

# Twenty years of political transition

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What explains the divergent political paths that the postcommunist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have followed since the fall of the Berlin Wall? While some appear today to be consolidated democracies, others have all the features of consolidated autocracy. Many scholars have considered this question, and have suggested the importance of a variety of contextual and conjunctural factors. In this paper, I offer a simple and at most suggestive review of how the data look 20 years after the start of transition. I will not do justice to the rich literature on the causes of postcommunist political developments that has developed during these two decades, and refer readers to Pop-Eleches' (2007) excellent summary and review of the evidence. With some minor exceptions, I will reach conclusions similar to his.

## 1 Measuring democracy

To assess the extent of change in the political systems of the former communist states since 1989 some metric is needed. Compiling cross-national indexes of democracy has become something of a new industry in recent decades, and three products have pretty much cornered the market. Since 1973, Freedom House, a non-profit advocacy group, founded in New York in 1941 to promote democracy and expand political and economic freedom around the world, has compiled annual ratings of the extent of political and civil liberties in different countries. These ratings, on a 7-point scale, are based, according to Freedom House, on "a multilayered process of analysis and evaluation by a team of regional experts and scholars."<sup>1</sup> The Polity project, begun around the

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<sup>1</sup> See Freedom House's website, [http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana\\_page=354&year=2009](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=351&ana_page=354&year=2009).

same time by a political scientist, Ted Robert Gurr, also evaluates countries annually on the authority characteristics of their political regimes, rating them on a 21-point scale that runs from -10 (a “fully institutionalized autocracy”) to +10 (a “fully institutionalized democracy”).<sup>2</sup> Finally, a team at the World Bank has been compiling a dataset of “Worldwide Governance Indicators” (WGI), at first biannually and now annually. Among these is an index of perceived “voice and accountability” in countries around the world. Although this is useful for various purposes, a number of features of the voice and accountability index render it less useful for my analysis here. First, the index is available only from 1996, which reduces its value for assessing the dynamics of postcommunist transition. Second, the index aims to capture perceptions of democracy rather than to analyze the objective reality (unlike the Freedom House and Polity democracy ratings). Since it is quite likely that in the postcommunist world perceptions diverge from the objective reality, this is a problem. Third, the index is an aggregate of many individual sources, which makes it even harder than in the other two cases to be sure exactly what the differences in scores across countries are measuring. (The voice and accountability index also includes the Freedom House data among its sources, with a very high weight; see Kaufmann et al. 2009, p.31). Consequently, I will not discuss the WGI further.

Two other possible sources are the measures of democracy produced by collaborators of Adam Przeworski and the indexes of legislative and executive electoral competitiveness included in the Database of Political Institutions (DPI), compiled under the leadership of Philip Keefer, also at the World Bank.<sup>3</sup> The Przeworski team operationally defines “democracy” as a regime in which the chief executive and legislature are elected, in which more than one party is allowed to

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see the Polity IV site at [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm).

<sup>3</sup> See Przeworski et al. (2000), the DPI webpage at <http://go.worldbank.org/2EAGGLRZ40>.

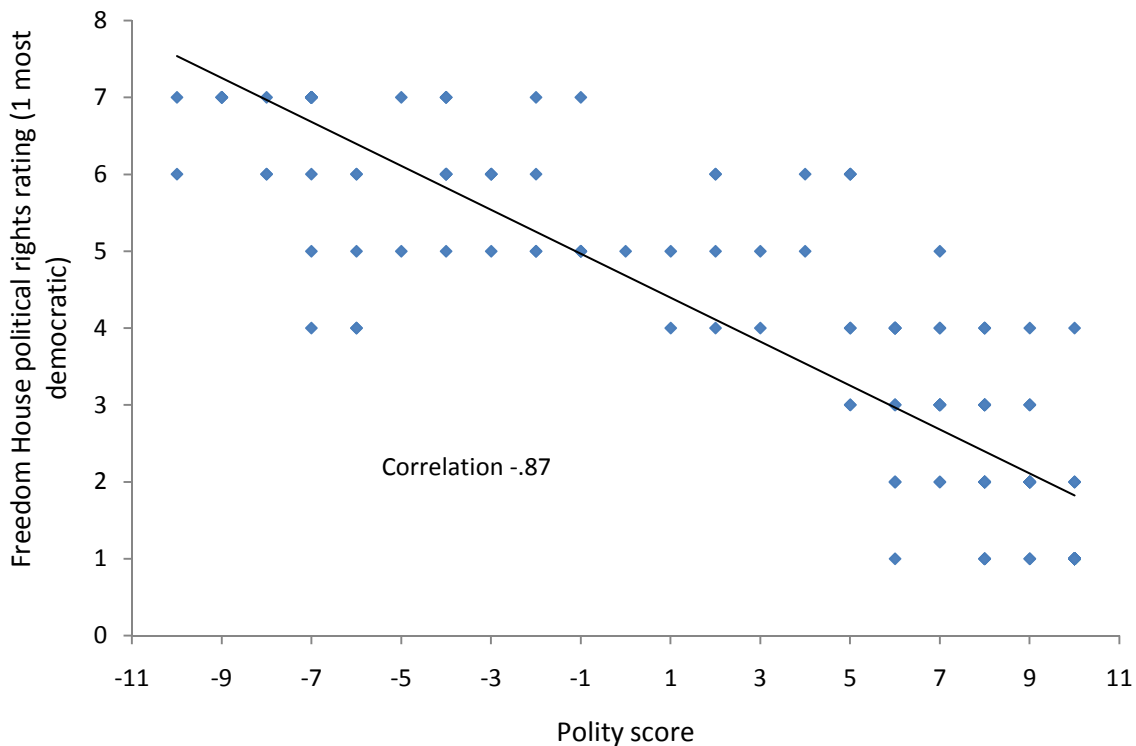
compete for office, and in which the current incumbents have not won three or more elections in a row. This definition deliberately “errs on the conservative side,” classifying as dictatorships those regimes that enjoy extended popularity such as the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt after 1940, but all definitions run into troublesome cases. The reason I do not use this one here is that it is dichotomous, and so does not tell us much about the paths—gradual, undulating, or direct, and rapid that countries took to reach democracy. The DPI measures are also useful for various purposes. But they do not constitute a continuous measure of the degree of democracy and focus only on the competitiveness of elections, rather than a broader conception of democracy.

Given the availability of two potentially valuable sources of data on the same subject, one might begin in at least three ways. One sensible approach is to conduct analysis using all available sources and emphasize results that prove robust across them (e.g. Pop-Eleches 2007). Another approach is to examine the methods of data collection and the conceptualizations of the target variables of the different data sources and decide on this basis which is more appropriate for a given project. A third approach is to examine the data themselves, checking whether the ratings are consistent with other sources of information about the countries in question, and whether observed objective differences and similarities among countries show up in the ratings. If such a “reality check” casts doubt on the ability of a data source to accurately distinguish between countries, then requiring results to be robust to the use of such data is likely to lead researchers astray.

Does the choice between Freedom House and Polity matter? In any given year, the two ratings are correlated (see Figure 1 for the 2007 scores). However, as Figure 1 shows, the countries to which Freedom House assigns the same score often have widely divergent scores on

Polity's rating. Countries given 5's by Freedom House, for instance, are rated everything from -7 (close to consolidated autocracy) to +7 (close to consolidated democracy) by Polity. Similarly, countries given the same ratings by Polity sometimes have quite divergent ratings on the Freedom House index. So which data one chooses may very well affect the results.

**Figure 1. Freedom House and Polity democracy ratings, 2007**



On theoretical grounds, the Polity ratings have the advantage of using a 21-point scale that permits finer distinctions than the 7-point Freedom House scale. What makes the decisive difference for me, however, is the results of the reality check. When it comes to the postcommunist countries, the Freedom House data contain some curious anomalies. Consider Russia, which from 2005 to 2009 has been rated 6 on Freedom House's political rights scale,

one step away from a pure autocracy.<sup>4</sup> This puts it on the same level as the United Arab Emirates.

Experts agree that Russia's political institutions in the late Putin era fell short of the democratic ideal. Elections were marred by significant falsification; certain candidates were prevented from running; and the state media—which includes all the main national television channels—provided disproportionate and overwhelmingly favorable coverage of the incumbents. In general, direct criticism of the president and prime minister were strongly discouraged on the three main state-owned national television stations. Nevertheless, the country was governed during these years under a democratic constitution by a popularly elected president and parliament. Despite electoral irregularities, most observers agree that the results of national elections did, by and large, reflect popular preferences. Credible polls suggest that the popularity of President—and now Prime Minister—Putin was quite genuine. Freedom of the press, although constricted, continued to exist on the internet, in print media, on one national radio station, and on some local and cable television stations. In the 2008 presidential election, a communist, an extreme nationalist, and a centrist ran against the Kremlin-favored incumbent, and were given hours of free airtime on national television to debate each other and present their positions.<sup>5</sup>

The United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, is a federation of seven absolute dynastic monarchs whose appointees make all executive and legislative decisions. The only “parliament” is a consultative assembly, whose members are either appointed by the emirs or chosen by a college of electors whom the emirs also select. According to Freedom House, there is evidence

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<sup>4</sup> Freedom House states on its website that the rating of Russia does *not* include Chechnya, where political rights are certainly far lower than in most other parts of the country.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev*, New York: The Free Press, forthcoming 2010, Chapter 12. I draw in this section on my discussion there.

that “members of the royal family and the country’s police” use “torture against political rivals.” In Russia, political parties are weak. In the UAE, they do not exist.<sup>6</sup> For a research project which relies on making fine distinctions between countries’ political regimes, a rating that equates these two objectively quite different systems is not very useful. In 2007, Polity IV rated Russia 5, on a level with Venezuela and Ecuador, and UAE -8.<sup>7</sup>

Another postcommunist country on which the Polity and Freedom House raters differ is Estonia, which received a perfect political rights score of 1 from Freedom House, but a 6 (on the scale which runs from -10 to +10) from Polity. The reason Polity did not give the country a perfect score is that the Estonian authorities discriminate against their Russian speaking minority. In order to acquire citizenship—without which, they may not vote in national and EU elections or join political parties—residents must pass a demanding oral and written exam in the Estonian language. As a result, in 2006 a significant part of the population—nine percent, almost 120,000 people, according to Estonian official statistics—remained without citizenship and thus disenfranchised.<sup>8</sup> Estonia has been criticized for this and for other kinds of discrimination against its ethnic minorities by Amnesty International, the Council of Europe, and the UN’s Special

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<sup>6</sup> The information about the UAE comes from Freedom House’s own *Freedom in the World 2009*, available at [www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=445](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=445).

<sup>7</sup> In September 2009, I contacted Freedom House to ask whether the organization genuinely thought Russia under Putin to be no more democratic than a federation of absolute autocrats. A representative explained that in Freedom House’s finer-grained sub-scores, Russia was rated slightly above the UAE, with a total of 8 out of 40 for political rights, compared to UAE’s 5. This is reassuring, as far as it goes. However, the sub-scores themselves raise additional puzzles. On the sum of the political rights subscores, Russia is rated lower than Mauritania, a country ruled by a military junta that had just staged a coup, deposing the elected president, arresting officials, and establishing control over the state broadcast media. On “electoral process,” Russia is judged on a level with Oman, where the only elections are for a consultative council without any legislative power.

<sup>8</sup> “Estonia Today: Population by Nationality,” Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://web-static.vm.ee/static/failid/460/Nationalities.pdf>.

Rapporteur on Racism.<sup>9</sup> One can debate the historical context and the politics of the Estonian authorities' decisions. But it is hard to see how the disenfranchisement of almost one tenth of the population is consistent with a rating of perfect democracy.

Since 1996, Freedom House has also published a more fine-grained assessment of democracy in the postcommunist countries—the Nations in Transit rating, which is on a continuous scale. The late start, well into the postcommunist transition, creates problems for using these data to study the trajectory of change. But even were it not for this, it turns out that the Nations in Transit scores correlate with the simple Freedom House political rights scores at  $r = .97$ . The Nations in Transit scorers evaluate four dimensions of democracy—the competitiveness of the political process, the degree of development of civil society, the independence of the media, and the quality of public administration and governance. Yet, with their more complex methodology, they arrive at almost exactly the same results. Estonia gets the second highest score of all the post-communist countries, surpassed only by Slovenia. Russia is around the level of Tajikistan, which was also in the Freedom House political rights ratings on a level with the UAE. For these reasons, I focus in this paper on the Polity data.<sup>10</sup>

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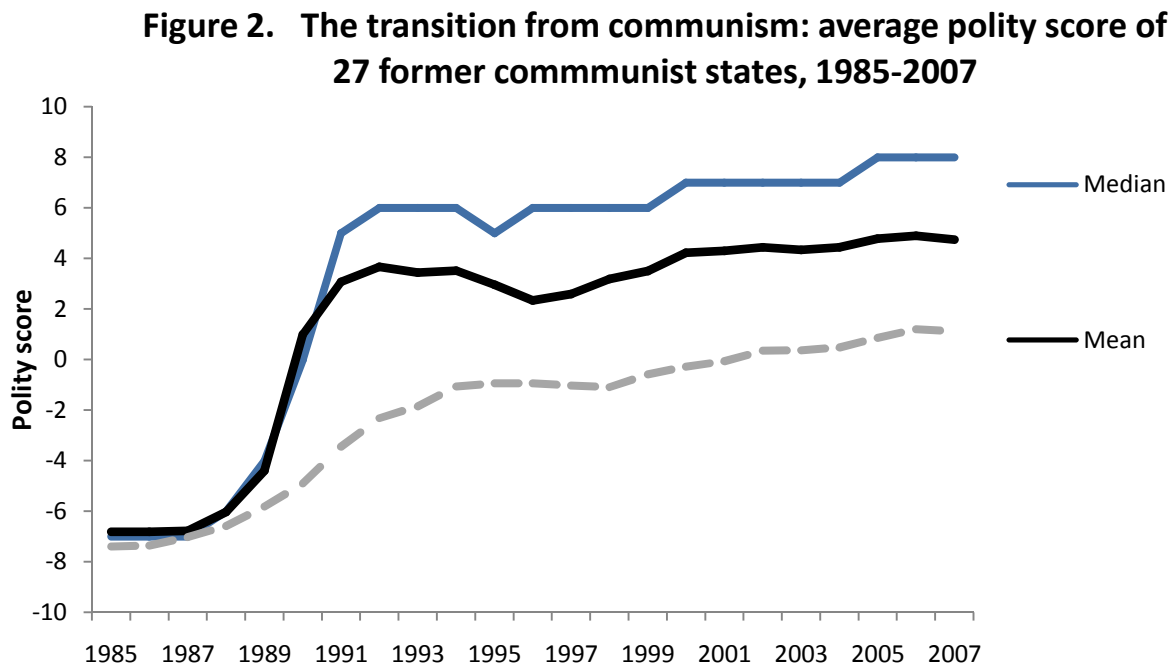
<sup>9</sup> See Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2009*, “Estonia,” <http://report2009.amnesty.org/en/regions/europe-central-asia/estonia>, and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2008*, “Estonia,” <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,FREEHOU,,EST,4562d8b62,487ca209c,0.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Even the Polity coders may not be immune from outside pressure. Shortly after I had written the first draft of this paper, I thought to check for updates on the Polity website. To my surprise, I found that Polity had indeed “updated” some of its figures, reducing Russia’s Polity score by one point for the entire period from 1992. The coders had also increased Estonia’s rating from 6 to 9, close to a perfect score. The only explanation Polity provided for these changes referred to information that had been widely known for years and already mentioned in previous Polity reports. The director of the Polity team, when I contacted him to ask the reasons for these changes, explained that an ongoing reevaluation of democracy scores was in progress. Despite my repeated inquiries, he did not give any specific explanation for the changes to Russia’s and Estonia’s scores. When I asked if these might have something to do with the fact that since the late 1990s the project has relied on funding from the US government’s Political Instability Task Force, itself funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (see the Polity website [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm)), he replied: “As regards my response to pressure from our US Government supporters, you can be sure that I consider their perspectives as seriously as the many inquiries and criticisms I receive from academics and other experts. There has never been any serious arm-twisting from either



## 2 Transition trajectories

Figure 2 shows the average Polity scores for the 27 former Communist countries covered by the data set from 1985 to 2007, the latest year for which data were available. On average, these countries experienced a surge of democratization in 1989-1992, reaching the lower borders of what Polity classifies as “democracy.” There was a slight reversion on average in the mid 1990s, followed by upward movement in the 2000s to something close to the top of the scale. By 2005, the median country had reached a score of 8 on the scale, on which 10 signifies a pure democracy.



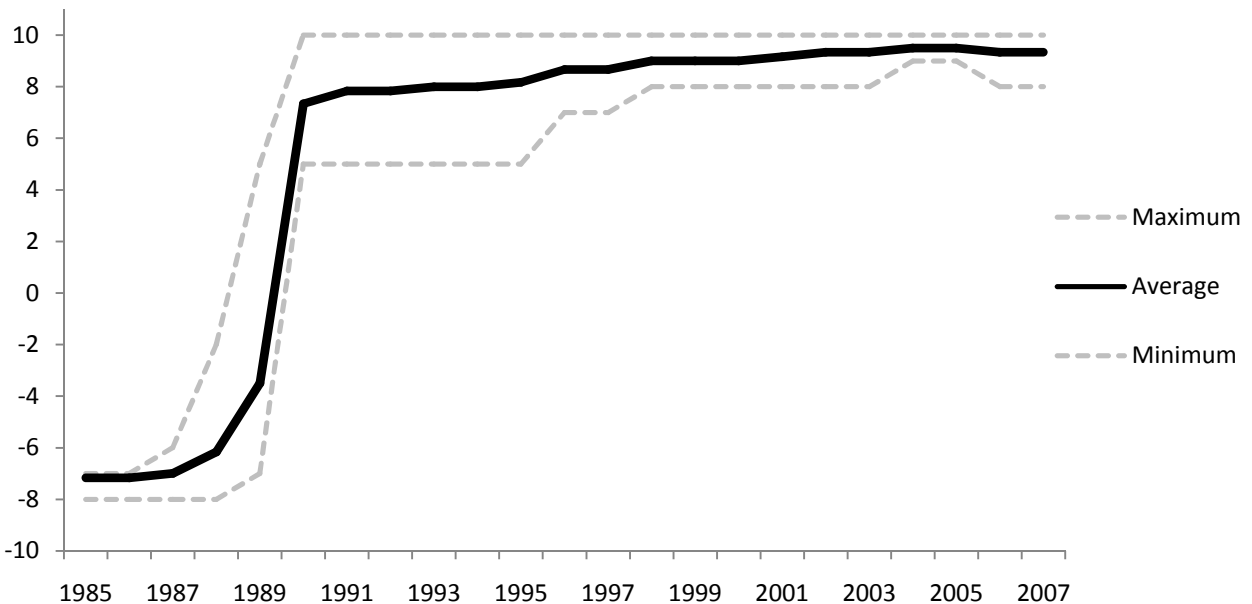
Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); 27 former communist states. Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

side; not that such tactics would be strong enough to induce me to make changes that I did not feel were warranted by the evidence." I do not doubt the integrity of the project's director. However, I remain baffled by why the project would be unwilling or unable to explain why the scores of these countries had been changed, purportedly on the basis of information that had been well-known for years. In this paper, I continue to use the original Polity ratings. These are certainly not perfect, but the apparent anomalies in the Polity codings for postcommunist countries seem to me smaller than the anomalies in the Freedom House scores.

The jump in democracy remains impressive if we compare it to what happened in other countries that started towards the bottom of the Polity scale in 1985. That year, the communist countries studied here ranged in Polity scores between -9 (Albania) and -5 (Yugoslavia). The dashed line in Figure 2 shows the mean Polity scores in subsequent years for all other countries that had Polity scores of -9 to -5 in 1985. As we see, there was a wave of democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s outside the communist world as well as within it. However, the communist countries on average reformed much faster and reached a higher level of democracy.

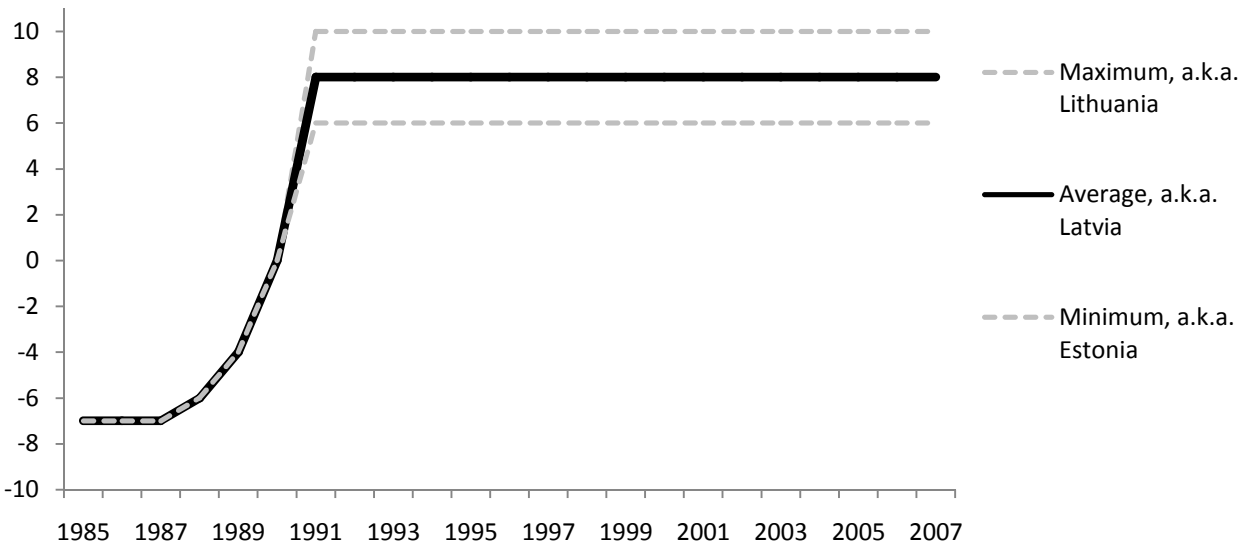
The averages, however, conceal a great deal of variation in the transition path. And this variation correlates strongly with geography. Figure 3, panels a-f, shows the average path of countries' Polity scores for six sub-regions of the former Communist world.

**Figure 3a. The transition in Eastern Europe**



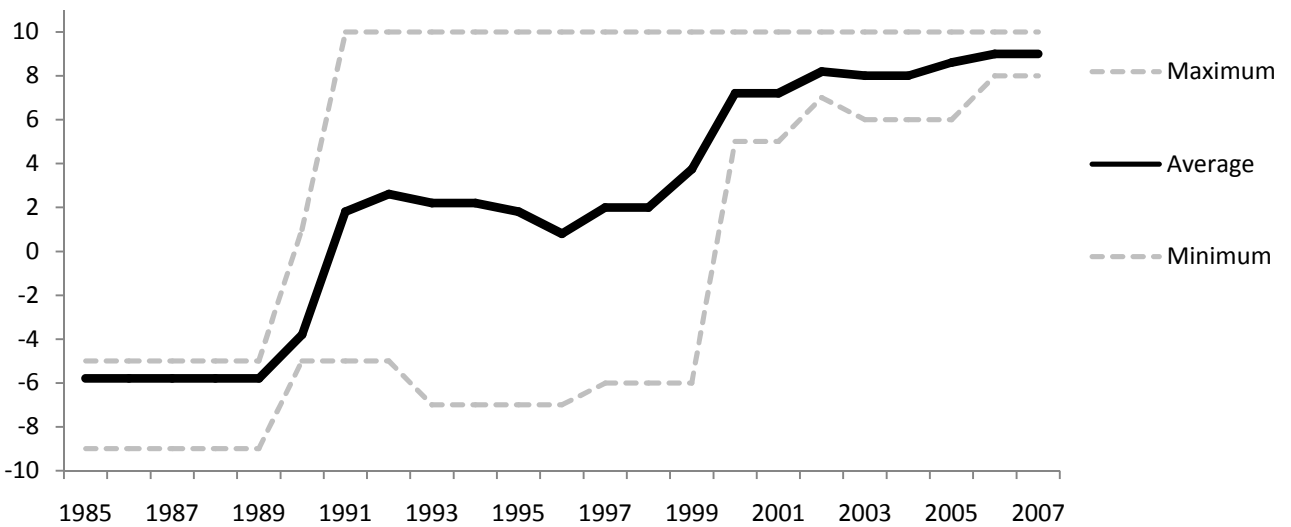
Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); EE: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia; Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

**Figure 3b. The transition in the Baltics**



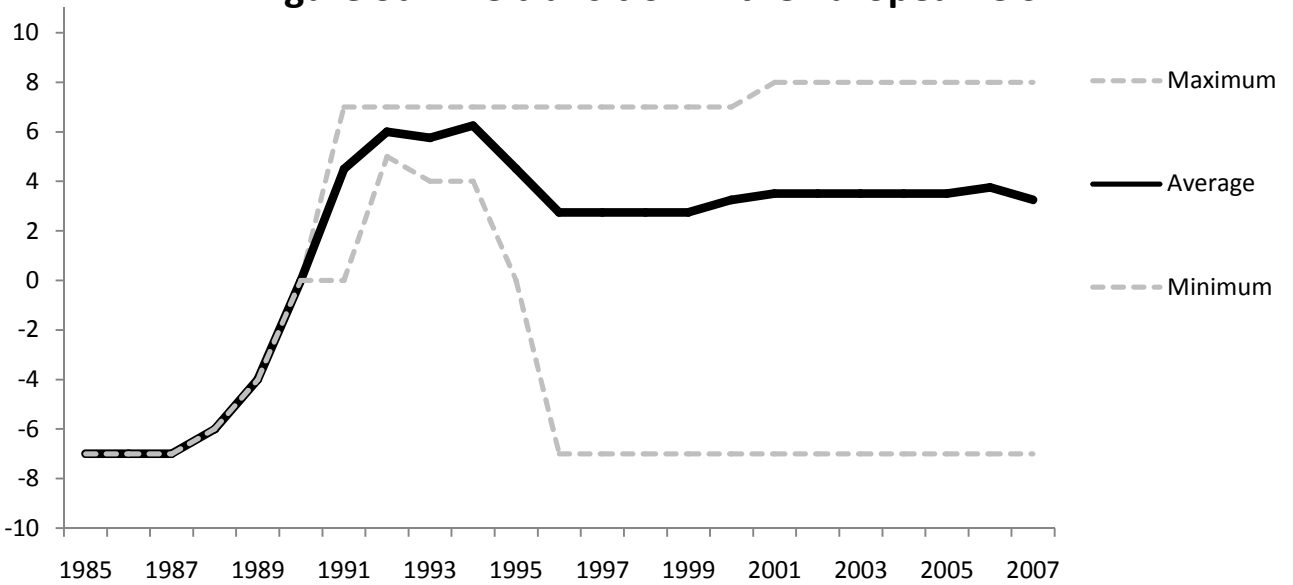
Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); Baltics: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia; Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

**Figure 3c. The transition in the Balkans**



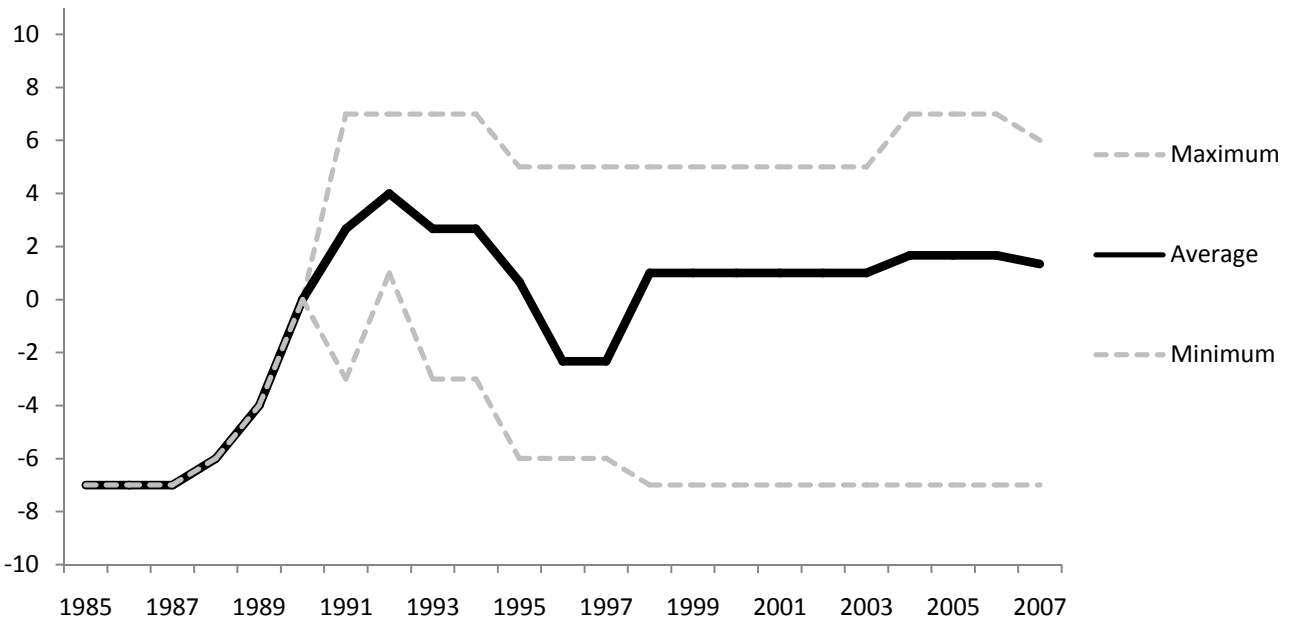
Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); Balkans: Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia (and Montenegro), Slovenia; Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

**Figure 3d. The transition in the European CIS**



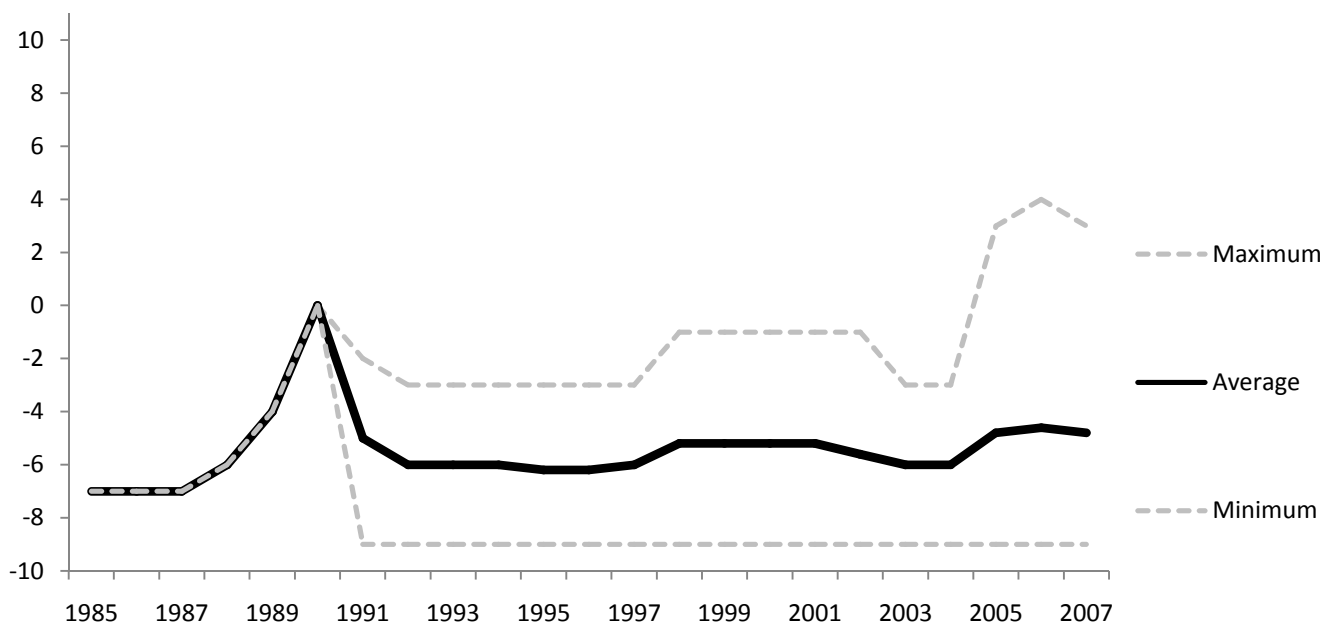
Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); European CIS: Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine; Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

**Figure 3e. The transition in the Caucasus**



Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia; Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

**Figure 3f. The transition in Central Asia**



Source: Polity IV, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm); Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. Polity scores: "10" = pure democracy; "-10" = pure autocracy.

From studying these graphs and those for individual countries, several patterns of political change emerge. The average pathway in both Eastern Europe and the Baltic might be called the *sprint to democracy*. Countries shoot up the Polity scale in the first years of transition, becoming clearly democratic, and then stabilize at a high level, or over time creep even higher. This pattern fits the particular trajectories of: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Latvia, and Lithuania. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the *failure to take off* that characterizes the Central Asian states: an initial, relatively weak rise towards democracy, followed in the mid-1990s by reversion to authoritarian government. This pattern fits Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. In the case of Belarus,

however, the initial rise was very substantial—up to +7—and so was the subsequent fall after the dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko was elected and consolidated control.

Between these two polar versions of transition are several more complicated ones. There is the *sprint—then jog—to democracy* of countries for which the initial spurt takes them only part of the way, and which then converge gradually over the course of the 1990s and 2000s on the high level of democracy achieved by the East European countries. This is illustrated by the average for the Balkan countries, and among individual cases fits those of Romania, Albania, Macedonia, and Moldova. Similar in some ways is the *late sprint to democracy* found in Croatia and Serbia: very little movement towards democracy occurs in the early 1990s, but then after 1998 both shoot up to +7 or +8 on the scale. This might have something to do with the war that was taking place on or around their territories.

In the final two patterns, the country stalls somewhere in the middle region. In *sprint to the edge, then stall*, countries surge in the early years to the 5-7 range that marks the border of democracy and then seem to get stuck there, bumping up or down a point or two temporarily, but neither reaching the 8-10 range of consolidated democracy nor falling back into clearly authoritarian territory. This trajectory is illustrated by the average for the countries of the European part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and fits the histories of Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia (if one disregards a major temporary reversion in 1995-8), and Estonia (which, as noted, is dragged down below its Baltic peers by its treatment of ethnic Russian residents). *Jog half-way, then stop* is a pattern which may turn into either a very slow version of *sprint—then jog—to democracy* or a slow version of *failure to take off*. It involves rising modestly to stabilize in the mid-range of -3 to +3. This pattern fits the average for the Caucasus and the individual cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

One final point to note about the trajectories featured in Figure 3 is the very different levels of variation in patterns within different geographical sub-regions. At both extremes, variation is relatively low. In Eastern Europe and the Baltics, all countries travel in a tight cohort, with little difference between the most democratic and least democratic in a given year. To a slightly lesser degree, the Central Asian states also travel together—or rather fail to travel, together—almost all staying towards the bottom of the scale. In the Balkans, the dashed lines that show the gap between the most and least democratic countries describe the shape of a snake that has swallowed something large. In the 1990s, countries in the Balkans ranged between “pure democracies” such as Slovenia and close to pure autocracies, such as Serbia. Yet this variation disappeared after 2000. All countries converged on relatively high quality democracy. In the Caucasus and the European CIS, things remain more interesting. After the early years of democratization, the funnel opened up—countries ranged between very low and relatively high scores, and the large dispersion remains today.

If there is any conclusion to be drawn from considering these trajectories, it is about the apparent importance of geography. In most countries of Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Balkans, one can already say that the transition to democracy has been a success, although it took longer in some countries than in others, and reversions in some are still not ruled out. In Central Asia, attempts to build democracy have so far almost entirely failed, and few will probably be surprised if Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, currently in an institutional no-mans land, revert to join their Central Asian neighbors in consolidated autocracy. In between the Baltics and Central Asia—in the European CIS and the Caucasus—the outcomes seem to have been far less strongly predetermined. In these countries, the political future was much more in play. A dictator like

Lukashenko could pull his country in a direction different from those followed by Ukraine and Russia.

### 3 Explaining differences in democracy as of 2007

Why have some of the communist countries become consolidated democracies, while others have reverted to authoritarian government? What can explain the noted geographical patterns? To explore this, I ran a number of regressions, seeking to find what factors could both account for the variation in the Polity scores of these countries as of 2007 and steal away the explanatory power of geography. The results are shown in Table 1.

Many kinds of factors might have influenced the path of political transition of the communist countries. Some are relatively exogenous, predetermined by forces that were not themselves shaped by the transition itself. Others have to do with particular choices made by participants in the period of change. Since these are the sort of factors that might be reshaped by policy or short-term political conjuncture, it is natural to hope that they are significant so that one can devise ways to quickly reverse undesirable outcomes. Moving from more exogenous to more endogenous factors, I looked for evidence of the influence of countries': geographical location (distance from Western Europe), natural endowments (since oil and minerals are often thought to predispose countries towards authoritarian rule), ethnic heterogeneity and religious traditions, level of economic development and industrialization, political legacy (for how many years the country had lived under communism, what empires had dominated the territory in the period since 1800, whether the country had enjoyed independent statehood between the two world wars), and political institutions in the post-communist era (parliamentary or presidential regime).



All of these have been associated by numerous scholars with the quality and durability of democracy.

Table 1. Correlates of democracy in the postcommunist countries, 2007

	-----Dependent variable: Polity score 2007-----									
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Constant	11.94 <sup>c</sup> (1.34)	11.96 <sup>c</sup> (2.43)	10.19 <sup>c</sup> (2.89)	12.26 <sup>c</sup> (1.11)	10.54 <sup>c</sup> (2.19)	16.82 <sup>c</sup> (5.76)	11.90 <sup>c</sup> (1.74)	11.43 <sup>c</sup> (2.35)	10.92 <sup>c</sup> (1.54)	8.97 <sup>c</sup> (1.39)
<i>Geography</i>										
Distance from Duesseldorf, th. kms.	-3.38 <sup>c</sup> (.62)	-3.41 <sup>c</sup> (.67)	-2.97 <sup>c</sup> (.88)	-2.80 <sup>c</sup> (.93)	-3.09 <sup>c</sup> (.73)	-3.65 <sup>c</sup> (.70)	-3.38 <sup>c</sup> (.68)	-3.26 <sup>c</sup> (.81)	-2.25 <sup>b</sup> (.93)	.27 (1.36)
<i>Endowments</i>										
log of oil produced, 1970-89		.011 (.11)								
<i>Historical empire</i>										
Habsburg			1.99 (2.26)							
Ottoman			2.54 (2.08)							
<i>Former Soviet republic</i>				-2.77 (2.38)						-3.83 (2.60)
<i>Independent interwar State</i>					2.48 (1.58)					
<i>Ethnicity and religion</i>										
Ethnic homogeneity (share of pop. of largest ethnicity)						-5.53 (6.59)				
Protestant share							-0.02 (.030)			
Catholic share								.014 (.022)		
Muslim share									-0.063 (.046)	-0.01 (.02)
Muslim share * former soviet										-0.14 <sup>c</sup> (.03)
R-squared	.5847	.5820	.6038	.6112	.6069	.5911	.5745	.5845	.6203	.7326
N	26	25	26	26	25	25	24	25	26	26

OLS, robust standard errors. <sup>a</sup> p < .10, <sup>b</sup> p < .05, <sup>c</sup> p < .01

Table 1. Correlates of democracy in the postcommunist countries, 2007 (cont.)

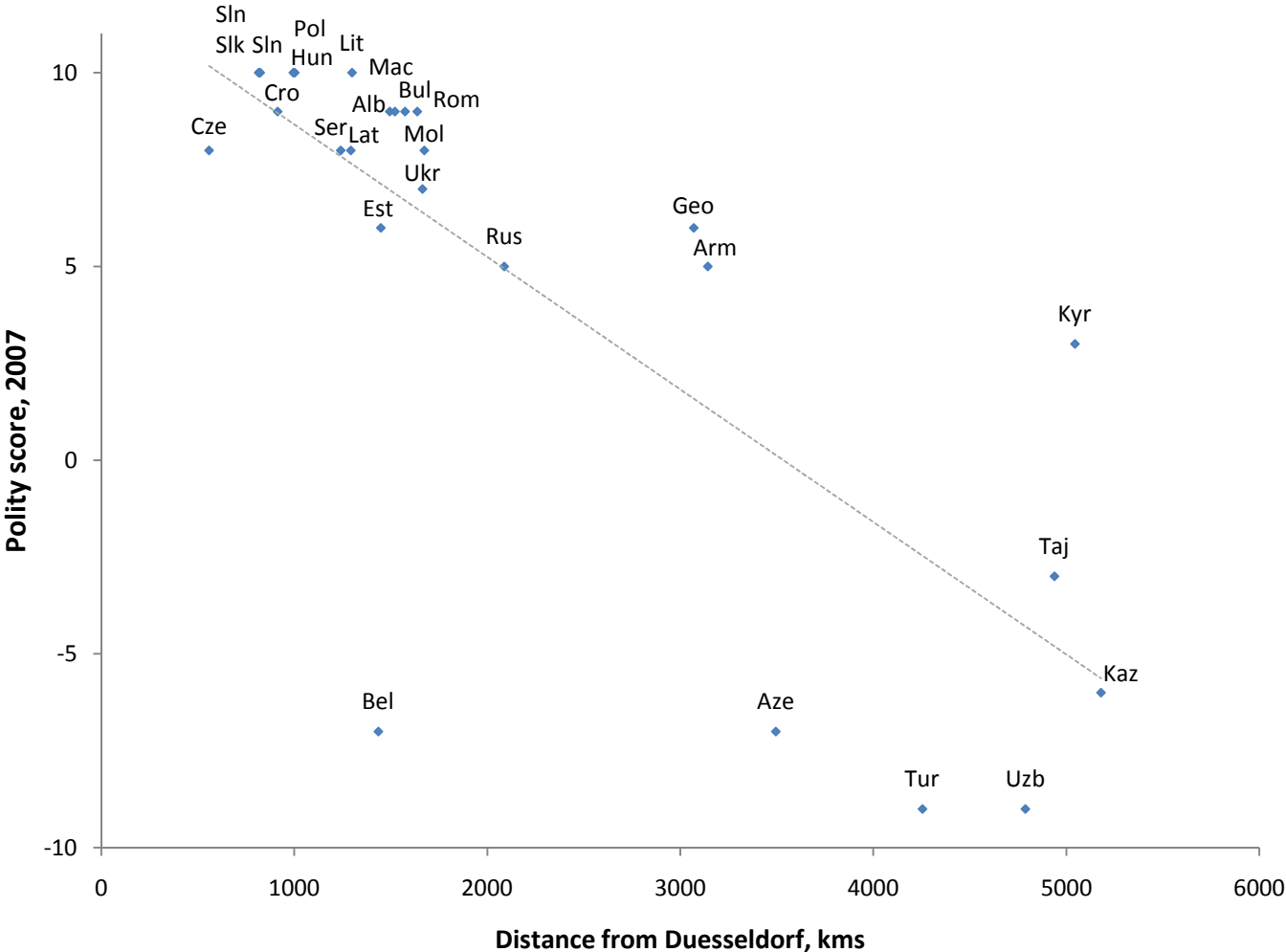
	-----Dependent variable: Polity score 2007-----							
	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)
Constant	15.85 <sup>c</sup> (2.29)	11.55 <sup>b</sup> (4.19)	12.35 <sup>c</sup> (1.22)	21.12 <sup>c</sup> (5.44)	9.75 <sup>c</sup> (3.19)	21.05 <sup>b</sup> (8.21)	19.29 <sup>c</sup> (5.49)	18.13 <sup>c</sup> (4.61)
Distance from Duesseldorf, th. kms.	-3.95 <sup>c</sup> (.71)	-3.11 <sup>c</sup> (.88)	-3.31 <sup>c</sup> (.82)	-1.81 (1.32)	-2.89 <sup>c</sup> (.90)	1.32 (1.97)	1.35 (1.78)	
Muslim share						-0.00 (.02)	-0.01 (.02)	
Muslim share * former Soviet						-0.15 <sup>c</sup> (.03)	-0.14 <sup>c</sup> (.03)	-0.11 <sup>c</sup> (.04)
Former Soviet republic						.12 (1.67)		
Independent interwar state						.13 (.66)		
<i>Economic development</i>								
GDP per capita PPP 1989, thousand \$ (Fischer and Sahay 2000)	-0.55 (.37)							
GDP per capita PPP 1990, thousand \$ (WDI, 2009)		.02 (.36)						
Agricultural value added as percent of gdp 1990, WDI			-0.024 (.086)					
<i>Political institutions</i>								
Years communist				-0.23 (.15)		-0.29 (.22)	-0.27 (.16)	-0.21 <sup>a</sup> (.10)
DPI system: parl = 2, pres = 0 strong pres elected by parl = 1					1.42 (1.21)	-0.46 (.42)		
R-squared	.6058	.5489	.5825	.6618	.6082	.7877	.7881	.7745
N	25	24	25	26	25	25	26	26

OLS, robust standard errors. <sup>a</sup> p < .10, <sup>b</sup> p < .05, <sup>c</sup> p < .01

Note first that, among the 26 postcommunist countries for which data were available, a simple proxy for distance from Western Europe—I use the distance of the country’s capital from Duesseldorf, Germany—can account for 58 percent of the variation (column 1). As was evident in considering trajectories in the previous section, the further east a communist country was, the

less likely it was to achieve consolidated democracy by 2007. This relationship is graphed in Figure 4. Closeness to Western Europe might matter for at least two reasons: it might increase the diffusion of democratic attitudes and ideas from the West and it might render the country's future integration into West European institutions such as the European Union more plausible (Kopstein and Reilly 2000). However, as will become apparent, the data suggest another interpretation.

**Figure 4. Distance from Duesseldorf and Polity rating 2007**



Greater endowments of minerals, and in particular oil, have been associated with less democratic government (Ross 2001). To capture such effects, I used a variable measuring the total quantity of oil produced in the country in the years 1970-89, in metric tons, calculated from Michael Ross's dataset on oil and gas. As column 2 shows, this did not have a statistically significant effect or affect the estimated influence of geography or the amount of variation explained. It might be that countries' pre-communist history affected the extent to which democracy developed in the postcommunist years. I classified countries on the basis of which of the three main East European empires—Russian, Ottoman, or Habsburg—had had the greatest influence over the country's current territory during the period after 1800. (I show regressions using dummies for Ottoman and Habsburg domination in Table 1, column 3; Russian domination is the excluded category.) Inevitably, this required some perhaps arguable judgment calls—for instance, I classified the dominant influence over Serbia as being the Ottomans rather than the Habsburgs, and the main influence over Azerbaijan as being the Russians rather than the Ottomans. As a check, I also tried classifications that took into account all the empires that had controlled part or all of the territory at some point since 1800. In neither case did the imperial history variables prove statistically significant. I also tried including dummy variables for whether the country had been a former Soviet republic or had had its own independent state in the interwar period. Both variables had the expected sign (negative for the former Soviet republics, and positive for interwar statehood), but neither of these was statistically significant (columns 4 and 5). None of these historical variables caused a large drop in the coefficient on distance from Duesseldorf, so they do not seem to explain much of the geographical pattern. To look for the effects of ethnic heterogeneity, I tried including three alternate measures, constructed by Jim Fearon, each of which reflects the distribution of ethnic groups in the

population as of 1990: the population shares of the largest and second largest ethnic groups, and an index of ethnic fractionalization. None of these was statistically significant, and none reduced the explanatory power of geographical location or increased the variation explained by much. In column 6, I show the result for the first of these.

Religious and cultural traditions are often thought to influence the development of political regimes. In these regressions, the proportion of Protestants or Catholics in the population (as of 1980) had no evident effect, but the proportion that were Muslim adherents did.<sup>11</sup> Including a measure of the share of the population that were Muslim adherents reduced the effect of geography by about one third. The Muslim share was not itself significant. However, if one breaks down the Muslims into those that live in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and those that live in the former Soviet republics, on the other, a clear result emerges. Although the proportion of Muslim adherents in the Balkans and Eastern Europe is unrelated to the degree of democracy (as we might expect, given the universally high levels of democracy in these regions), states with more Muslim adherents in the former Soviet world were far less democratic (column 10). Including in the regression also a dummy for former Soviet republics (so as to avoid mistaking the effect of Soviet legacy for an effect of Muslim heritage), geographical location is no longer significant and even has a positive sign.

At the start of transition, the communist countries were at very different levels of economic development. The association between economic development and democracy is one

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<sup>11</sup> For the proportions of Protestant and Catholic adherents, I used data from Barrett (1982). However, because this source gave non-credible estimates of the proportion of Muslims for some countries (e.g. Albania), I used data from the Association of Religion Data Archives for estimates of the Muslim share of the population (see [www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_3\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_3_1.asp)).

of the best known correlations in the social sciences.<sup>12</sup> Did it make a difference here? Answering this is complicated by the great divergence between estimates of what the initial levels of real gross domestic product per capita in these countries were. Consider three relatively authoritative sources of estimates of countries' gross domestic product, adjusted for purchasing power parity—the IMF (as published in Fischer and Sahay 2000), the World Bank's World Development Indicators (which obtain their data from the International Comparison Program), and the estimates of Angus Maddison of the OECD (Maddison 2003). The estimates of Russia's per capita GDP at purchasing power parity in 1989 or 1990 ranged from \$5,627 (Fischer and Sahay 2000, p.36) to \$9,086 (WDI as of 2009), with the Maddison estimate in between, at \$7,773. The problem is compounded by the fact that the International Comparisons Program changes its retrospective estimates of gdp per capita every few years, sometimes by large amounts.

Given this, I tried using two alternative measures—those of the IMF and the World Development Indicators, as of 1989-1990. Adding these to regressions including just distance from Duesseldorf, neither measure of national income per capita was significant, and neither reduced the estimated effect of location much. I also tried using instead a measure of the agricultural share of GDP in 1990 to pick up effects of initial underdevelopment, but again found no evidence that this mattered (columns 10-12).

Turning to political institutions, whether the country established a presidential, parliamentary, or mixed system, as coded by a team from the World Bank in the Database of Political Institutions (Beck et al. 2001), was not significant, and induced only a small drop in the

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<sup>12</sup> For recent attempts to determine the direction of causation, see Boix and Stokes (2003) and Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2008).

location variable's coefficient (column 14). However, the number of years a country had been communist did appear potentially important; although it was not itself statistically significant, including this reduced the size of the location coefficient by almost 50 percent (column 13).

Based on this preliminary investigation, I show some models including several explanatory variables in columns 15-17. First, in column 15, I show that once we control for Muslim religion, distinguishing between former Soviet and other Muslims, along with the duration of communism in the country, whether the country had a parliamentary or presidential system and whether the country had had an independent state in the interwar period were completely insignificant, the former now with the “wrong” sign. We see in columns 15 and 16 that Muslim religion and the number of years under communism can completely account for the effect of location, and actually change the sign of its coefficient. Column 16 drops the dummy for former Soviet states, which is highly correlated with the number of years under communism ( $r = .84$ ), and far less significant when the two are included together. Finally, column 17 shows a parsimonious model including just the proportion of Muslims in former Soviet states and the duration of communism. These variables, by themselves, can account for more than three quarters of the variation in the 2007 Polity scores, including the part correlated with location (adding the distance from Duesseldorf increases the R-squared only slightly, and the variable has a counterintuitive positive sign).

Table 2 shows some robustness checks, attempting to weaken the observed relationship between the Polity score, on the one hand, and Soviet-Muslim heritage and years under communism, on the other. Column 1 repeats the model from Table 1, column 17. Column 2 adds dummy variables for the different regional subgroups. This actually increases the size of the coefficients on both the Soviet Muslim share and years communist, although the latter is no

Table 2. Correlates of democracy, robustness checks

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
<i>Dependent variable</i>	Polity 2007	Polity 2007	Polity 2007	Polity 2007	Polity Demo- cracy Score 2007	Polity Par- comp 2007	Polity 1998	Polity 2007	Polity 2007
Constant	<b>18.13<sup>c</sup></b> (4.61)	19.20 <sup>b</sup> (7.72)	20.43 <sup>c</sup> (5.70)	18.38 <sup>c</sup> (4.55)	15.66 <sup>c</sup> (2.32)	5.84 <sup>c</sup> (.86)	13.02 <sup>b</sup> (5.39)	18.63 <sup>c</sup> (4.09)	9.18 <sup>c</sup> (.23)
Muslim share * former Soviet	<b>-.11<sup>c</sup></b> (.04)	-.13 <sup>c</sup> (.03)	-.11 <sup>b</sup> (.04)	-.11 <sup>c</sup> (.04)	-.06 <sup>c</sup> (.02)	-.02 <sup>b</sup> (.01)	-.11 <sup>c</sup> (.04)		-.11 <sup>b</sup> (.04)
Years communist	<b>-.21<sup>a</sup></b> (.10)	-.23 (.18)	-.23 <sup>a</sup> (.11)	-.22 <sup>a</sup> (.11)	-.15 <sup>c</sup> (.05)	-.04 <sup>b</sup> (.02)	-.14 (.11)	-.22 <sup>b</sup> (.09)	
<i>Region dummies (E Eur excluded)</i>									
Balkans		.18 (.64)							
Baltic		.81 (2.03)							
European CIS		-.13 (1.19)							
Caucasus		2.75 (4.94)							
Central Asia		2.55 (6.16)							
GDP per capita PPP 2007, thousand \$ (WDI, 2009)			-.08 (.08)						
Civil war dummy				1.76 (1.66)					
Central Asia + Azerbaijan								-8.40 <sup>c</sup> (2.94)	
Baltics + Moldova									-1.15 (.80)
Other FSU									-5.63 <sup>a</sup> (2.86)
R-squared	<b>.7745</b>	.7848	.7434	.7877	.8684	.6111	.6028	.7762	.7705
N	<b>26</b>	26	25	26	26	25	26	26	26

OLS, robust standard errors. <sup>a</sup> p < .10, <sup>b</sup> p < .05, <sup>c</sup> p < .01

longer statistically significant. None of the regional dummies are significantly different from Eastern Europe, and the proportion of variation explained is only slightly higher. Column 3



controls for *current* gdp per capita, rather than gdp per capita at the start of transition. Counterintuitively, this turns out to be negatively correlated with democracy (although not statistically significant), after controlling for Soviet Muslim heritage and years under communism. There is no gain in explanatory power, and the coefficients on the two main explanatory variables are the same or slightly larger. In column 4, I try controlling for whether the country experienced a civil war in the transition period.<sup>13</sup> The coefficient on the civil war dummy has an unexpected positive sign, although it is not statistically significant. Soviet Muslim tradition and communist legacy remained significant with coefficients that were not much changed.

Column 5 replaces the Polity score, which consists of the sum of Polity's democracy and authoritarianism scores, with just the democracy score (on the 0 to 10 scale). The results are similar, and now 87 percent of the variation is explained. Since the dependent variable is now measured on an 11-point, rather than a 21-point, scale, the coefficients are correspondingly somewhat smaller. Column 6 uses as dependent variable one component of the 2007 Polity democracy score—arguably the one that is least subjective in the coding—the Polity measure of the competitiveness of participation (*parcomp*). Countries are rated on a five-point scale which runs from “repressed”—“No significant oppositional activity is permitted outside the ranks of the regime and ruling party”—to “competitive”—when stable and enduring political groups compete for national office, without much coercion or disruption. Again, the proportion of Muslims in former Soviet countries and the number of years under communism are significant, and they together explain more than 60 percent of the variation.

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<sup>13</sup> I coded as 1 the countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Georgia, Russia, Serbia, and Tajikistan; as 0.5 Macedonia, Moldova, and Slovenia; and all others as 0. Bosnia was not in the data set because of missing data.

Column 7 examines whether the apparent effect of Muslim heritage and years under communism is something new that has emerged in recent years or a result that would also have shown up in the 1990s. I use as the dependent variable Polity's rating as of 1998. Again, the results are similar, although only 60 percent of the variation is explained. The Soviet Muslim variable has the same coefficient, but the years under communism variable is somewhat smaller and no longer statistically significant. This is because of the former Yugoslav states of Serbia and Croatia, which were highly authoritarian in the 1990s despite a relatively shorter time under communism; controlling for the Balkans, one obtains the same coefficient on years under communism as before (-.21,  $p < .05$ ).

The proportion of Muslims in former Soviet republics variable singles out the Central Asian states plus Azerbaijan (the variable correlates with a dummy for these six states at  $r = .98$ ). As might be expected given this correlation, including both in the regression, neither is statistically significant. Replacing the Soviet Muslim variable by the dummy for Central Asia plus Azerbaijan yields a marginally higher R-squared. Could there be some factor other than a high proportion of Muslims that unites and distinguishes these six states and that leads to authoritarian government? This is certainly possible. But it is not obvious what that other factor might be. It is not mineral wealth, since countries like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have little in the way of mineral resources. Nor can it be southern location or agricultural workforce, since Armenia and Georgia are as far south as Azerbaijan, and Georgia and Moldova were as agricultural as the six states in question at the start of transition.

The years communist variable might appear to be picking up just the three-way division between the East European and Balkan states, communized at the end of World War II, the Baltics and parts of Moldova, occupied by Stalin's troops in 1940, and the other Soviet republics,

incorporated into the USSR in the early 1920s. Including dummies for the Baltics plus Moldova and for the remaining former Soviet states yields an R-squared that is slightly lower than that in the column 1 model with years communist. Thus, it is possible that the years communist variable contains more relevant information than is captured by just this three-way division.

To recapitulate, one can account extremely well for the variation across the postcommunist countries in levels of democracy as of 2007 with two variables, both of which reflect characteristics of the countries that were strongly correlated with geography and more or less fixed at the start of transition. Countries that had lived under communism for longer and—among the former Soviet republics—those which had more Muslim adherents tended to make a less complete transition to democracy during the years between 1989 and 2007.<sup>14</sup> Choices of the political leaders during the transition period appear to have been secondary, or perhaps to have been largely determined by these aspects of the country's cultural and institutional legacies.

Except, perhaps, in one case. It seems to me that the election of Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus, and the determination of this individual to impose autocratic rule, changed the country's course in a quite fundamental way. If this is the case—and if our two explanatory variables, Muslim tradition and years communist, are the right ones—one should expect the relationship between these variables and the Polity score to be even stronger if we drop Belarus from the dataset. This is indeed the case. The R-squared rises from .77 to .88, and both explanatory variables are much more statistically significant than before.

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<sup>14</sup> Pop-Eleches (2007) finds similarly that a Muslim religious tradition and a history of pre-WWII Soviet statehood correlate with lower democracy ratings.

## 4 Discussion

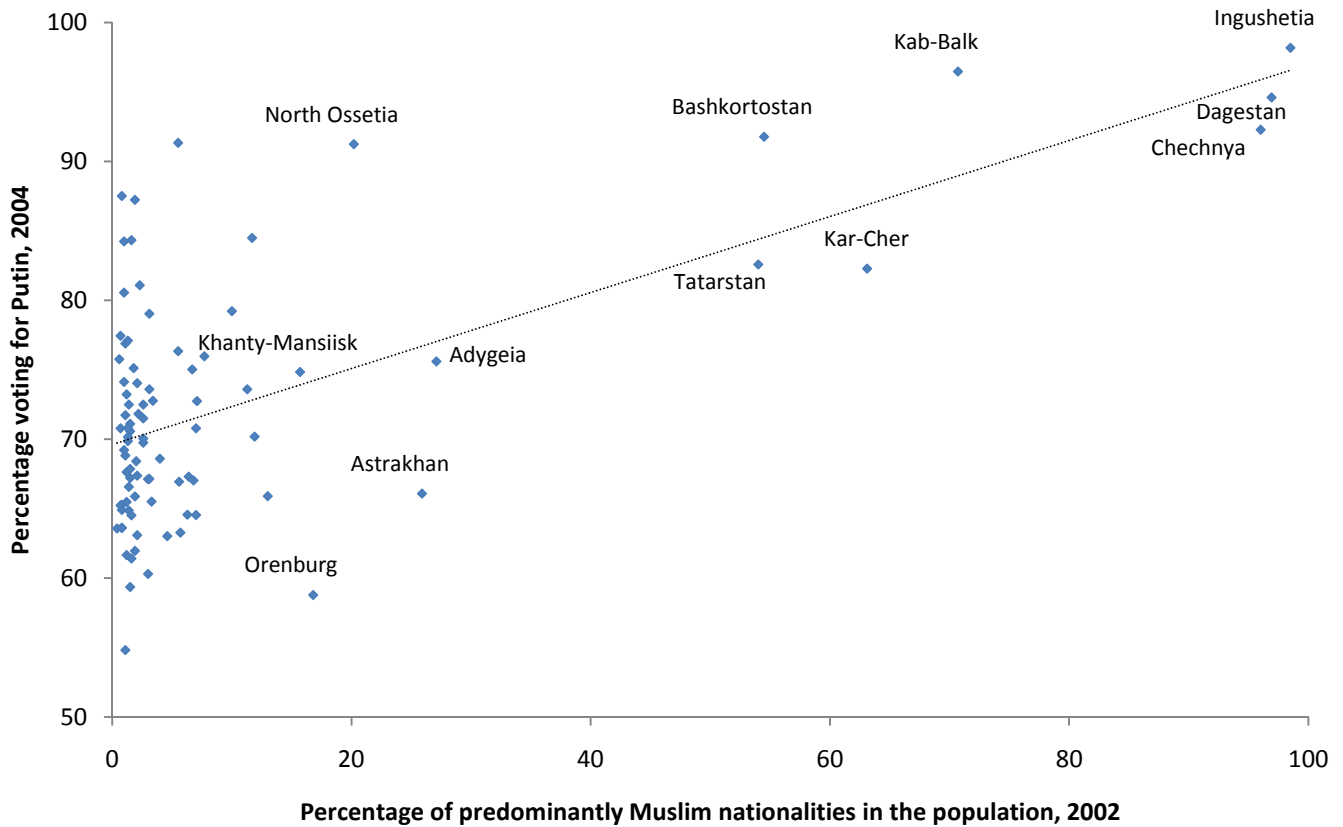
But what does all this mean? It is one thing to estimate some regressions, another to believe that what they are telling is “the truth.” That a Muslim tradition constitutes some sort of obstacle—although by no means an insuperable one—to liberal democracy echoes a result found by scholars who have looked at the determinants of democracy in broader datasets of countries (Fish 2002). Fish presents evidence that the correlation between Islam and authoritarianism is explained in part by the greater prevalence of patriarchal gender relations in the Muslim world, and refers to some other scholars who have argued that “the unusual tenacity of clan and tribal relations in Muslim societies ... are inimical to democracy.” At least in published statistics, the huge gender gaps that Fish demonstrates for many Muslim countries do not show up in the former communist world. There is almost no literacy gap between males and females in the postcommunist countries with large Muslim populations—the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan. Nor do these countries have particularly low representation of women in parliament.

The tenacity of clan networks may have more to do with it, although how exactly remains unclear. Within Russia, implausibly high electoral turnout and votes for central incumbents have become characteristic of various predominantly Muslim regions. Figure 5 shows the relationship for the 2004 presidential election, in which the incumbent, President Putin, won with 72 percent of the valid vote nationwide. Many of the more egregious reports of electoral irregularities have come from traditionally Muslim regions like Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Chechnya.<sup>15</sup> In these regions, governors have established particularly effective—and repressive—political machines. What role if any Islam played in this is a subject that requires further research.

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<sup>15</sup> For a review of reports of such irregularities, see Fish (2005).

**Figure 5. Muslim population and very high votes for Putin, 2004**



Source: Central Electoral Commission and Goskomstat RF.

It is also possible that in this region authoritarianism has been fueled not so much by elements of Islam as by the fear of it, and by the attempts by incumbent regimes to protect against Islamic fundamentalism in anti-democratic ways. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s, leaders used arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, and expulsion to crack down on those believed to be potential Islamic extremists (Collins 2002, Luong 2003). Within Russia, this has been one of the justifications for repression in parts of the North Caucasus where “Wahhabi” terrorist groups have been active.

The second determinant—years under communism—is plausible but vague in its implications. What exactly happened to countries in those additional years of communist rule

that reduced the impetus to create effective democratic institutions after communism fell? Whether or not the country had been part of the Soviet Union was not the crucial difference.<sup>16</sup> Nor was past experience of independent statehood (Table 1, column 15). Finally, I tried to see if the level of economic development of the country *at the time of communization* made a difference. Using Maddison's data, which required huge approximations such as using Maddison's estimate of average "USSR" GDP per capita in 1913 (\$1,488 1999 international Geary-Khamis dollars) for all the former USSR republics, I found no significant results. Perhaps better data on this would reveal patterns. But it is notable that the Czech republic, by far the most developed at the time of communization, with estimated GDP per capita of \$3,088 1990 dollars in 1948, was rated slightly less democratic in 2007 than Romania, which had estimated GDP per capita in 1946 of just \$816 1990 dollars. There was great variation in the level of economic development among the East European countries at the time of communization, yet they have moved in a pack to high levels of democratic consolidation.

In short, I have no good answer. Countries that were incorporated by the Bolsheviks after 1917 are today the least democratic; those that were incorporated into the Soviet Union during World War II come second; and the countries that became communist—but not Soviet—after the end of World War II are today the most democratic. Why exactly, I cannot say. In addition, post-Soviet countries where more of the population was traditionally Muslim are today less democratic. Again, why exactly is a question for further research. The strong way in which the data point towards historical legacies—especially in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Central Asia; less decisively in the European CIS and the Caucasus—is striking. It is also disappointing

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<sup>16</sup> See Table 1, column 15. Adding the dummy for former Soviet republic to a model with just years communist and Soviet republic times Muslim adherents, the Soviet dummy was not significant and the R-squared was only .0004 higher.

for those who hope, through policy advice, to increase the level of democracy in these countries in the short or medium run. So far, at least, the choices of different policies or of particular configurations of political institutions seem either to have been strongly determined by history and culture or to have mattered less than the historical contexts in which they were chosen.

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