. By 1980, the majority of the countries in the Soviet bloc were in the process of converging with advanced industrial western countries at the high end of the HDI scale, while maintaining a massive advantage over most non-communist developing countries. Thus, despite the appearance of a pervasive sense of crisis throughout the communist bloc at the time Gorbachev took the helm of the Soviet Union in 1985, this crisis was not reflected in the story of human development as it had unfolded up until that point.

Conclusion

The above discussion in no way implies that communist strategies of development were inherently more effective than others. Nor does it pretend to offer a comprehensive account of the sources of variations we currently see in levels of human development across post-communist space. What it does do is raise questions about the attention social scientists – economists and political scientists in particular – have been devoting to particular factors in explaining variations in particular dimensions of post-communist transition. Their explanations of divergent trajectories highlight factors that deserve consideration – from sticky communist-era legacies (Beissinger and Kotkin 2014; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013) and varied "paths of extrication" that Stark and Bruszt (1998, 4) to the potential role of democracy and civil society that some see as generating more effective economic and social policies (Orenstein 2008, Cook 2008). Yet, the weight attached to these mechanisms may have been greater than warranted in part to the lack of commensurate attention to long-term trends in overall human development that is often overlooked even in arguments stressing communist-era legacies.

This is in marked contrast to the developing world where, at least since 1990, much more attention has been paid to trends in human development, precisely to account for the fact that some countries (whether due to fortuitous circumstances or distinctive strategies) have gradually secured major gains in standards of living without a commensurate rise in income. That the

overall story of human development should be pushed aside in the study of post-communist transitions seems particularly problematic since communist countries were particularly strong in reaching human development rankings that were well above their rankings in per capita wealth (as noted above). This is evident in the performance of communist countries that may have initiated economic reforms to varying degrees but have not experienced the abrupt regime change seen in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the USSR in 1991. Cuba, at present, is ranked 44th in HDI (behind just seven of the 28 post-communist countries ranked), and has a score comparable to Kuwait, which has a per capita GDP more than four times that of Cuba. In 1990, Cuba, China and Vietnam all had much higher HDI rankings as compared with their rankings in per capita GDP (Cuba went up 26 spots, China , while China and Vietnam both went up 41 spots). In effect, the story of communist legacies and post-communist development reads differently when one shifts the focus from wealth to human development. Indeed, even in cases where we see consolidated democracies and sustained market reforms, the difference between the communist and post-communist period become less stark in terms of relative positions in overall human development.

This also raises some questions about the weight some attach to more proximate causes, for example, when one aspect of the post-communist transition (e.g. democracy and civil society) often viewed as a causal factor in explaining another dimension of the transition (e.g. national income and welfare provisions). To the extent that some other forces may be responsible for both political and economic outcomes, the focus is on the design of institutions coming out of transition, the choice of economic policies and reform strategies, or the immediate influence of regional neighbors or international institutions. These factors are surely important, and there is nothing in this paper to suggest that one should ignore the effects of a particular set of choices or actions undertaken by human actors in the course of transition. But, a better understanding of the magnitude and durability of these kinds of effects depends on first taking stock of longer-term trends that may also partially account for the variations we seek to explain. It is tempting to view post-communist transitions as offering “laboratory-like” conditions that fit a “most similar systems” comparative design. If one views communism as a monolithic set of institutions and practices, then variation in post-communist transitions are most likely to result from either the nature of post-communist institutions or the strategic choices made by elites at key moments.

However, a broad examination of both per capita income and overall human development reveal that substantial differences were clearly in evidence by the late communist period and likely preceded communism altogether. This is true not only between CEE countries that experienced four decades of communist rule and FSU countries that experienced seven decades of communist rule; it is also true within the FSU, where we find significant variation from Belarus and Russia to the Central Asian stans. While it is no startling revelation to suggest that Central Asia lagged behind the European parts of the USSR, it is not clear why this fact should not be incorporated into our analytic frameworks (and as more than "background" or "context") for explaining variation across post-communist space.

Perhaps the most pertinent application of such a Braudelian longue-durée view to regions that once experienced communist rule is Janos' (2000) study of the enduring hierarchical structures that distinguished the 19th century East European "periphery" from the West European "core" in terms of both the dynamics of economic development and patterns of state-society relations. Also, Kornai (2008, 29), despite his conviction that communist developmental schemes extended the gap between Eastern and Western Europe, recognizes that the CEE region has lagged behind for centuries and is not likely to close the gap for several decades in the best case scenarios. In fact, as this paper has shown, the relative position of most post-communist countries have not changed very much between the period of late communism and the present, except during an first five or six years of the transition, when more FSU experienced a steeper decline. Zooming back in time allows us to recognize this initial period of transition as more the aberration than the norm, with a longer time-frame revealing few surprising increases or decreases in positions of countries releative to each other, or to various clusters of industrialized or developing countries. There is thus a very real possibility that what many see as divergent transitions since the end of communism – spurred by varying permutations of policies, institutions, regime-types, or regional pressures – may just as easily be reconstructed as evidence of long-standing historical pathways that predate the fall of communism, and possibly its advent as well.

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