

The breakdown of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe has offered scholars in the field of transition and regime change theory, and comparative politics in general, a major opportunity to test out former theories, but also formulate new ones. Obviously, no theory is alone applicable to the complexity of the transitions. There is a variety of cases, each with distinct developments before, during and after the transition to democracy has been completed.

Some common features are still possible to extract when studying regime change in a region. As for Central and Eastern Europe, one of the most outstanding characteristics of the transition to democracy has been the visibility and importance of external factors. Previously the view was held that external factors were essentially secondary to domestic processes of regime change. The studies on Central and Eastern Europe carried out the last 15 years might show another picture, and that leads us to the core of this paper. How important have the external factors been? After providing the reader with some relevant theories on democracy and democratisation, the focus is turned to the examination of external influences on transition in this region. In order to narrow down the complexity of the subject, the European Union has been chosen as the variable to examine closer, but without ignoring other factors of significance, as for example NATO membership. The incentives for membership in the EU have in general been strong, and in order to receive invitation for accession, the applicants in the post-communist countries had to fulfil conditions governing almost every aspect of their political, economic and social institutions. This again leads to the assumption that external factors are interwoven with domestic developments.

The cases chosen for this study are the neighbouring countries of Czech Republic and Slovakia. Although they had a common past in Czechoslovakia, their paths to transitions to democracy and EU accession parted. Slovakia demonstrated insufficient progress on domestic political reforms, and authoritarian leadership, which again had consequences on their progress in the application progress, while the Czech Republic had a more positive advancement. The cases have been chosen just because of their differences, and with the assumption that these distinctions might help proving whether or not the EU is one of the most important external factors in regime change and democratic consolidation.