

JURAJ KALICKÝ*

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Faculty of Political Science
and International Relations, Matej Bel University

JANA LASICOVÁ**

Department of Security Studies, Matej Bel University

JAROSLAV UŠIAK***

Department of Security Studies, Matej Bel University

Central European states from a conservative perspective in the period 1990–2004

Introduction

The geopolitical term Central Europe has hardly ever been exactly defined until now (so far) either in space or in time. The states or states' clusters within this domain have exhibited highly distinguishing characteristics in the form of the assemblage of various nationalities, ethnicities, and religions when compared to the states of Western Europe. The analysis of particular states of either a limited or a broader Central Europe has become a research subject of many theoreticians of political science and international relations. Though this issue has been indisputably analysed in many scientific studies, there is still a lack of thorough learning on the impact of ideological concepts on how some of the already mentioned states managed to cope with economic barriers of the given period. Economic transformation of a political system is rather complex, and it requires a specific approach to be dealt with, as recently defined and summarised by the Copenhagen

* Juraj Kalický — works as a special lecturer at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Matej Bel University, Kuzmányho 1, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, the Slovak Republic.

** Jana Lasicová — works as a part-time Associated professor at the Department of Security Studies, Matej Bel University, Kuzmányho 1, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, the Slovak Republic.

*** Jaroslav Ušiak — works as a full-time Associated professor at the Department of Security Studies, Matej Bel University, Kuzmányho 1, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, the Slovak Republic.

criteria.¹ The process itself can be put into practice only by highly prepared and properly experienced experts. If not, there is a possibility of cyclically repeated accidents, e.g., financial crisis, corruption, failures of the private sector, etc.

The aim of the article is to set those selected theoretical concepts that had the greatest impact on the successful transformation of former socialist states, where-in economies were predicated on a different basis compared to Western Europe, i.e., the central economic planning. Applied scientific methods are determined by the content of the article and the issue itself. Thus synthesis, analysis, convergent comparison, and security synergetics, especially reflecting threats and crises will be methodologically accompanied with the selected theories of conservatism, and neo-conservatism, proving specific analytical layers to search social, political, and economic strata of reality.

1. Conservatism — a conceptual platform for economic, security and political state transformation

Conservatore — accounts for the Latin term the meaning of which is the process of maintenance of any phenomena, especially of universal human values. From the Middle Ages onwards conservatism is related with the effort to preserve peace as one of the main prerequisites for the welfare of human society. The Enlightenment signified this phenomenon for European states to project the ideas of progressivism and terminating old obstructive traditional concepts. This ideological movement was distinctly at odds with monarchism and clericalism, as the main supporters of conservative principles. Philosophically, conservatism since its initial phase was highly political, though being viewed as a permanently dogmatic and sceptical doctrine. This critical objection was derived from the fact that conservatism, in general, did not support prompt social changes and reforms, but was seemingly in favour of the then prevailing *status quo*. Broadly speaking, conservative thinking cannot be viewed as a political doctrine. In its proper form it impacts irrational attributes, sets priorities of social values, social ethos, preserving historically and socially verified values, and attempting to maintain an existing social and legal system in the form of permanently working and efficient models.

What is more, conservatism might able to strengthen national pride, but, as pointed out by the German philosopher Herder, J. G., in an exaggerated form, it turns counterproductively into a sort of cliché or sentiment. Supporters of conservative thinking claim that its criticism is caused by the absence of a thorough

¹ The Copenhagen criteria represent the accession procedure to be conformed to by those states which aspire to become EU members. In June 1993, the EU Summit in Copenhagen decided to open EU membership to Central and East European countries previously forming the Cold War Soviet bloc.

understanding of its fundamental parameters, which are rather broad and directly related to economic development. One of them, oriented towards right political ideology, supports elitism, i.e., the existence of elites and to some extent liberalism, in case it serves economic interests. This kind of conservatism makes use of the classical perception of the doctrine where in a social hierarchy, authority and power are taken as a rather innate feature, similarly as is innate the social subordination between those who govern and those who are governed. Accordingly, social product and wealth are allocated. Consequently value orientations are put into the political spectrum, especially if the state finds itself at a transformation crossroads.

The uncertainty of such periods was materialised within the increase of etatisation and egalitarian values via the middle-spectrum political parties. Partially, the role of paternalism was increased, while the left-wing and anti-reformist parties made use of it, which determines that conservatism had a left-wing as well as right-wing political essence. Generally speaking, during the process of economic transformation, the indecisiveness of citizens is supposed to accept that political system which has been recently created in order to properly enforce new reforms, as citizen-voters decide in general elections either irrationally or by means of populist manipulation. B. Caplan in his book *The Myth of the Irrational Voter* claims that the main source of an improper decision making process by new democracies at the time of reformation processes, as in Central Europe, is the irrationality of voters as well as slogans of populist politicians. Instead of reality, myths and clichés are registered (Caplan 2008). Consequently, social awareness in transforming states tends to be more oriented towards conservatism more than towards strictly liberal values, or towards combining their mixed hybrid doctrinal form. The basic idea of conservatism consists of two praxeological bases. The traditional one, mainly etatistic and paternalistic, is marked by scepticism towards a market economy. The second-praxeological basis stresses the fact that private possession is the essence of a properly functioning state, which finds its parallel with Thomas Aquinas's concept of a well-functioning Christian society wherein private possession is supposed to be an inseparable part of human and civic freedom, moreover, strictly under state protection. In this way a person tends to commit charitable deeds within a humanitarian or charity domain as can be recently observed in the activities of governmental or non-governmental organisations.

Historically, conservatism was seminal within the creation of foreign policy doctrines of many liberal states, e.g., the Monroe doctrine, mainly due to its inherent pragmatism. In fact, this ideology does not make so much use of the terms such as people, nation, the masses. Conversely, strong state elites and institutions account for those phenomena, which play the most important role when there is a need to maintain order and to eliminate conflicts. As such, citizens are partly deprived of their rights and freedoms in order to give a preference to the state *per se*. The state's task is to form those institutions which guarantee territorial protection,

the state's concept, as well as a certain kind of isolationism as a protection against those phenomena that might cause conflicts in society. Isolationism as a security doctrine and a characteristic feature of a security environment was during the course of history several times tested and implemented by those states which wanted, for various reasons, to maintain their *status quo* (the USA, Japan, China, Great Britain, Myanmar, Iran, etc.).

Recent conservatism has its supporters even in the European Union — the concept of which is a result of liberalism. It is significant mainly at those moments when for some time mechanisms of integration fail, and the state is not capable of guaranteeing the protection of national sovereignty. Disputes always arise with any efforts concerning EU or NATO enlargement, especially with a necessity to reformulate a security environment that is always changing when enlargement takes place. Conservative arguments of those states which might potentially share borders with new member states, point to the fact that the enlargement process itself is not necessarily to eliminate regional disparities. Conversely, it might be a source of threats for those states which are left beyond the borders of an integrating entity.

Conservatism also points to another dimension of private possession absent in the previous periods of collectivisation. Citizens, while attempting to gather more private property to reap the benefits related to it, contribute directly and effectively to the benefit of the whole society. This interaction was almost not evident and absent when governments composed of one political party dominated and governed mainly the countries of the former Soviet bloc.

2. The real economic dimension of conservatism

As stated above, conservatism is generally taken as opposition to the French Enlightenment which immensely stressed rationalism. It was the 18th century when the Enlightenment as a product of the French revolution completely annulled feudalism *in situ* as well as the monarchy, and established the tradition of human and civil rights for European nations. Less pronounced is the economic dimension of this revolution, which impacted the national economy, domestic and foreign policy needless to say, of the contours of Europe in the following two decades, during the Napoleonic wars (Mácha 1968). The affluent aristocracy, after even the Colbert² reforms, accounted for a stumbling block in foreign policy and economic development, especially when compared to the level of progress in Great Britain. Within the changes of the social-political system, and with Colbert

² Jean-Baptiste Colbert — a French politician, serving as the Minister of Finances of France from 1665 to 1683 under the rule of King Louis XIV. As the dominant political figure and expert on economic affairs, tax, and financial system, Colbert carried out the programme of economic reconstruction that helped to make France the dominant power in Europe.

himself sidelined in effect — the so called centralised Jacobite democracy, a new system of economic reforms, especially the reformed tax system, was put into practice. Another progressive, newly-flexible dimension, was a new social class — the bourgeoisie, which was enabled to implement a new economic — capitalist market economy. Conservatism in this case served as a tool to protect the aristocracy to preserve traditional values due to revolutionary movements.

A first interpretation of conservatism under which it formed opposition to the progress brought by the French revolution was copied in its altered form in other European countries. The 19th century and its bourgeoisie revolutions produced two relevant social entities — aristocrats (toppled monarch and aristocrats) and liberals (bourgeoisie — acting in industry, building, agriculture) who also gained support from the intelligentsia, army representatives, and the lower social classes. Moreover, liberals were viewed as utterly lacking in respect towards traditional values such as patriotism, and were considered as cosmopolitans. It was the period which pioneered completely new European ideologies via social changes. Conservative parties formed in this period maintained their continuity in conservative thinking especially in Great Britain, Spain, Italy, and also in other states coming into existence in the 19th century.

The interpretations of conservatism are different. Compared to the first, the second has historical corollaries. Here, history used by the American politologist Leo Strauss makes use of this interpretation in order to accentuate the fact that conservatism is not as fully authentic and independent as other ideologies. Conversely, there is an interconnection with liberal state theories to be the main actor in international politics, mainly at the confluence of paternalism and protective role of a state (Strauss 1953). This interpretation dates back to the first half of the 19th century, ideologically impacted by A. Comte. Based on Comte's theory — conservatism is not an ideology *per se*, it is only a fear of particular social classes resulting from their inability to preclude irreversible social-political changes. Emotional changes and anxiety are wrongly taken and presented as political postures, while they have no place in society since it is an entity with its own structure and dynamics (Mácha 1968). Authenticity of the economic dimension of the first interpretation can be proved by the fact that conservatism resisted firstly a change in the societies' economic, then social, and finally, political insight. Economic boom in the transatlantic domain caused a fear of possible but mainly less controllable repercussions of *laissez-faire* economics. K. Marx, who formulated the rule of surplus value and benefit, also pointed to these potential flaw points, though being not a conservative, mainly because of the fear of a possible collapse of capitalism (Marx 1965).

Proponents of this interpretation of conservatism, in actual fact, did not oppose technological change brought about by scientific development, as being criticised by their opponents. Conversely, scientific and technological development was taken as inevitable, but so decisive as to radically change social life.

In their opinion, science and technology contribute to state power, which is then respected in the international environment with a higher prestige if more attention is paid to technological inventions.³ High tolerance of conservatism towards technological-scientific development was supposed to confirm the reliability and correctness of conservatism and its positive impact on the economy of a state.

As already mentioned, under the second interpretation, conservatism is not “a clear ideology.” Today, after two decades of political parties’ development it has been proved that no *per se* or strictly single way-oriented political parties exist. When taking into consideration geographical conditions, a state’s wealth in natural, security aspects, and energy sources (security), conservatism, thanks to its own structure with an integrated substantial economic dimension, has been able to fully integrate with liberal and socialist doctrines and ideologies.

Conservatives in the economic sphere permanently prefer their own rational concept only as a project, the achievement of which might be realised either by liberal or any tools, backing on the historically-verified slogan “the end justifies the means”, especially if a stronger state is the issue.

Conservatism is adjustable. The neo-conservatism of the recent period as well as various centre-right and right wing peoples’ parties, across the political spectrum are classified as conservative.⁴ The increase in the number of conservative political parties in the structure of the European parliament, especially in its leadership, reflects this adaptability.⁵ As such, it is perceived that the opposition always becomes more radical either regionally and nationally within the EU platform. Conservatives also attempt to preserve the family as a fundamental institution of state. Economic discipline and stability are presented as basic individuals’ duties, moreover liberals are criticised for taking this issue as an optional (Sútor 1999).

A third interpretation has no theoretical ground. A conservatively-orientated person can be socially active, thus their attitude is transformed into an ideological posture. In the case of attempting to be socially influential, the person must be an active participant in party policy, while being consciously, or at least subconsciously, aware of the difference between economic and social conservatism. This selection takes place within strong conservative parties and in their selection campaigns. If a voter does not see a connection between the economic and social agenda, the state must provide aid where required by this kind of voter. Thus a phenomenon called “social-democratic consensus”, comes into operation in order to flexibly integrate conservative strategy into a coalition with liberals, as

³ After the Second Industrial Revolution Great Britain became the world’s first industrialised nation of the 19th century. Conservatives occupied at that time a very strong position, though fully accorded with this unprecedented scientific-technological revolutionary progress.

⁴ Christian Democrats-Slovakia, Russian United Democratic Party — Yabloko — the Russian Federation, Jobbik — Hungary, etc.

⁵ On 17th January 2017, Antonio Tajani was elected President of the European Parliament, member of Forza Italia — the Conservative party of Italy.

can be seen in European or American history (Oakeshott 1962). In Central Europe conservatism has gained its position via political clerical, right-wing, national-people's parties during the last decade of the 20th century, while contributing to an economic rise and social stability. However, the position of these parties was later weakened due to their tendencies not to join the EU or NATO. Moreover, electoral results are impacted by issues from the outer space e.g., the increased influx of refugees, etc., which causes splits in internal-party relations. This is something new in states previously governed by one-party political systems. This situation cannot be branded either as positive or negative, it is just a process of a civic society formation which is still not over, as can be seen e.g., in the V4 countries whereby an improper copying of a kind of EU fashion has strongly been criticised by Central European eurosceptics, although a convergence of conservatism and liberalism emerges, which better helps to cope with security issues e.g., illegal migration flows (Gizicki et al. 2014). Although there might be an accord within security policies, this was not the case of the V4 countries. The year 2017, especially its first half, was a turning point of this tendency as in the V4 a new trend of party and civic variety evolved, gaining a positive image in the EU supranational space.

3. A neoconservative way to deal with relevant matters

From a time perspective, the formation of conservative parties was a significant change of this ideology. As these political parties and their neoconservative version approached towards a practical policy, a continuity of their impact on social development was guaranteed. This situation emerged not as a direct result of conservatism, but via logical continuity, and more importantly, the establishment and activation of conservative parties has always been caused by social change or revolution. Today, the trend might be termed transition — a transfer from one political status to another. In 1818, after the end of the Napoleonic revolution era of French history, thanks to F. Chateaubriand and the magazine *Le Conservateur*, a conservative party was created. It was based on hermeneutic methodology — and strictly through *hermeneutechné*⁶, a modality of political struggle was defined. Development of trends towards the efficiency of conservative ideas in politics also took place in Great Britain, where an already formed conservative movement transformed into the Conservative party in 1834. This development as such impacted also other countries, and was always activated with social changes. In the European background, it was bourgeois revolutions since the 17th century,

⁶ The term *hermeneu-techné* is of Greek origin, coined by Aristotle (*Politics*) as a way of managing political impact via various analytical levels, approaches and alternative attitudes. Since the 18th century this method has been applied in legal science as a way of interpretation.

up to the revolutions of the Spring of Nations⁷ of the 19th century (Anderson 1974; Holden 1974).

A century later, in 1947, another hybrid of conservatism emerged as a need to suppress the realisation of communism in order to ideologically protect the United States of America, mainly due to the situation after the Second World War. As such, a new metamorphosis of conservatism, in this particular case initially via J. R. McCarthy — a republican senator, and later as a main creed of ideology, radically changed freedom from the “clarity” of ideology while stressing the economic goal of politics. A transitive level between traditional conservatism and neoconservatism was the New Right⁸ (Cowel 1986). A substantial part of neoconservatism is full of all the above-mentioned efforts to set politically the political situation after downgrading the impact of liberal concepts dominating at the beginning of the 1960s, which firstly dominated strongly, then gradually lost influence.

American as well as European neo-conservatism is in fact an ex-liberal doctrine, which reassesses influential liberalism and defines its marginalised movements. As reasons we may introduce several failures of liberal concepts, especially e.g., young generation movements requiring multicultural and racial equality, though lacking a particular orientation or goal. Here it is possible to conclude the following facts: neonservatism comes out of the platform of social/cultural demands where making use mainly of a free market economy, economic reforms, thanks to the interference between civic rights and the state’s duty to reflect new social movements (Kopecezi 1986). Irving Kristol, the very important American intellectual, became a significant ideologist of neo-conservatism. According to him, neo-conservatism is a new set of beliefs coming into existence since the disappointment of society over the real potential of liberalism (Nisbet 2000). Kristol comes out of a traditional concept of liberalism which accentuates traditions in the sense that they provide people with an identity and insurance even under

⁷ The Spring of Nations was a series of political upheavals throughout Europe in 1848. This term in its essence expresses social problems but mainly ambitions related to geopolitical effort, establish new state units which reached their climax in the so-called revolution year 1848 on the European continent. Generally, this period can be characterised as an epoch of transformation of the political status when the Vienna Congress (1814–1815) completely re-structured Europe by changing state boundaries according to power ambitions of particular major European states. What is more, each nation- a people (as stated in the French institution) demanded sovereignty and sovereign state. Two state tendencies started to be topical: on the one hand — the principle of nation states, on the other, states formed in a citizenship manner, e.g., Austria under Metternich absolutism. Both tendencies resulted in violence — either in the form of revolution movements from the side of social level strata, or in the form of state terror, e.g., Austria.

⁸ New Right is a conservative doctrine which converged with a new political agenda formed in the 1960s. It accentuated at that time less-reflected social issues, e.g., the problem of gender equality, women’s rights, culture emancipation of a group with diverse sexual orientation (homosexuals, religion, ethnic communities, etc.) Thus the New Right is a conservative movement which reacted to a now social agenda in states of Western Europe and the USA.

a negatively changing social agenda. He further claims that traditional social ties were formed within moral consequences, and if they are not met, a destabilisation of society might result. Traditional conservatism and neo-conservatism stress even more social order, viewing it to be a higher economic and moral principle (Ježovičová 2004). Kristol contributed to the promotion of conservatism, but mainly of neo-conservatism. Obviously, the development of neo-conservative thinking was positively impacted by the social and economic change in the 1960s. A new integration based on economic cooperation began to develop with preference over politics. Economic integration between Europe, both Americas and South-East Asia, brought new benefits, mainly when coping with the post-Cold War situation, when formulation of so-called social welfare, and even by issues such as family, state, religion, and a particular social background. It seemed as if conservatism had framed more exact contours as to what the state establishment can and cannot do. Consequently, there arises a parallel with the transition period of the states of Central and Eastern Europe with those events of the Spring of Nations. The relevant European states are gaining a new identity towards institutions as the Warsaw Pact, and the Council of Mutual Economic Cooperation. At the same time, a new identity is indisputably connected to economic stability, but an inseparable part of this stability is an accommodation of states towards changes in sovereignty, economic, security and political integration, a new understanding of conservatism and its innovations. Essentially, a broader European identity based on respect towards traditions, values, and order is being proved. Therefore a newly reflected multi-speed Europe in which the V4 countries are attempting to find their position, and other Central and Eastern European states might be viewed as a base for the continuity mentioned above in the interference between liberal and conservative ideas.

Conclusion

As for the essence of political conservatism, it can be concluded that it undoubtedly accounts for a non-homogenous ideological phenomenon. Within the practical political domain, there are still differences between those who hail economic conservatism on the one hand, between those who are in favour of social conservatism on the other. As a prime cause of this disputation can be considered the process of EU economic, political, and security integration which subdues national sovereignty, while applauding the so-called supranationality. If taken for granted, this kind of conservatism takes as an inseparable part issues which have become inherent in the minds of Christians. Thus there can be considered two possible tendencies of future development. Firstly, the approximation model via building a certain level of tolerance between conservatism and liberalism. Secondly, the epochal misery of liberalism which might, in its boundless form,

completely get lost in the near future. Historically gained experience clearly provides states as well as citizens with the fact that no ideology meets all citizens' needs since it cannot take a preeminent position in any social system.

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CENTRAL EUROPEAN STATES FROM A CONSERVATIVE PERSPECTIVE IN THE PERIOD 1990–2004

Summary

The post-communist transition of Central European States (the V4 countries and their neighbours, when speaking about a broader Central Europe) took place in the last decade of the 20th century until the years 2002 and 2004, when the V4 countries were allowed to access the EU and NATO. In this case, the term transition accounts for changes in the political status of states, a transition period in which basic pillars of the state — political system, the market economy, replaced the centrally-planned economy, the security and agenda of human rights, were assessed by new criteria. It was a complicated process that had to be reflected from the perspective of science and research, but also it had to be accepted from the perspective of citizens who did not always perceive the changes in a positive way. Central Europe lacked public discussion, a space that was supposed to be dedicated to the supporters of integration, but also to opposing opinions in order to make transparent

attitudes, objections, but mainly, to introduce comprehensible projects of further development. Today many theoreticians from Western Europe view the absence of public discussion to be a serious lack of planning in the preparation period. Mainly future positive benefits were presented, liberalism as the best solution of economic problems was unilaterally preferred. Little attention was given to possible impacts of the other ideological or theoretical concepts, e.g., conservatism, which puts an emphasis on the important role of the state, traditions, paternalism, and other aspects, which could, at first sight, operate as controlling mechanisms, even barriers to liberalism and integration. At that time, conservatism seemed to be an outdated ideology. But in practice, the situation was different. Conservative parties, and particularly the conservative perspective of reality, became an essential way of problem solving. The article aspires to explain some aspects of the impact of conservatism on the positive process of transition and transformation in Central Europe.

Keywords: Central Europe, transition, transformation, conservatism, economic dimension, Central Europe, neoconservatism.

Juraj Kalický
juraj.kalicky@umb.sk

Jana Lasicová
lasicova@gmail.com

Jaroslav Ušiak
jaroslav.usiak@umb.sk