Conflict and Cooperation: The Analysis of the Historical Factors of European Integration in East Europe Since 1990s

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Abstract. This essay mainly discusses the impact of social changes in East Europe, such as political liberalization and ideological shifts, and the causes of the current situation. The conflict between pro-European and anti-European factions is significant in the challenging European integration process. This caused the appearance of the Right-Wing populism political parties and their radical economic policies, which mainly opposition to European integration, including focusing on the domestic market and employment, anti-immigration, and opposition to economic integration, such as exclusion from the European market. Also, geopolitical factors, such as the fear of Russian influence due to a kind of stereotype, contributed to the complex situation. This led to comprehensive pro-Western policies in some Eastern European countries. The Russian-Ukraine war happening now is seen as a significant example of the pro-Europeanism and anti-Europeanism conflict. The author concludes that the current situation in Eastern Europe results from these complex factors and their interactions.

1 Introduction

After the Revolution in 1989, Communist Eastern European countries finally gained independence from the Soviet Union. They have also started plenty of reform in politics and the economy. Many Eastern European countries’ political and economic systems began to become more similar to those of Western Europe. Although the similarity was increased, the integration process of Europe in East Europe was changing and slow. Only Poland and Hungary became members of the EU but are still not members of the Eurozone. Other countries like Belarus and Russia. They did not show their willingness to join the EU. However, the diplomatic relationships among the East European countries are getting worse; the central conflict is between the pro-European and non-pro-European countries; one outstanding example is the war between Russia and Ukraine. The purpose of this research is to find the relationships between the Revolution in 1989 and the integration of Europe and the factors that influenced and obstacles to the integration in East Europe, which also could predict some potential problems in the integration process in the future. In this essay, the research mainly analyzes the historical factors that influenced the condition in East Europe nowadays. It includes (1) the process and impact of political liberalization in East Europe, (2) the process and impact of ideological change and (3) the causes of the current situation in East Europe.

2 Political liberalization in East Europe

2.1 The process of political liberalization

The origin of political liberalization in East Europe was started in Poland in the 1980s. The leading protester against the authoritarian government in Poland was a labor union called “Solidarity.” In 1988, Solidarity started a great-scale strike in the Stalowa Wola Steelworks. Requested to legalize Solidarity and improve the welfare and treatment of workers. This movement rapidly expanded to large cities in Poland. However, the Polish government suppressed most of the strikes by violence. The strikes did influence Poland greatly. This strike forced the Communist Government to reflect on whether it was worth negotiating with the Solidarity. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was reforming, and there were attempts at economic and political liberalization. The political liberalization in Poland was just the beginning. The success of the democratization in Poland encouraged many opposites in Socialist Countries to negotiate with the government [1].

After six days of the free election in Poland, the opposites in Hungary and the government began to conference. The conference lasts for three months. The ruling party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, dismissed and began the general elections. The process was smooth and successful. After Hungary, a chain reaction began in Eastern Europe’s politics. Hungary
soon removed the border fence with Austria, which made many East Germans escape from the Socialist world. This event led to the reunification of Germany, which reduced the political power of the Soviet Union [2].

Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was reforming difficulty in the political system. To isolate conservatives in the party, Gorbachev modified the constitution and established the Congress of People’s Deputies (CPD). The result was significant. In March 1989, for the first time since 1918, contested elections to a Soviet legislative body and live TV coverage to all the citizens of the Soviet Union. Specifically, a Congress of People’s Deputies occurred in the Soviet Union [3]. Also, in 1989, CNN became the first unofficial media broadcaster in the Soviet Union. This event influenced how citizens viewed the public events in their country. In 1990, the Soviet Union held the first national election. A large number of republics have begun to de-communize through elections. The Communist Party lost five Republics. Yeltsin won the presidential election in Russia and Immediately withdrew from the Soviet Communist Party. The Soviet Union at that time was on the verge of collapse. To prevent this ending. In the fourth CPD meeting. Gorbachev produced a draft that “Recognized the participating States of the Treaty as sovereign republics, possessing full state power in their territories. The USSR is a sovereign federal State formed by the voluntary association of the participating States.” On June 12th, 1991, Yeltsin declared Russia autonomous from the Soviet Union [5]. Soon, he encouraged the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine to secede from the Soviet Union. On December 25th, 1991, Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Although the authoritarian Soviet Union collapsed. However, the Soviet Constitution is still being used in Russia. Yeltsin tried to modify the constitution to increase the president’s political power to promote economic reforms.

On October 4th, 1993, Yeltsin used violence to suppress opposition, and banned the activities of a large number of political parties and political groups, closed down many opposition newspapers. Yeltsin used the support of the army and the Ministry of Internal Affairs to combine legislative and administrative powers successfully [6]. The president’s increased political power caused Russia’s political liberalization to not continue in the future.

2.2 Impact of the political liberalization

The political liberalization in East European countries led to many critical impacts, mainly in the political field, economic field, and diplomatic strategy.

First, In the political field. The political liberalization led to the lower political participation of the East European people. The formation of a new political system gave ordinary people more political rights and encouraged them to participate in the political field. However, people’s participation in politics has declined. The most dramatic phenomenon is the marginalization of the organized workers’ movement. The reason could be that after getting the political rights. People do not know their interests and are unaware of what kind of method could protect them [7]. The author believes that this phenomenon is caused by less experience in participating in the political field. Meanwhile, in the first ten years after the revolution, the practice of system democracy throughout the region was highly “experimental” due to the poor development of democratic and political institutions, the inadequacy of the rule of law, and the frequent elections that led to frequent administrative shifts.

Second, some East European countries like Poland and Hungary were eligible to become members of the European Union and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) due to their democratic political system, which is a cause of political liberalization. Joining the European Union for those countries means the domestic market is connected to the entire EU market. Therefore, the scale of free trade among the East European countries and other countries in the EU increased [8]. This could help East European countries develop the Exported-led increase method and gain more investments. However, the high increase after the economic integration caused an unstable condition.

3 Ideological shifting in East Europe

3.1 Ideological shifted in Eastern Europe

In fact, due to the rapid collapse of the socialist system, the ideology of East Europeans practically disappeared. Take Poland as an example. The turnout rate in elections was the lowest after the political liberalization [9]. This article believes that, except for the mentioned point of view, there is less experience in politics. The other main factor of this phenomenon was the regional economic downturn in the 1990s. Based on the data from the World Bank, the GDP increase rate in 1991 in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary was -5%, -8.7%, -7%, and -1.2%, respectively. The other reason was caused by the solid seditious of Communism and the rapid and massive denial of Communism. Those two factors caused the turnout rate of their first election in those East European countries to be the lowest in history. The author believes that the economic downturn also promoted the popularity of pan-Europeanism. Many East Europeans hoped that economic integration could stabilize their economy and allow for more space for economic growth. This has led to an overall pro-Westernism, especially for countries already joining the European Union, such as Hungary and Poland.

Meanwhile, to prevent the reappearance of communists, the government of East Europe published many de-communization policies. One of the policies was the promotion of traditional culture. For example, the deregulation of religion and the re-privatization of land to promote family consciousness and ancestor worship. Those two factors which have led to a
resurgence of national consciousness in Eastern European countries [10].

After this period, a trend of populism appeared in East Europe. Most of the populist parties were right-wing populist parties. This is because the left-wing parties are more passive. To promote economic development and attract multinational capital investment, the center-left parties must accept the game rules laid down by the neo-liberals and implement policies similar to those of the right-wing parties, such as liberalization, privatization, and deregulation. However, the right-wing parties are more concerned about factors like employment, social welfare, and national interests. For instance, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Orbán, was defined as a right-wing populist. From 2010 to 2019, due to his taxation policies, the new tax structure reduced income taxation, increased (foreign) capital taxation, and broadened the tax base, causing an additional 2.5-3.0 percent of gross domestic product to flow to households [11]. Naturally, they have an advantage over the left-wing parties. Populists claim that they represent most of the ordinary people and against elites in the traditional sense [12]. In conclusion, the shift of ideology in East Europe promoted the formation of a diverse society in East European countries.

Among these concepts, Russia was a unique example. Russia was influenced by the communist culture the most among the Eastern European Countries because it was the central and core part of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, Yeltsin announced to find “Russian thoughts” to replace Communism. However, unlike other Eastern European countries, Russia did not find an ideology, which caused 20 years of socio-ideological vacuum. In 2006, a new viewpoint, “Sovereign Democracy,” appeared in Russia. It could reflect President Putin’s political philosophy: to achieve political stability first after the chaos, to consolidate the country through political governance, improvement of institutions, and democratization in an orderly manner.

Meanwhile, some scholars claim that this ideology was a weapon that prevented Western ideologies’ influence [13].

Furthermore, this ideology led to the Anti-Westernism, which was very popular in Russia. First, anti-Westernism is used for social cohesion and mobilization, as a means of national identity, and as “an important part of the political process in contemporary Russia.” Second, as a tactic of political struggle, one must strengthen one’s position with a clear conception of the enemy and thus fight against one’s opponents. From this point of view, it is not difficult to understand Putin’s remarks before and after the 2007 State Duma elections, in which he labelled the opposition as “dogs of the West.” In conclusion, the ideology in East Europe became more complex and diverse.

3.2 The impact of Ideological shifted in Eastern Europe

The impact of the shift of ideology in East Europe was complex and significant. First, the ideological diversity led some East European countries to reach the conditions for joining the European Union, which promoted the integration of Europe. However, the right-wing forces and the nationalists who oppose European integration are becoming more influential. The conflict between pro-Europeans and independents could be one factor in the complex integration process. Second, the shifts in ideology have caused the complex geopolitical conditions in East Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The East European Countries were no longer allies. Due to the different degrees of political liberalization, different diplomatic strategies, and different conditions of the country. The East European countries were separated into two sides. Pro-European and Anti-European. The best example is the Russian-Ukraine War, which started in 2014. Third, the rethinking and re-respecting traditional culture has promoted the restoration and strengthening of national identity in Eastern European countries in the era of globalization and post-communism. Lastly, the shift of the ideology in East Europe also promoted the realist process of some ideologies and de-radicalization in society. After losing their political power in the government, the communist parties changed their strategies to get used to the democratic regime. One of the most common methods is to abandon Leninism and embrace Social Democracy, which could gain more support from the voters [14]. This phenomenon is the same goes for former radical-right-wing political parties. Extremist activities are motivated more by religion than ideology. The policies made by the political parties became more and more similar, which made the political environment more complex.

4 The causes of the current situation in East Europe

4.1 Analysis of Causes

The current situation is complex in East Europe. The following perspectives might cause this unstable circumstance in geopolitics. The author’s recurring point in this article is the conflict between pro-European and anti-European. Most of the East European countries chose a pro-Western strategy while alienating Russia. For instance, in February 1997, the Baltic countries asked Poland and Ukraine to join NATO. Poland and Ukraine soon agreed. This behavior caused strong opposition from Russia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia claims, “Joining NATO is a great mistake of those countries, and it is unacceptable for Russia [15].” The main reason Eastern European countries still strongly desire to join NATO despite the enormous risks and dangers of escalating regional crises is a kind of fear of Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited most of the legacy of the Soviet Union. East European countries are afraid the chauvinism of Russia could cause them to lose their independence and territories. This is also why Ukraine refused to participate in the military integration of the
Commonwealth of Independent States, which Russia controls. Ukraine emphasized that if Russia tries to reform Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to an institute with a structure similar to the Soviet Union, Ukraine won’t stay in CIS.

However, after they joined NATO, they had to follow the US-led Western countries’ strategy completely. Meanwhile, based on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, “The Parties agree that, if an armed attack occurs, all the member states will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force. ” This means that regardless of member state, it could drag the entire organization into a war. For East European countries, although joining NATO could protect them, it also hardly maintains geopolitical neutrality, which means completely turning against Russia and its allies. Therefore, for East European countries, it is a conflicting choice. In the author’s opinion, the best choice for East European countries like Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus is to pursue a policy of non-alignment to be part of the proxy war.

The second factor that caused the unstable circumstance was mainly in the economic field. After joining the European Economic Area, the Eastern European countries face an increasing trade deficit with the European Union. Between 1995 and 1996, the deficit in Poland increased from USD 6.2 billion to USD 11.9 billion; in Hungary, the deficit of USD 2.6 billion in 1995 climbed to USD 3.1 billion. Commodity dependence on former EU countries could explain this circumstance to some extent, which must lead directly to developing similar industries in the country. Meanwhile, the European Union was also increasing the economic integration process through investments to help the industrial transformation; this action also increased its influence in new member states [16]. However, not all interest groups agree with this kind of big scale of integration. As the author mentioned in the preceding part of the text, the right-wing populists were against integration to protect domestic employment. Therefore, this factor still revealed that the challenging integration and now a day condition was mainly caused by the conflict between pro-European and anti-European.

4.2 Current situation

The best example of the pro-European and anti-European conflict is the Russian-Ukraine war happening now. As a part of pro-European countries, it has always been warned and threatened by Russia not to join NATO forever. However, it was still attacked by Russia and its ally Belarus. This behavior only made European countries support Ukraine even more. On its official website, NATO claims its perspective of supporting Ukraine: “The security of Ukraine is of great importance to NATO and its member states. The Alliance fully supports Ukraine’s inherent right to self-defense and its right to choose its security arrangements. Ukraine’s future is in NATO.” Relations between NATO and Ukraine date back to the early 1990s and have since developed into one of the most substantial of NATO’s partnerships. Since 2014, in the wake of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, cooperation has been intensified in critical areas. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, NATO and Allies have provided unprecedented support [16].

Furthermore, the EU is also promoting the joining process. Suppose all these two processes are finished before the war ends. There may be a high possibility of expansion to a greater regional war instead of just a war between two countries.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the causes of the condition of East Europe nowadays are complex. East Europe experienced a long period of political liberalization to gain independence in different concepts and freedom for ordinary people. This movement initially led to reduced political participation but soon caused diversity and de-radicalization in society. This phenomenon is one of the origins of the conflict between East European countries, between pro-Europeanism and anti-Europeanism; for example, it appeared in the domestic political arena in many East European countries. It has been chiefly known as the conflict between the Right-Wing populist party and Left-Wing Parties or some actions that are straightly against the policies of the European Union, for instance, attacks on immigrants from Islamic countries and street protests against government integration policies. It is identical among the relationships of the countries. This caused the countries to join to protect their sovereignty. However, that action decreased their neutrality. In the context of complex geopolitical conditions, the perspectives above are discussed as contributing to the complex situation in Eastern Europe today.

References

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