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# From the Soviet Bloc to the Ballot Box: Democratization in Eastern Europe

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

From the Soviet Bloc to the Ballot Box:  
Democratization in Eastern Europe

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
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## Abstract

### From the Soviet Bloc to the Ballot Box: Democratization in Eastern Europe

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This undergraduate honors thesis examines the common causes of democratic transitions in Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine. One purpose of this honors project is to discern why certain countries like Poland and Latvia have successfully transitioned to and consolidated stable democratic institutions, while others like Ukraine have not. One central question examines the degree of influence that foreign actors exerted in promoting democracy movements in Eastern Europe. A theoretical framework will be established by combining parts of the models of Samuel Huntington, Juan Linz, and Alfred Stepan. The research project will place special scrutiny on Huntington's theory of foreign actors affecting democratic change. This thesis will examine how changes in the approach to foreign affairs by the Soviet Union, the Vatican, and the U.S. influenced Eastern Europe during the "third wave" of democratization. More specifically, these changes will be linked to the rise of civil society in the region, like Solidarity in Poland. Other causes and aspects of democratic transformation will also be examined, like demographics in Latvia and the deep-rooted problems of corruption, economic stagnation, and dependence on Russia that continue to plague the Ukrainian democracy. At the end, implications of the study will be explored in light of resurgent Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and around the world. Questions surrounding the Trump administration and the future of transatlantic security and stability will be addressed.

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## **Introduction**

In order to understand the history and imagine the future of democracy, it is vital to understand the phenomenon of the “third wave” of democratization in the twentieth century in a way that illuminates the factors that led to its occurrence. Three fundamental questions guide the study of this period and of global democratization in general. First, it is imperative to determine both the independent and common factors that led to the democratic transformations in the Eastern Bloc. This study will thus seek to discern the common causes of recent democratic transformations in post-communist Europe by specifically studying the cases of Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine. Through qualitative and quantitative means, various hypotheses and causes of modern democratization will be applied to these three cases thematically to more fully comprehend the dynamics of democratic transition. By doing so, common causes that initiated democratic opening in these three countries will be studied.

Second, it is necessary to find out why some countries in this region (such as Poland and Latvia) were relatively successful in making the transition to democracy and sustaining its institutions, and why others (like Ukraine) faltered after attempting to democratize and continue to experience significant problems. These reasons are certainly complex, and some are interrelated with the causative factors of democratization. However, this question will yield a closer and more in-depth look at each of the three countries individually. The mere fact that each country had differing outcomes and varying degrees of success demonstrates the truth that, whatever forces led to those results, they largely are specific to that nation. Today, Poland and Latvia are established members of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European

Union (EU), and are two of the fastest growing European economies. Conversely, the Ukrainian democracy has been plagued by rigged elections, vast economic stagnation, a weak judiciary, and widespread government corruption. Clearly distinguishing the reasons for these contrasting results is not only important, but necessary, to comprehend the challenges of consolidating a democracy after transition.

Third, the role of geographical proximity and foreign influences must be scrutinized in relation to a country's democratic fortunes. This can be understood as the "Neighbor Effect," or the "Domino Effect," as Dr. Samuel Huntington labels it. Numerous political scientists argue that transitions to any regime are mostly due to domestic factors that originate from within a country. However, the broader location and conditions of the international realm should not be discounted when examining democratization, especially in a region like Eastern Europe. The instruments of influence and coercion that exist in the arsenal of regional powers and global hegemony enable these foreign actors to exert power on other countries and their political processes. These foreign actors vary from specific countries to international organizations.

Inherent in this category of study is pondering the role of the West in supporting democracy abroad (and in these three cases) as well as the influence that Russia continues to wield over former Soviet satellite states and nations within their "sphere of influence" like Ukraine. Influence and power can manifest themselves in economic and diplomatic sanctions, humanitarian aid, coalition pressure and pressure from international organizations, as well as other incentives. These tools, along with others, comprise what is known in the diplomatic community as "soft power." Coupled with the opposite means of influence – hard power or the threat of military force - these tactics can be incredibly



impactful in pressuring a country to change its ways. The role of the “Neighbor Effect,” and the foreign policies of the U.S. and Soviet Union, as well as the influence of supranational organizations like NATO and the European Community and even other sources of power like the Vatican, were at the epicenter of the transition to democracy in the Eastern Bloc. Likewise, these foreign factors were equally as powerful in affecting the different regime outcomes that existed between each country and continue to exist in the present-day. Therefore, this angle of evaluating the past and current state of democracy in eastern Europe must not be undervalued.

Before revealing hypotheses, it is first necessary to explore the background of this subject, and lay out the theoretical framework through which this study will partially be conducted. The work of certain scholars will be used to examine cases of democratization, and will provide various methods for determining the most relevant causes of transformation for each country. Huntington, Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz, and others all have made substantive contributions to this subject. After laying out the theoretical framework, hypotheses will be constructed to guide the study going forward. Then, necessary findings, data, and qualitative analysis will be thoroughly disclosed. These findings will be amalgamated in the broader international context when possible. Finally, after summarizing the study in the conclusion, implications of each transition will be explored in order to imagine the future the region. In doing so, present-day geopolitical realities will be considered.

## **Background**

One hundred years ago to this month, on April 2, 1917, the president of the United States had had enough. After years of unilateral aggression by an authoritarian

regime in the German empire and dogged American neutrality, President Woodrow Wilson addressed a joint session of Congress, asking for war. Yet, the motive of his plea did not solely pertain to the interests of his own country. Rather, he believed the destiny of the world order was at stake. That world order, the international community that Wilson envisioned, was to be grounded in one thing: democracy. He believed the U.S. had a responsibility to intervene in the European conflict, the “War to End All Wars,” to, in his words: “make the world safe for democracy” (Wilson). With this statement, President Wilson not only marked the beginning of a new era in American foreign policy thought, but he also advocated for a new international order.

Although this was a bold new idea, the foundation of Wilson’s idea for the future of the international system had existed for centuries. Democracy is a form of government that dates back to ancient Greece. Although present in the works of philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, the modern propagation of democracy did not emerge until the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Huntington, 5-6). At that point in history, democratic revolutions in America and France shocked the western world and demonstrated the rising prominence of this new governing model and idea. It took the French a few decades to consolidate their democracy and make the full transition, but the U.S. and France both quickly became dominant players on the world stage. Nevertheless, the spread of democracy was slow. In the ensuing 160 years, only a few states undertook democratic transitions - like Switzerland and Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the immediate aftermath of the second World War, Italy, Austria, Japan, Korea, and West Germany accepted various democratic institutions initiated by the Allied occupiers (Huntington, 16-19). Turkey and Greece crept toward democracy around the same time,

as did many Latin American countries (Huntington, 19). Democracy did not begin to significantly spread, however, until the twilight of the Cold War. Specifically, the military coup in Portugal in 1974 marked the beginning of what Samuel P. Huntington famously labeled the “third wave,” and most dominant period, of global democratic transition (Huntington, 4). This broadly refers to the period between 1974 and 1991, but especially between 1989 and 1991, wherein approximately thirty countries from around the world made the transition from nondemocratic to democratic regimes. This constituted the most important movement of the late twentieth century. It prompted political scientists and international relations scholars like Francis Fukuyama to hypothesize the “end of history,” when democracy would ultimately prove to be the universal, predominant, and final form of government. Fukuyama’s exact words from the controversial 1989 essay were: “what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government ” (Roth & Fukuyama). Long ago were the days of the surging totalitarianism that led to World War II. This new “wave” of democratic transition was a consequential event, giving many Western scholars and proponents of freedom much cause for optimism.

Although the movement toward democracy in this period spanned geographic regions, the area in which it was most concentrated was east-central Europe. After World War II, the Soviet Empire bolstered their regional hegemony, spreading their influence in most of Eastern Europe. Joseph Stalin and the Soviet regime moved quickly after the Allied victory to effectively colonize their western neighbors. After the grueling military

campaign that ended in pushing the Nazi's back to Berlin, the Soviets empowered Moscow loyalists within each of their occupied territories to assume political power. They infiltrated police forces in countries like Poland and won the propaganda war by dominating radio waves in the region (Applebaum). The Soviets also used these occupied states for mercantile purposes. They uprooted factories, industries, and even material goods, to bring back to the U.S.S.R. to assuage the starvation and economic woes that spread across the country during the war (Applebaum). The most notable manifestation of Soviet intervention in eastern Europe was the installment of numerous puppet communist regimes. Authoritarian governments in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia were, in effect, created and propped up by Soviet Russia. The "sphere of influence" that Stalin envisioned when discussing Europe's partition with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany in the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact of 1939 had taken hold in a most pronounced manner ("A secret protocol"). The Soviet Union now dominated half of the continent. Marxist teachings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which centered around a revolution by the "bourgeoisie," the political alignment of the working class to communism, and the inevitable domination of socialist economics, suddenly appeared to be gaining momentum.

The occurrences at the end of the 1980's represented a stark reversal of Marx's projections. For myriad and complicated reasons, both domestic and international, the world's preeminent communist state weakened and fell. The Berlin Wall, which divided up East and West Germany, came down in 1989. The Warsaw Pact, the Soviet-led military alliance that existed to counter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),

dissolved in the summer of 1991. Then, finally, the U.S.S.R. communist regime fell just after Christmas of the same year. The Cold War was officially over.

Yet, amid this historic unraveling of a world superpower and its ideology, an equally important movement was developing in the Soviet bloc of eastern and central Europe. Fourteen countries quickly declared independence from the Soviet Union, and pro-democracy movements gained momentum in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Albania (Huntington). Remarkably, the political landscape of the former Eastern Bloc was upended almost overnight. Between 1989 and 1991, every nation in eastern and central Europe held competitive parliamentary elections for the first time in decades. Although these elections were not all entirely democratic, and some were only partly free, the rapidity and widespread nature of this regional political change was shocking and seemingly improbable. In the “backyard” of the Soviet Union - one of the two foremost global powers - regime types more resembling that of its hegemonic adversary, the United States, expanded at an alarming rate. This enabled America to triumph in the all-inclusive confrontation that was the Cold War and therefore assume lone ownership of the title: “world superpower.” Authoritarianism was in decline, communism was discredited, and democracy was rising.

## **Theory**

Since the late twentieth century, a number of theories have been devised to explain this period. Distinct theories have been comprised to evaluate both the transitional period to democracy and the consolidation phase in which a nation attempts to cement democratic institutions. Before assessing the causes for transition and reasons for varied degrees of success in consolidation, qualitative and quantitative methodologies

must be outlined. For the purposes of the transitional period, Samuel P. Huntington's theoretical framework outlined in his landmark book: *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* provides a strong basis for examining the movement toward democracy in Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine. His theory relies on five overarching causative factors that are applicable to most cases.

First, Huntington cites the declining legitimacy of authoritarian regimes as an important cause for democratization. Another term he used for this category was the term "performance dilemma" (Huntington, 46). For the "third wave" period, this causative factor can be interpreted as not only the declining legitimacy of authoritarianism, but of communism specifically. The "performance" aspect of this theory simply refers to the ability of the state to "deliver the goods," or foster economic well-being. In Huntington's words, "Over time ... communist governments found it more difficult to invoke communist ideology to support their legitimacy. The appeal of the ideology declined as the state bureaucracy stagnated and socioeconomic inequalities ossified" (Huntington, 48). Furthermore, the economic performance of communist regimes in Eastern Europe - measured by commonly used categories like unemployment rates, life expectancy rates, standards of living, economic growth, and median income levels - created a situation in 1989 in which "Marxism-Leninism made it impossible to develop legitimacy based on their economic performance" (Huntington, 48). As Huntington notes, popular support for any regime or government tends to erode over time (Huntington, 48). Yet, in an authoritarian regime, once support begins to erode and the economy begins to decline, there is no institutional outlet for political resuscitation. In democracies, there is. New coalitions and parties rise to power frequently in democratic regimes through a free and

fair electoral process. Thus, as eastern Europeans developed frustrations with their governments, they slowly developed desires and expectations for regular, competitive elections. Additionally, communist regimes lose legitimacy with military failures. Huntington cites the lengthy and costly war in Afghanistan as a significant reason for the falling popularity of the Soviet Union in the 1980's (Huntington, 54).

Second, Huntington lists economic development as a causative factor for democratization; specifically, the growth of global economic output as a means of modernizing developing economies. Huntington writes that "economic development, in short, provide(s) the basis for democracy" (Huntington, 59). Economic crises also play a part. Huntington refers to oil price hikes in some eastern European countries and Marxist-Leninist constraints in other nations that created economic downturns which weakened authoritarian regimes (Huntington, 59). In essence, Huntington (along with most modern economists) argues that economic growth and development is interrelated to rising trends of urbanization, education, and an expanded middle class (Huntington, 66). These economic trends often create social forces and a civil society that possesses the capacity to resist authoritarianism and ignite democratic uprisings.

Another cause that Huntington cites for democratization in the "third wave" is religious changes. This category may not be as universally applicable to East-Central Europe as political, economic, and external forces. However, its prevalence and influence is still notable, especially in Poland. Western Christianity is strongly and commonly associated with democracy, and Huntington notes that, while this correlation does not prove causation, "Western Christianity emphasizes ... the dignity of the individual and the separate spheres of church and state" (Huntington, 73). After all, modern democracies

first appeared almost exclusively in Christian countries. As Huntington points out, at the time of *Third Wave*, 57% of predominantly Western Christian countries were democratic, while only 12% of non-Christian nations were democracies (Huntington, 73). Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the expansion of Christianity promotes democratic development. The ascension of Pope John Paul II to the head of the Catholic Church and the doctrinal changes dictated in Vatican II are vital to examine as it relates to the Polish democratic transition.

The fourth factor, external forces; the and the fifth hypothesized cause, the “Regional Contingency Factor,” or the “Domino theory,” allow for an evaluation of the “third wave” with an international scope. Various international factors were instrumental in the fates of regimes in Eastern Europe and around the world. The burgeoning question that must be addressed, however, is how significant these foreign influences were. There is much debate about this in the intellectual community, and of course it is difficult to quantify. Yet, understanding the role of global powers in the “third wave” period of democratization, as well as how they affected – and continue to affect - the consolidation of democracy in the present-day, is essential.

The second central question that underpins the study of democratization in these three cases – the reasons for varied degrees of success in consolidating and sustaining a democracy – can be answered using a combination of theories and data. It is necessary to examine this category through both a qualitative and quantitative lens, because the areas that illuminate the differing levels of success in a democracy manifest themselves in easily comparable numbers and explanatory theories. Among others, the studies of German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel are relevant to measuring success in



consolidation. Merkel's theories of "embedded democracy" and "partial regimes" can be used to understand how Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine all had varying outcomes after their respective transitions. Merkel's concept of "embedded democracy" rests on the claim that in order for a democratic electoral system to function properly (when competitive elections produce winners that accurately reflect popular preferences and who assume power peacefully), then certain behavioral, institutional, and structural elements – called "partial regimes" – must be in place (Erisen and Kubicek, 5). Merkel's four partial regimes consist of political participation, civil liberties, mutual constraints on the executive and horizontal accountability, and the effective power to govern (Erisen and Kubicek, 13). Through examining "micro" and "macro" levels of governance, Merkel's model will allow for the assessment of a broad range of variables in evaluating the democratic outcomes in Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine after transition. His framework provides a theoretically informed means of gauging how an issue within a particular partial regime can yield a larger fault line that exists throughout the entire system. (Erisen and Kubicek, 4).

Additionally, the "consolidation" question will be addressed using data from relevant databases like the Freedom House Index, Polity Score, Human Development Index, and Gini coefficient. These indexes provide in-depth information regarding political, economic, and humanitarian statuses within countries that are necessary to compare in the both period of democratic transition and the present-day. Comparing this data between each of the three Eastern European countries, and examining their changing scores in each category, will provide a clear illustration of the causes that surrounded

liberalization. Moreover, it will enable one to understand why there have been varied degrees of success in consolidation post-1991.

The work of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan in the area of democratic consolidation is notable as well, and entirely relevant to apply to this second question. Their definitions of how a consolidated democracy operates behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally form a benchmark from which the modern states of the Polish, Latvian, and Ukrainian systems can be judged (Linz and Stepan, 6). The most pertinent theoretical contribution of Linz and Stepan is their “five arenas of a consolidated democracy.” In this framework, they outline certain pre-requisites and necessary conditions for the sustenance of a democratic regime. First is civil society. This aspect of democratic consolidation pervaded most countries during the “third wave,” and these authors acknowledged that civil society was “crucial in Eastern Europe as a vehicle for asserting the autonomy of those who wanted to act ‘as if they were free,’” (Linz and Stepan, 7). The second arena is political society: the development of the “core institutions ... by which society constitutes itself politically to select and monitor democratic government” (Linz and Stepan, 8).

Third, the rule of law is a commonly accepted trait that must characterize a consolidated democracy. As Linz and Stepan note, a state’s claim over the monopoly of the legitimate use of force in order to protect citizens and deliver services is required for any sustainable democracy (10,11). The aforementioned three “arenas” of consolidation outlined by Linz and Stepan are also “pre-requisites” to consolidation. Fourth, there must be an effective state bureaucracy to institutionalize democratic procedures. This depends on the ability of a state to command, regulate, and extract resources; and provide basic

entitlements in its territory amongst its people (Linz and Stepan, 11). Lastly, Linz and Stepan claim that “economic society,” or the “set of socio-politically crafted and accepted norms, institutions, and regulations...that mediates between state and market,” is another supportive condition for a consolidated democracy. (Linz and Stepan, 11). The ability of a state to periodically intervene in areas of the market and perform certain functions is foundational, even when privatization is the goal. A strong state that has the capacity to enact some degree of state regulation is important for a democratic system to consolidate and operate in the long term. Linz and Stepan’s framework can be used to examine causative factors evident in both the transitional phase and the consolidation phase, because oftentimes some of the same causes that ignite a transition can remain relevant in consolidation.

### **Hypotheses**

Due to the many theories dedicated to this period of resurgent democracy, there are a number of opinions regarding the true reasons for the “third wave.” Certainly, this is not a black and white area of study. The transitions that began in the late 1980’s emanated out of a complicated geopolitical landscape. The causes for each transition were complex and multifaceted. Those many causes are not what divides scholars; the vast majority of the reasons cited by the intellectual community did in fact exist to some degree in Eastern Europe and are not in dispute. The area of ambiguity lies with the degree of influence that these causes exerted. Much less consensus is found among scholars regarding this issue. Some causes – such as civil society, Soviet reforms, and changes in demographics, are widely agreed to be of considerable importance. Yet, the

relative impact of other causes – like religion and the influence of foreign actors – are debated.

In light of the research at hand and the implications of this time period, the aforementioned causes of democratization will be further examined and affirmed. First, certain civilian organizations and forms of peaceful resistance – known as “civil society” in the political science field – will be found to be heavily influential, especially in the case of Poland. Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy reforms, which angered many hardline factions in the Soviet communist apparatus and precipitated the fall of the U.S.S.R., were common causes of each transition in Europe. Demographic changes were especially important in Latvia. Not only were changes in the population of ethnic Russians and their attitudes pertinent to the political transitions in the Baltic states, but implications of these changes remained equally as impactful during the consolidation phase as well. The state of demographics in Latvia and other Baltic states still undergird questions about the future of this region today, especially in light of the recent Russian military intervention in Ukraine.

In addition to asserting the importance of the previously cited causes, this study argues that other causes are of equal, if not more, importance to the cases of Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine and post-communist Eastern Europe at large. With regard to Poland, the role that religion and the Catholic Church played in liberalizing the country and pushing back against Soviet authoritarianism must not be understated. Analysis will show that the Church, and the values it effectively spread, helped inspire the Solidarity movement and lay the groundwork for not only the Polish transition, but the whole region’s triumph over communism. The role of geographic proximity and the influence of

foreign actors will also be shown to be of colossal importance. Foreign factors are sometimes undervalued by scholars, as many tend to focus mainly on the domestic conditions of any political transition. But the “Neighbor Effect” and the varying forms of power wielded by international hegemony and organizations must not be diminished. This cause should occupy as much scrutiny as domestic causes do. After all, most domestic causes are interrelated to global or regional dynamics.

It is important that each country case be examined not with a microscope, but with mindfulness of the international environment and the forces therein. If that is done, then the linkage between seemingly individual causes, like civil society, demographics, and economics, will be connected to broader global movements. This study hypothesizes that the de-legitimization of communism in Eastern Europe – triggered by Soviet reforms and amplified by the rising influence of the Vatican and United States - emboldened dissent and gave way to civil society movements which effectively stood up to authoritarians and brought democratic change to the Eastern Bloc. It will also assess current geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe in light of resurgent Russian aggression to comment on the future stability of democracy in the region.

### **Country Background**

Poland was the first country to transition to a democracy in Eastern Europe. A satellite state of the U.S.S.R., Poland had formerly been one of the foremost European powers prior to becoming “stateless” from 1795-1918 due to conquest and partition (Linz and Stepan, 258). After World War I, Poland was granted independence following the Treaty of Versailles. Yet, in 1939, a Nazi-Soviet agreement - the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact - agreeing to divide up Northern and Eastern Europe left the country once again

formally dissolved (Kissinger, 272). After World War II, in which Poland was a member of the victorious Allied coalition, Polish resistance forces launched an uprising against their Soviet occupiers. It was not until this civil war was quelled that the Soviet Union established total military dominance over Poland, and the Polish army began to submit to the Soviet model (Bielasiak, 271).

Latvia, along with her Baltic neighbors Estonia and Lithuania, was independent from 1918 to 1940 (Linz and Stepan, 403). There were competitive parliamentary elections held in the 1920's following the expulsion of Soviet troops and recognition of Latvian sovereignty, and lands began to be redistributed from wealthy German nobles to Latvian farmers. However, just as the country was beginning to recover from the damage of the Great Depression, a coup d'etat ushered in the Ulmanis dictatorship in the mid-1930's (Linz and Stepan, 403). Parliament was suspended, as were political parties and the Constitution. After six years of dictatorship and a centralized economy, Latvia once again fell victim to Soviet expansion. The same treaty that preceded the joint invasion of Poland, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, laid the foundation for the Soviet invasion and annexation of Latvia (Linz and Stepan, 403). Although the Nazis occupied the country from 1941 until 1944, the USSR annexed Latvia again after the Allied victory in Europe. Nevertheless, as Linz and Stepan note, "Latvia had the most substantial prior experience of democratic politics of any of the Soviet republics" (402-403). Constructive as that reality may have been, it was still a long road back to democracy.

Ukraine, conversely, had virtually no democratic history. Divided between Tsarist Russia and Hapsburg Austria prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, Ukraine became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR) following a bloody war with the

Red Army in 1922. The Ukrainian SSR became one of the founding members of the Soviet Union, and, later, the United Nations (UN-DPI). In the 1930's, the USSR cracked down on Ukrainian cultural autonomy, installing policies of russification that transformed Ukraine's demographics and led to a massive famine, the "Holodomor" (Famine of 1932). Nikita Khrushchev was named head of the Ukrainian Communist Party in 1938, which he led before taking the same position for the entirety of the USSR following Stalin's death in 1953. Like Latvia, Ukraine was occupied by Nazis during World War II. Only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 did Ukraine become independent, making the transition to a market economy. Yet, due to a number of reasons, many to do with continued Russian interference and economic fluctuations, Ukraine has struggled to consolidate a democratic regime, suppress corruption, and keep control of its territory.

## **Findings**

It is impossible to observe the regime changes in the third wave without noting the strong presence and influence of civil society. In all three country cases, at various times, grassroots protest movements emerged to form a popular means of resistance against the regime. One of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's five pre-conditions for a consolidated democracy, civil society also helped initiate transitions in post-communist Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. As Linz and Stepan define it: "civil society... (is) that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests" (7). The fact that none of the resistance movements in Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine were terminally suppressed, such as peaceful pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square were around the same time, demonstrates

that the regimes lacked the popular support and legitimacy to go against the will of the people.

### **Civil society and the Catholic Church**

In Poland, civil society manifested itself in two forms: the Catholic Church and “Solidarity”. With its staunch commitment to atheism, the communist apparatus in Eastern Europe tried to stamp out any form of religion in the populace. The Roman Catholic Church, however, became a central organization through which people in Poland could make their voices heard. This represented a contrast to the Orthodox Christian Church, which historically represented the national religion and was intertwined with the voice of the state (Huntington, 73-76). Roman Catholicism, however, became a transnational organization that gave voice to dissidents and opponents of repressive regimes (Huntington, 82). The Church was a refuge for people who wanted to articulate certain moral beliefs and organize as one to advance their religious values. The communist regimes in Poland and elsewhere pushed secularism on a grand scale, and sought to undermine the Church at every turn (Linz and Stepan, 245). They intentionally attempted to persecute religious groups, infiltrate churches, and ban clergy from positions of high status (Linz and Stepan, 245). Yet, in Poland, there was a strong religious culture. According to a study conducted by Richard Rose and Christian Haerpfer at the time of the Polish democratic transition, 84% of Poles were churchgoers (Rose and Haerpfer).

Huntington noted that in the 1950’s, the authoritarian structure of the Catholic Church made it a barrier to democratization (77). Changes made in the Church’s doctrine, however, turned it into a force for democracy after 1970. The most notable change was undoubtedly the convening of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, commissioned



by Pope John XXIII in the 1960's. Held to address relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world, Vatican II stressed the importance of social change and political accountability (Huntington, 78). Moreover, a recurring theme was the dignity of individual rights. One passage discussing the role of the Church asserted that its leaders have the onus to "pass moral judgements, even on matters of political order whenever basic personal rights make such judgment necessary" (Smith, 284). These doctrinal changes outlined the new role of church in society, and prompted many of its leaders and followers to oppose communist regimes according their religious values.

The ascension of Cardinal Wojtyla, originally from a small town close to Krakow, to the pinnacle of the Catholic Church, changed everything. Pope John Paul II became a central figure in the Church's role as a vessel of resistance to authoritarianism. As Huntington wrote when discussing the importance of Pope John Paul II to the "third wave" of democracy, immediately upon rising to the papacy, he "denounced violations of human rights and explicitly identified the Church as the 'guardian' of freedom 'which is the condition and basis for the human person's true dignity'" (Huntington, 83). Human rights lay at the center of the Church's resistance oppressive communist regimes under his leadership. The Pope himself asserted the commonalities between his mission and democratization while speaking out against Pinochet's regime in Chile in 1987: "I am not the evangelizer of democracy; I am the evangelizer of the Gospel. To the Gospel message, of course, belong all the problems of human rights; and if democracy means human rights, then it also belongs to the message of the Church." (Huntington, 84). Pope John Paul II always seemed to be in the right country at the right time - during the middle of its struggle towards democracy. Being the first non-Italian pope in over four and a half

centuries, and a Polish national who played soccer with Jews and fled the Nazi's in his youth, he had lived out the perils of extreme political power (Stourton, 32). As Pope during a consequential time in which the world order was shifting, his pastoral visits had profound political effects – both in Europe and South America (Huntington, 83). None was more powerful than the first visit to his home country.

In 1979, shortly after assuming the papacy, Pope John Paul II visited Poland. This was his homecoming visit, and massive crowds lined the streets to hear his words and cheer (BBC, 1992). This epic first visit undoubtedly lifted the spirits of the beleaguered nation, and planted the seeds for civic and democratic renewal. One Polish bishop observed: “(his first visit) altered the mentality of fear...people learned that if they ceased to fear the system, then the system was helpless.” (Huntington, 83). British historian Timothy Garton Ash remarked that this “first great pilgrimage...was the beginning of the end of communism in Eastern Europe. Here, for the first time, we saw that large-scale...supremely peaceful and self-disciplined manifestation of social unity, the gentle crowd against the Party-state, which was both the hallmark and the essential domestic catalyst of change in 1989” (Ash, 1990, 17). Ash went on to cite the remarks of Lech Walesa, his chief political opponent General Wojciech Jaruzelski, President George Bush, and Russian President Gorbachev. Each of these world leaders contributed the fall of the Iron Curtain in part to the Pope, leading Ash to conclude: “without the Polish Pope, no Solidarity revolution in Poland in 1980; without Solidarity, no dramatic change in Soviet policy towards eastern Europe under Gorbachev; without that change, no velvet revolutions in 1989” (Ash, 2005).

Others also connect the Pope's effective leadership not only to a revitalization in civil society and the role of the Church in society, but to the rise of "Solidarity" and the fall of communism itself. One of the preeminent historians of the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis, said that the Pope's initial trip inspired the formation of "Solidarity" and initiated communism's downfall: "when Pope John Paul II kissed the ground at the Warsaw airport he began the process by which Communism in Poland – and ultimately elsewhere in Europe – would come to an end" (Gaddis, 193). Indeed, the call of Pope John Paul II to abandon fear, pursue freedom, and seek only the goodness and affirmation that comes from God inspired a nation, revived a region, and mobilized millions. Imploring the citizenry to change their own regimes from within rather than inciting violence, the Pope watched as his homeland conquered communism and chose democracy just ten years later.

After the passionate appeal of the new pontifex and a combination of other sociopolitical changes, civil movements spread with great rapidity across Eastern Europe. The most famous, of course, was Solidarity. Founded in 1980 by Lech Walesa, Solidarity was the first labor union in a Warsaw Pact country not controlled by a communist party (Linz and Stepan, 262). Its membership quickly rose to over 10 million, which encompassed about one-third of the working age population in Poland (Linz and Stepan, 262). Solidarity was a social platform that pushed for Polish worker's rights, among other societal changes. It was popular, effective, and supported by the Vatican and the U.S., in the form of 50 million dollars (Judt, 589). The CIA under the Reagan administration provided covert support to Solidarity in the form of money, newspapers and propaganda, and organizational advice (Sussman, 128). Their strikes and public demonstrations, and

the widespread support of the citizenry it galvanized, made Solidarity a problem for the communist regime. Martial law was enacted early in the 1980's, along with other means of suppression, but eventually the regime was forced to the negotiating table with the popular union (Linz and Stepan, 264).

The success of Solidarity was a historic first for the entire Eastern Bloc. Gone were the days when the Polish United Worker's Party (the communist regime), put down protests with deadly machine-guns. Gone, too, were the days when full-scale Soviet-led invasions brutally extinguished popular movements in other countries, like the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968 (Linz and Stepan, 237-238). Although Solidarity's peaceful means of civil resistance was initially met with martial law and imprisonment, both sides ended up compromising. The Round Table talks were held at the end of the 1980's. Here, the Polish government and Solidarity agreed to conduct elections in 1989 – the first (semi) free elections of any country in the communist Eastern Bloc. This marked the beginning of the 1989 anti-communist democratic revolutions all across East-Central Europe. Poland was the first, and Solidarity was the engine from within that made it happen.

Although Solidarity was the most notable case of civil society during this time period, Poland was not the only country that witnessed popular social movements bring about democracy. The "Singing Revolution" in Latvia, as well as the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, are two other examples. In Latvia, rumors that the Soviet Union would build another hydroelectric power plant along its longest river, as well as a metro in Riga, further threatened the cultural and environmental landscape of the country. Following Gorbachev's reforms in Moscow which condoned wider economic

liberalization in the Soviet satellites, a number of Latvian groups rose up to call for independence. The Latvian People's Front, the Latvian National Independence Movement, and the Citizens' Congress all demanded the restoration of Latvian sovereignty and held public demonstrations in the fall of 1988. Approximately one year later, a massive "human chain" was formed across all three Baltic countries on the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The People's Fronts of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania organized an extraordinary demonstration of Baltic unity by forming a 420 mile-long "Baltic chain of freedom" that ran through the capitals of each country and was comprised of over 2 million people (Dreifelds, 34). This was a symbolic call for unity and independence from the Soviet Union. Less than seven months later, new elections to the "Supreme Soviet" (the legislative bodies) were held. In May, after continued social resistance and Soviet decline, Latvia finally declared its independence in 1991.

The Orange Revolution restored hope in Ukrainian democracy in 2004. The run-off vote for the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election was tainted by corruption and voter fraud. Results were thought to be rigged by government authorities in favor of Viktor Yanukovich over his opponent, Viktor Yushchenko (Aslund and McFaul). Kiev became the rallying point for pro-democracy protests and acts of civil disobedience, strikes, and sit-ins. In November, over half a million people convened at Kiev's Independence Square wearing orange, the color of Yushchenko's campaign, and marched peacefully around Verkhovna Rada, the parliament building (Karatnycky). The democratic revolution led to the Supreme Court's announcement that the election results would be nullified, and a second run-off was freely and fairly conducted. This resulted in a clear victory for the challenger, Yushchenko, and he was sworn in as president in 2005. Ukraine's democracy

has ebbed and flowed since then, and still struggles with entrenched problems of corruption that were not adequately addressed by the Orange movement (Fukuyama, 547). Yet, the Orange Revolution shows that Ukrainians have the capacity to demand democracy in a peaceful and convincing manner. This movement, as well as the powerful forms of social uprisings in Latvia and Poland before their respective democratic transitions, demonstrate the accuracy of Linz and Stepan's theory that an active civil society – which is autonomous from the state - is one of the absolute necessary conditions for democracy. Without the coordinated organization of a populace that is persistent in petitioning oppressive regimes and demanding political change, authoritarianism will linger. Today, Poland and Latvia are both free and prosperous largely due to the efforts of civil society.

### **Demographics in Latvia**

In addition to the popular protest movements like the “Baltic Chain of Freedom,” Latvia also benefited from the surprising ability of its Russian minority population to integrate into Latvian society. The issue of the ethnic Russian minority population was at the heart of their transition to democracy in 1991, and remained a barrier to democratic consolidation going forward. Latvia had, and still has, the largest population of Russians among any of the three Baltic states (over one-third of the population at the time of transition), and, therefore, their ability to assimilate was an important determinant of whether Latvia could make a smooth transition (Linz and Stepan, 410-412). Furthermore, democratic consolidation will continue to be most difficult in Latvia, because it is the most demographically diverse of any Baltic state (Linz and Stepan, 405). As data shows, Russian minorities felt a strong identification with Latvia and a relatively weak

identification with the U.S.S.R. during the “third wave” period (Linz and Stepan, 410). Over half of Russian speakers in Latvia more closely identified with the Latvian state in 1992, which was up 20% from just two years earlier (Linz and Stepan, 411). Moreover, according to a survey conducted at the time, approximately 85% of non-Latvians felt “proud” or “very proud” of being a resident of Latvia in 1990 (Klingemann and Titma). As Linz and Stepan put it, this demonstrated the ability of the Russian minority in Latvia to have “multiple and complementary identities” and assimilate culturally and politically (Linz and Stepan, 410). The perceived acceptance of this ethnic “other” by the Latvian Popular Front and other nationalist factions aided their quest for democracy. The whole population – comprised of ethnic Balts and ethnic Russians – largely joined together in protesting communist occupation and united under the cause of independence. As Soviet influence fell, Balts and Russians grew stronger in their support of democracy, and in 1991, it came to be.

Yet, upon finally making the transition to a democracy, the Latvian government undertook measures to exclude ethnic Russians from certain freedoms (Linz and Stepan, 409). The newly minted Latvian Popular Front regime restricted citizenship and voting rights only to pre-1940 citizens and their descendants, thus depriving hundreds of thousands of Latvian-born Russian speakers these fundamental rights (Linz and Stepan, 414-424). The government also adopted native language policies (Linz and Stepan, 413). This stark reversal in tone and policy by the new regime towards its Russian minority, which was mimicked in neighboring Estonia, hampered the quality of Latvian democracy in the years following independence. These politics of subtraction damaged the credibility of the Latvian democratic system, and hurt the relations of ethnic Balts with

Russian minorities (Linz and Stepan, 420). Progress has been made since the mid-1990's, and today over half of the Russian minority have gained citizenship. However, many still retain alien status. Although the Latvian government and economy have developed well in recent decades, the future health of their democratic system will in part depend on their ability to be inclusive.

### **Problems with consolidation**

Although Poland is often lauded as the shining success story of democratization in the Eastern Bloc, its transition did not come without complications. After the Round Table Talks were held at the end of the 1980's, in which both sides (Solidarity and the communist regime) agreed to conduct elections in 1989, Solidarity dominated in the new political system (Huntington, 23). The labor union-turned-political party won 99 out of the 100 seats in the newly formed Senate, and 161 of the open seats in the lower house, the *Sejm* (Linz and Stepan, 267-269). Lech Walesa himself won the presidency in 1990 and served as president for 5 years (Huntington, 23-24; Steger, 114). However, since Poland was the first country in the region to democratize, there were faults in the negotiating process that led to what Linz and Stepan call a "pacted transition" (Linz and Stepan, 264). Solidarity made certain concessions that hampered the movement towards a full-blown democracy. For example, 65% of the *Sejm* would continue to be appointed in non-competitive elections, and thus a non-democratic house of Parliament was deeply involved in drafting the new democratic Constitution (Linz and Stepan, 267). The first president, who under the new Constitution was awarded special powers in national security, defense, and international affairs (along with emergency powers), was (for the first year) the old communist head of state, the authoritarian General Wojciech Jaruzelski



(Linz and Stepan, 268). These reserved remnants of power made it more difficult for Solidarity to fully accelerate the process of democratization. As is seen so often in numerous cases of democratic transition around the world, mistakes that allow remnants of the old autocracy to retain a “seat at the table” in the new government can have lingering consequences.

While Poland, Latvia, and other Eastern Bloc countries certainly experienced growing pains in the primitive years of their new democratic regimes, it is still important to recognize that these transitions, when examined in whole, were largely successful. Today, Poland and Latvia are thriving countries with relatively strong liberal democracies. Poland is one of the safest and most visited countries in the world, and maintains a “very high” score in the Human Development Index, ranking among the top in the Western world (Linz and Stepan, 269). Latvia, in addition to Poland, is one of Europe’s fastest growing economies. Both nations are well-established members of both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), joining in the early 2000’s. Conversely, Ukraine continues to suffer from economic stagnation, corruption, and dependence on Russia. Unlike successful Western democracies elsewhere in central Europe, Ukraine is a prime example of a country that has not consolidated democratic institutions successfully post-transition.

## **Ukraine**

Ukraine, like all other satellite states, finally claimed independence after the fall of the Soviet Union, but due to deep-rooted problems that continue to undermine the country’s sovereignty, its democratic transition continues to be a work in progress at best. Economic crisis and stagnation has struck the Ukrainian state multiple times after its

transition. The first crisis occurred immediately after the shift toward a market economy in 1991, which ignited an eight-year recession (“Macroeconomic indicators”). After a period of rapid growth in the early-2000’s, the economy shrank 15% in 2009, with 16% inflation. GDP fell a staggering 20% from spring 2008 to spring 2009 (Inozmi).

Additionally, after the Russian invasion in 2014, annexation of Crimea, and resulting war in the East, the economy was reduced to zero GDP growth (“Amid staggering destruction”). Ukraine’s economy is only now beginning to recover from that recent catastrophe.

A multitude of Ukraine’s economic problems are interrelated to government corruption and Russian military and economic dominance over the state. Corruption is the single largest hindrance to democratic consolidation in Ukraine. It costs the state budget billions annually, Ernst and Young once ranked Ukraine among the three most corrupt nations in the world back in 2012, and Western diplomats have referred to the regime as a kleptocracy (Kyiv Post). The executive branch is overreaching and non-transparent - reaping the rewards of clientelism. Ukrainians also have a weak civil society footprint. The justice system is especially compromised, and represents a complete failure in democratic integrity. Only about 10% of the population trusts the judicial system, and judges are vulnerable to pressure from political and business interests as bribes oftentimes exceed their salaries (Hanouz and Geiger).

Ukraine’s proximity to and dependence on the Russian Federation continues to stall democratic consolidation in the country. About 40% of Ukraine’s total energy consumption is dependent on imports from Russian producer Gazprom, who claims that Ukraine owes billions in debt (Chorvath). With no real short-term energy solutions

outside of Russian imports, Ukrainian economic sovereignty looks bleak for the future. Russian is able to leverage its economic superiority over Ukraine to exert its military and geopolitical might – as witnessed by the Crimea annexation in 2014. In 2013, then-President Viktor Yanukovich, who was the initial beneficiary of voter fraud in the 2004 election, mysteriously suspended the installment of an association agreement with the EU. This led to mass protests by the so-called “Euromaidan” supporters, who eventually succeeded in ousting Yanukovich (Balmforth). He then fled to Russia in exile, where he remains today. These events gave way to the invasion in 2014 and ensuing conflict in the eastern region of Donbas, where Yanukovich’s support was largely concentrated. The striking turn of events showed the continued struggle of Ukraine to move out of Russia’s sphere of influence and integrate into Europe.

### **Graphical data**

It is important to observe, through visual graphs and data, how democracy has developed in Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine - and how its quality coincides with certain economic and living conditions. The Polity Score project, which measures various aspects of regime status and levels of executive authority, depicts a clear difference in Polish and Ukrainian authority trends post-transition (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>):

Figure 1

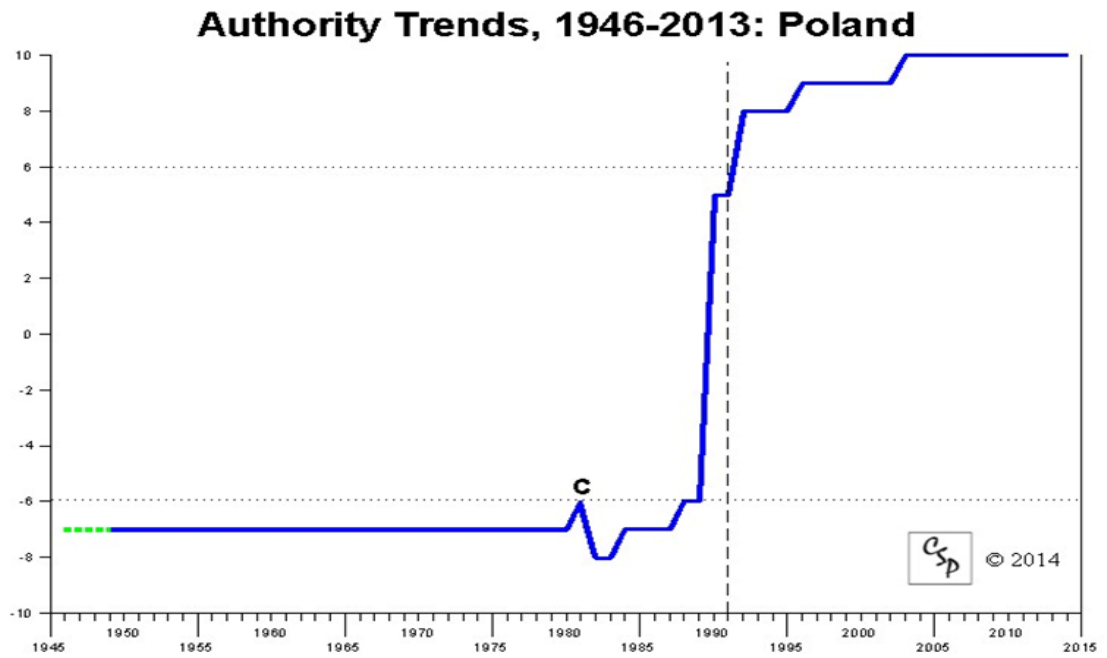
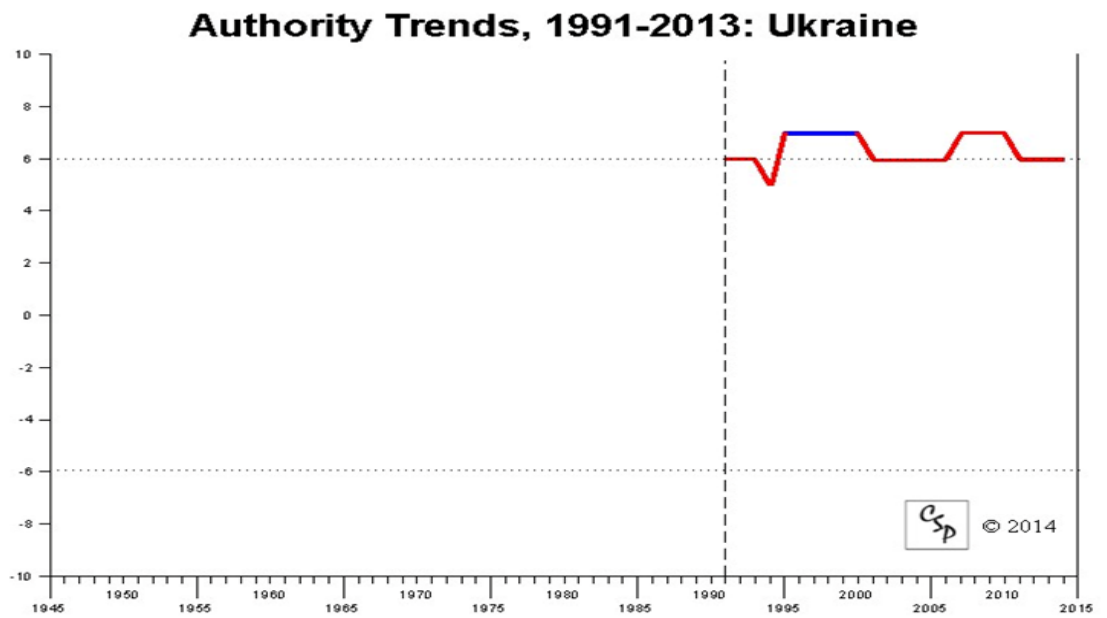


Figure 2



As Figures 1 and 2 both show, Poland had a remarkable jump right after its transition, while the fluctuating Ukrainian graph indicates the continued instability of its economy and government.

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a widely respected database that compiles a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and financial status in order to measure a person's progress in quality of life over time ("Human Development Reports"):

### Figure 3

**Human Development Index (HDI) changes over time: [Poland](#), [Latvia](#), [Ukraine](#)**

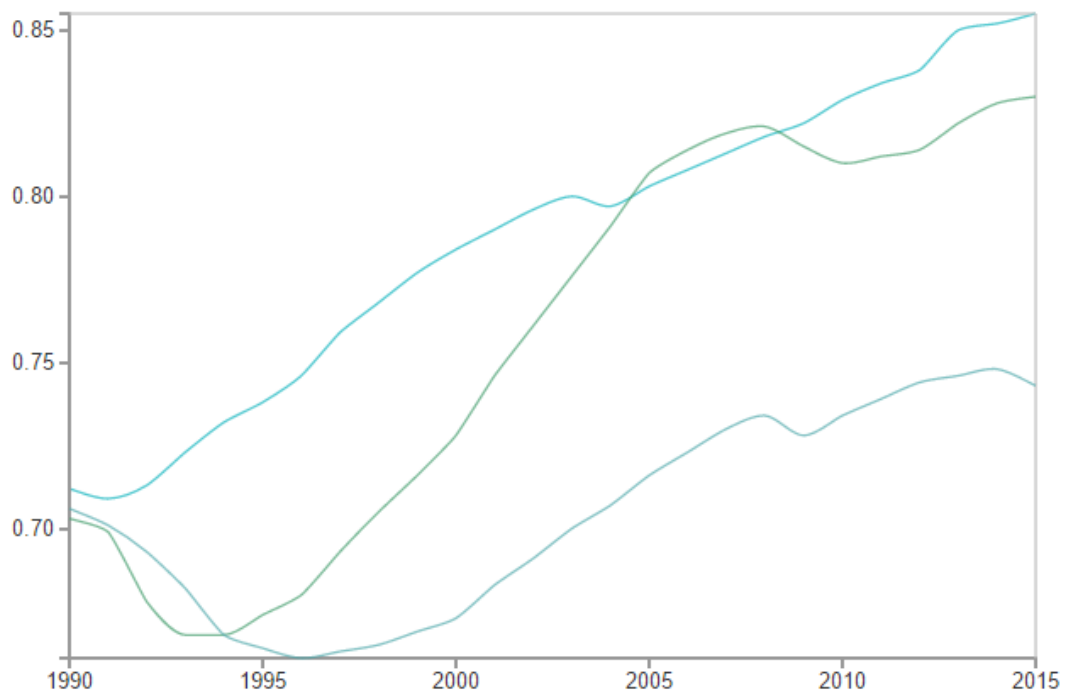
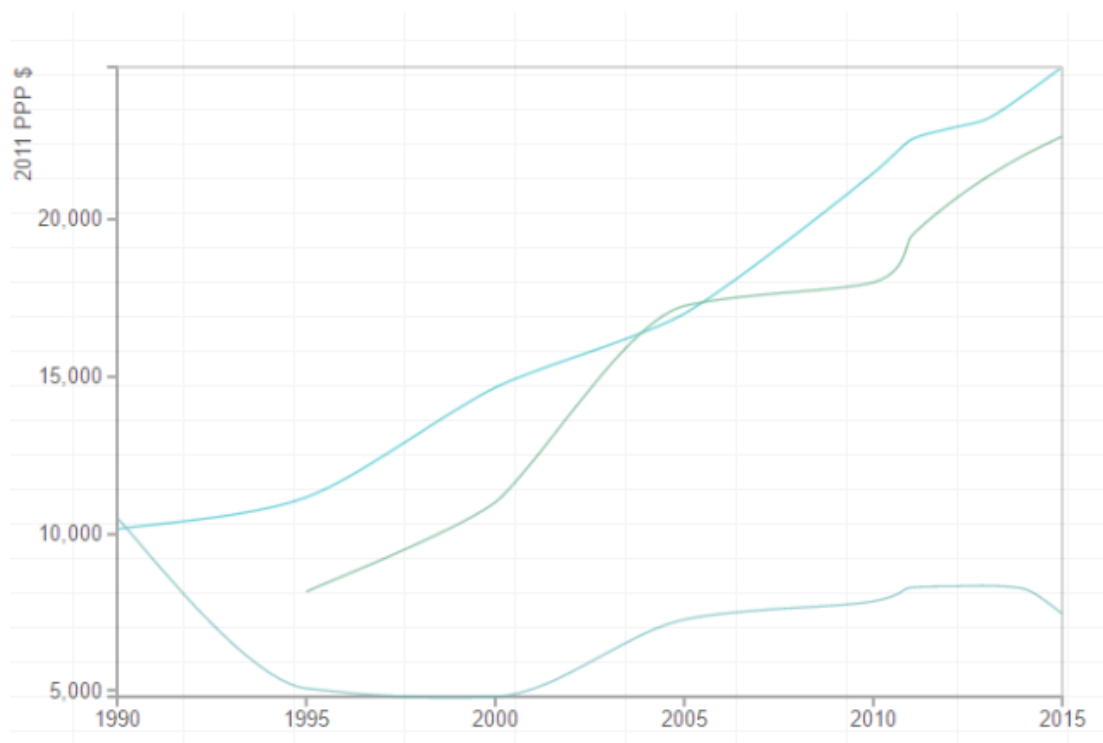


Figure 3 shows that Poland's HDI levels have historically increased with the consolidation of democratic institutions, while Ukraine's levels have ebbed and flowed in conjunction with economic crises.

GDP per capita, measured in Figure 4, is a commonly used metric that is also taken from the Human Development Index. It measures income levels and closely mirrors HDI levels in each country ("Human Development Reports"):

**Figure 4**

**GDP per capita (2011 PPP \$): Poland, Latvia, Ukraine**

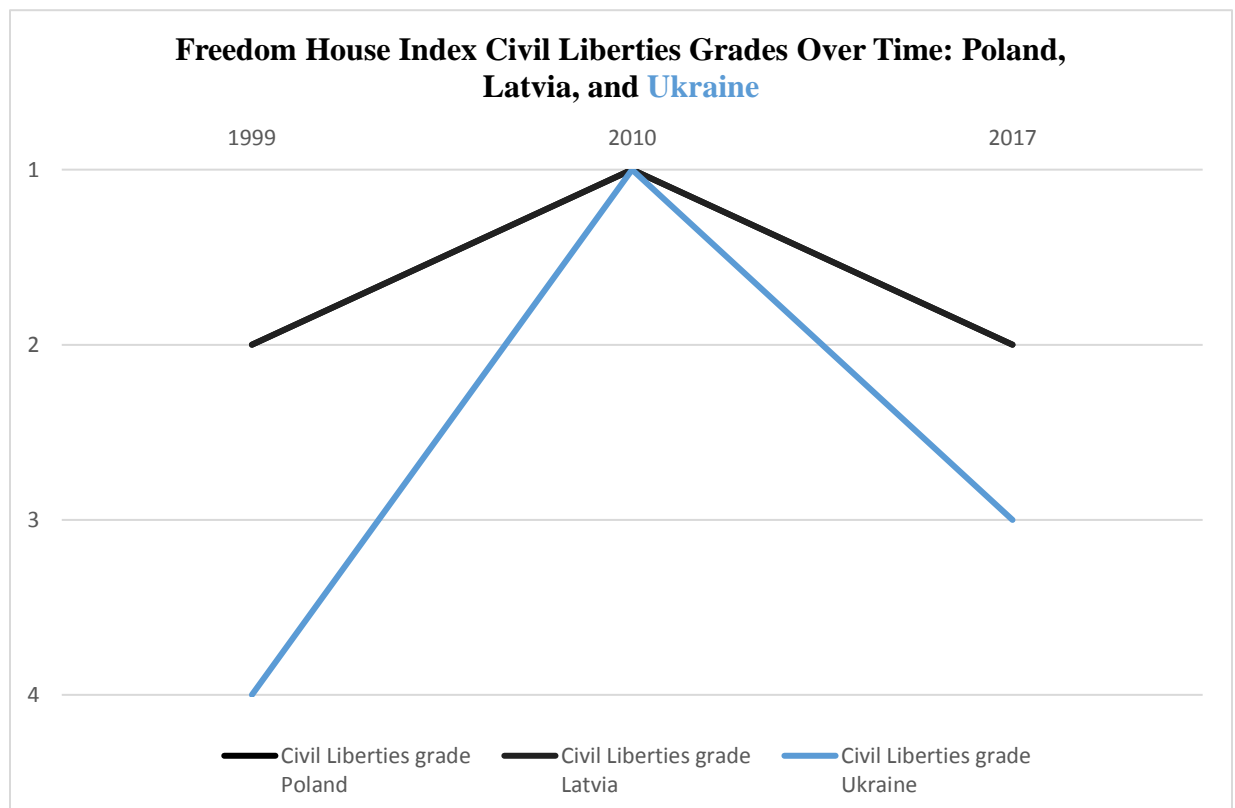


It should be noted that, although not displayed graphically, data trends compiled from the Gini coefficient also closely resemble that from HDI levels and GDP per capita. The Gini coefficient is another economic metric that evaluates inequality levels. Levels of

inequality directly and unsurprisingly coincided with the progression of democracy in Poland and Latvia, and, just like HDI and GDP per capita, they have floundered in Ukraine. Another noteworthy observation from both Figures 3 and 4 is the downturn in Ukraine's numbers (consistent in both graphs) around the year 2014, the time of the Russian invasion. This data shows how Russian expansion directly impacted Ukraine's economy and living standards.

The final graph, Figure 5, shows data collected from the Freedom House Index, which conducts research to measure levels of political freedoms and human rights around the world. Figure 5 reveals the quality of civil liberties in each of the three countries over the past two decades ("Freedom in the world").

**Figure 5**



It is not a surprise that certain freedoms have suffered in Ukraine as its political system has floundered in corruption. Freedom of the press, which is another category measured by Freedom House over time, has tumbled ten points during the last decade in Ukraine (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/ukraine>). The underperformance of Ukraine in civil liberties demonstrates the accuracy of Wolfgang Merkel's concept of "embedded democracy" and "partial regimes" in that the protection of civil liberties are a necessity for a stable, functioning, and quality democracy.

### **Foreign actors**

While causes like civil society, multiculturalism, and economic conditions were integral in the democratic transitions during the "third wave" in Eastern Europe, the impact of foreign actors cannot be underestimated. As Huntington wrote, "By the late 1980's, the major sources of power and influence in the world – the Vatican, the European Community, the U.S., and the Soviet Union – were all actively promoting liberalization and democratization" (Huntington, 86). It is Huntington's fifth "causative factor" that is often overlooked, yet was incredibly important, to igniting democratization in the late twentieth century. The biggest cause of any was undoubtedly the fall of the Soviet Union and declining legitimacy of communism and authoritarianism in the Eastern Bloc. The reforms of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980's were the single largest contributor to this consequential, historic decline of a world superpower. Moreover, the ensuing democratic transitions of 15 states in the Soviet Bloc were a direct result of changes in Soviet foreign policy initiated by Gorbachev's government (Huntington, 98-99).



Upon ascending to the presidency, Mikhail Gorbachev revoked the Brezhnev Doctrine – a hallmark of Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War (Huntington, 99). Devised by former General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, this doctrine was grounded in the reality that the Soviet Union would intervene whenever necessary to maintain existing communist dictatorships, especially within its sphere of influence. This was the foundational idea, or the unwritten rule, upon which brutal military interventions were enacted in the Cold War. Instead of doubling down on regional domination and military threats, Gorbachev reversed course and pursued an agenda of economic liberalization, political restructuring (*perestroika*), and openness to the West (*glasnost*). These famous reforms angered many hardline factions within the Soviet communist party, but they were necessary to save the country from economic calamity resulting from a military spending bout with the U.S (Kissinger, 310-311). This total reversal of decades of Soviet foreign policy doubtless gave way to all the other causes attributed to democratization in this period.

Protests and disastrous economic conditions had been prevalent in Eastern Europe for decades, but they were always suppressed or disguised by the hegemon in the region. The Hungarian Uprising in 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968, as well as interventions in Poland in the 70's, are all examples of how the U.S.S.R. used its military might to unilaterally protect dictatorships within its sphere of influence and impose rule and ideology (Linz and Stepan, 237-238; Huntington, 118). Yet, Gorbachev worked directly to de-legitimize and unseat old-guard authoritarian leaders in East Germany, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, and encouraged Communist Party leaders in Poland to join in a new governing coalition led by Solidarity (Huntington, 99). By removing the threat of military

force and embracing reforms like *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Moscow thus became not just an enabler of, but a force for democracy. In *Third Wave*, Huntington boldly wrote that Gorbachev joined John Paul II, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan as “the major transnational promoters of democratic change” in the late twentieth century (Huntington, 100). Although it is not clear that Gorbachev had the same intentions as the other three individuals cited, his actions directly resulted in full-scale democratization and the total decline of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. In that vein, Huntington’s assertion becomes sensible.

The role of the United States in this period cannot be underestimated either. Although not as consequential as the Soviet Union, the U.S. definitely helped accelerate democracy in Eastern Europe by changing its approach to foreign affairs. A few years before Gorbachev came to power and initiated the Soviet reforms, the U.S. became an active player in supporting democracy efforts around the world. With the end of the Nixon and Ford administrations also came the conclusion of an era of Henry Kissinger’s *realpolitik* foreign policy. Whereas Secretary Kissinger geared U.S. foreign relations to focus vigorously on American interests and downplay the need to meddle in the domestic affairs of other nations, President Carter vowed to put human rights on the “world agenda” in his 1976 campaign (Huntington, 92). This promise came after certain congressional initiatives amended foreign assistance treaties to make it possible for the president to deny foreign aid to authoritarian regimes guilty of gross human rights violations (Huntington, 91). Carter did indeed make human rights more of an emphasis by the American government as he helped upgrade the American bureaucracy to give human rights programs more organizational clout (Huntington, 92).

When President Ronald Reagan came into office, he built on the Carter administration's focus on human rights, but in a different way. Whereas Carter focused on specific humanitarian abuses, the Reagan administration sought to target the governments that enabled abuses and oppression to occur (Huntington, 92). Therefore, in the 1980's, it was the ideological foe of communism and authoritarianism that drove the Reagan foreign policy. In this period, the National Endowment for Democracy was created, the U.S. applied economic sanctions and diplomatic pressures to oppressive regimes, and also gave heavy financial and tactical support to pro-democracy forces around the world (Huntington, 93-94). This included millions of dollars sent to support Solidarity in Poland by the CIA (Huntington, 94). President Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who were close allies and both fervently anti-communists, engaged Gorbachev personally - forming an open dialogue manifested in many conferences that precipitated the fall of the Soviet Union. One example was the Reykjavik talks in 1986, in which Reagan proposed the elimination of all nuclear delivery systems and boldly walked away after his Russian counterpart refused (Kissinger, 313).

President George H.W. Bush also used skilled personal diplomacy during his term, which directly coincided with the democratic transitions in the Eastern Bloc. President Bush resisted the urge to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall or excessively relish in America's triumph in the Cold War – which simultaneously meant Soviet embarrassment at the fall of their empire (Kissinger, 315; Meacham, 400-401). With this measured diplomacy, his administration helped soften the blow of the end of the Cold War to the dissolving Soviet Union. This made it safer for democracies in the Eastern Bloc to re-create their sovereignty and normalize their national identity – evidenced by

the reunification of Germany (Meacham, 400-402). In effect, Presidents Carter, Bush - but especially Reagan - helped put democracy and human rights on the world's conscience, and at the epicenter of international affairs (Huntington, 94-95). No longer were these "Western values" placed at the periphery of American foreign policy, but in the 1980's they became a central focus. This in turn sided the U.S. (along with the Vatican) with resistance groups fighting communism's oppressions, and emboldened freedom fighters to generate change.

European institutions were likewise influential in supporting democracy movements. Although not as impactful as the Soviet Union, the U.S., or the Vatican, the European Community began what became known as the Helsinki Process (Huntington, 89-90). Conferences on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which have since morphed into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), drafted documents that offered support for Western values (Huntington, 89-90; Kissinger, 309). Conferences in Belgrade, Vienna, and Madrid prompted communist governments to endorse Western values, and thus opened them up to international criticism when they violated their treaty commitments (Huntington, 90). This pressure and oversight conducted by the West was largely symbolic, but it still aided the perception of democracy in Eastern Europe and contributed to the falling legitimacy of the Soviet Union.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

After careful examination of the numerous causes related to "third wave" democratization, and after considering them in light of relevant theory, it is clear that the most defining cause of democratic transition in this period was the impact of Soviet reforms and the chain reaction they set in motion. The pivot of the U.S.S.R. toward the

West and newfound support of economic openness and political restructuring, combined with the removal of the Brezhnev doctrine, led to the collapse of Soviet regional influence and the reputation of communism, totalitarianism, and authoritarianism in general. Moreover, this shift in foreign policy and evaporation of power directly gave way to a revitalized civil society and emboldened dissent in the Eastern Bloc. This is how groups like Solidarity and the “Baltic Way” gained their autonomy from the state and effectively organized to voice their opposition to the existing governments in the region. Combined with other causes like economic stagnation, these movements and domestic forces in each satellite state eventually succeeded in bringing democratic change. It is in this fusion of both Huntington’s hypothesis of the impact of foreign influence and Linz and Stepan’s theory regarding civil society as a necessary pre-condition for democratic consolidation that the overarching cause of democratization in this era is found.

Having validated the central impact of Soviet reforms, it is still important not to lose sight of the roles that the Vatican, the U.S., and, to a lesser degree, the European Community occupied in this process. Through foundational shifts in both America’s and the Vatican’s approach to foreign affairs, democratization in East-Central Europe was undoubtedly hastened. America’s power and the influence of President Reagan and Pope John Paul II must not be downplayed when observing this era. By embracing their roles as world leaders and championing democracy and human rights, the rise of American and Catholic influence collided at just the right time to bring about the ideological defeat of communism.

Barriers to consolidation still exist in Poland, Latvia, Ukraine, and many other democracies in Europe. The “pacted transition” in Poland, or the “curse of the first,”

which left the country with reserved domains of power, understandably complicated the Polish transition for a time (Linz and Stepan, 264). In Latvia, exclusive policies adopted by the government post-independence damaged relations with a significant minority population (Linz and Stepan, 414-420). Going forward, the Latvian state must reconcile the idea of a “nation-state” with a multicultural, liberal democracy. In Ukraine - which still struggles with democratic consolidation – corruption, economic crisis, and dependence on Russia continue to stand between a kleptocratic state and a healthy democracy with full protection of civil liberties. Economic growth and political sovereignty will not occur until the Ukrainian state fully claims independence from its hegemonic neighbor.

### **Implications**

Examining the implications of certain present-day geopolitical realities, in light of this historical study, is imperative to imagine the future of democratic stability in Eastern Europe. Today, Russia is no longer receding from the world stage, or withdrawing its influence and power. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia continues to attempt to re-create that Soviet-style sphere of influence and has conducted a worldwide assault on democracy and human rights. This is evident by the unilateral invasion into Ukraine in 2014, continued tactical support for separatist militias in Eastern Ukraine, crimes committed in the Syrian civil war and complicit support of a war criminal in Bashar al-Assad, and the meddling in U.S. and European elections. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a land-grab and a violation of international law the likes of which Europe had not witnessed since Hitler’s expansion in the 1930’s. Putin appears to define Russian foreign policy success as anything that comes at the expense of democracy, the U.S., or Western

unification. All of this begs the question: how safe are democracies like Latvia and Ukraine today, and what will the West do about this resurgent Russian aggression?

Possible Russian expansion into the Baltic region is no notion of fantasy. In 1995, Boris Yeltsin's foreign minister remarked at the UN that the use of Russian force in Estonia or Latvia would be justified to defend the rights of the Russian minority in the two Baltic nations ("Meri Dismayed"). Today, Russia is clearly more aggressive and likely to expand under Putin. When annexing Crimea, one of the reasons that Putin cited at the time was the need to bring ethnic Russians back into the "motherland," which was essentially the same reason Hitler gave for annexing Austria, Czechoslovakia, and other territories in the 1930's (Conant). According to the CIA World Factbook, the percentage of Russian minorities in Ukraine in 2014, at the time of invasion, was 17.3 percent (Conant). Today, Latvia has the highest percentage of ethnic Russians of any European country, at 26.2 percent (Conant). This is only another incentive for the Latvian government to adopt inclusive policies towards its Russian minority – not only for their democracy, but for their security and stability.

In these uncertain times of tension, strong American moral leadership need not be in question. This is because, as it was in the 1980's, American engagement is once again critical to restraining Russia and supporting democracies in Eastern Europe and around the world. American commitment to NATO, the continued stability of the EU, and Western support of democracy and human rights will arguably help determine the fate of certain vulnerable nations in Eastern Europe. In the 2016 campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump, when asked about what he would do as president if a NATO ally in the Baltic region was attacked by Russia, was noncommittal on his support of collective

defense – obligatory under Article V of the NATO treaty (Fisher). President Trump’s concerns over defense spending with underpaying NATO allies are justified, and certainly not new. Even still, America must be committed to the military alliance. As this study revealed, the stability of democracies in Eastern Europe and the success of pro-democracy dissent movements at least partly depend on American support, even if it is largely rhetorical. In a new era of Russian aggression, this support is as important as ever. If American allies in the region are to feel safe from this real threat, the U.S., along with the liberal West, must once again establish itself as that “shining city on a hill” – a beacon of freedom for all to see.



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Amid staggering destruction, eastern Ukraine looks to rebuild.

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