

SCHOLARS' VIEWS ON EASTERN EUROPEAN PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA

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Abstract

This article highlights Eastern European positive perceptions of America, as they are described in the scholarship. Particular attention will be paid to the reasons which explain Eastern European pro-Americanism. As shown in the article, the experience of communism and the subsequent post-communist European and worldwide reconfigurations are perceived by scholars as the main factors that prevent most formerly communist countries – Romania included – from expressing the same degree of anti-American reactions that can be seen in Western European countries.

Keywords: anti-Americanism; pro-Americanism; communism; post-communism

Introduction

The issue discussed in this study is based on my interest in American culture and the ways in which it is perceived in Romania, which determined me to start writing a doctoral thesis on the subject in 2009. At that time, I was thrilled to discover the large amount of valuable books and articles on phenomena such as Americanization and anti-Americanism. However, this feeling was soon replaced by concern when I realized that, while lengthy analyses were dedicated to Western European countries, Eastern European ones – including Romania – were very often ignored by scholars.

Regarding anti-Americanism – which I will focus on in this paper – the reasons why the relationship between countries of Eastern Europe and the United States of America was overlooked seemed to be related to the fact that scholars often found it difficult to identify strong anti-American trends in Eastern European countries. Most of them consider that, while Western Europe has a long tradition of anti-American predisposition, which has become increasingly popular after the terrorist attack of 2001 and the resulting American measures, the same does not apply to East-European countries. This is why many studies on America's relation with

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Europe ignore these countries altogether, or only dedicate a few lines to them, whose purpose is to justify why they do not benefit from a more thorough analysis.

The next part of my article focuses on identifying the main elements that are perceived as direct causes of Eastern European pro-Americanism.

The role of communism in shaping Eastern European pro-Americanism

Many analysts consider the largely pro-American attitude of East-Europeans is rooted in their communist past, when the United States of America was perceived as a desired alternative to the domineering Soviet Union, as well as the only possible direction support could come from. As Andrei Markovits stated in his book *Uncouth Nation. Why Europe Dislikes America*, “Eastern Europeans’ overwhelmingly positive views of America stem largely from their having perceived the United States as their sole ally against the much-despised Soviet Union” (Markovits, 2007: 10).

Paul Hollander shares the same view. In his study – *Anti-Americanism. Critiques at Home and Abroad. 1965-1990* – he refers to the dominant presence of the Soviet Union as one of the main reasons why anti-Americanism has been limited to Western Europe and has not spread in the countries which used to be under the control of the former Soviet bloc:

The nationalism of Eastern European nations, although quite intense, has never been nurtured by a threatening image of the United States and thus could not stimulate anti-Americanism. (...) If and insofar as East Europeans need scapegoats and simple explanations for their frustrations and collective misfortunes, it is, for obvious reasons, the Soviet Union and their own former pro-Soviet leaders which are the most inviting targets. (Hollander, 1992: 367)

Hollander also highlights the role of the official anti-American propaganda in communist countries, which did not have the effect intended by the authorities on popular feelings and attitudes (Hollander, 1992: 367). He shows how such propaganda and life under communist regimes led to a feeling of admiration of Western political and economic systems and acceptance of Western products. These attitudes became stronger when the fall of communist regimes proved the inefficiency of the Soviet system and made people turn towards America – as main representative of the West – as the only viable option. When he refers to the events which determined the elimination of Soviet-type structures and the transition towards Western democratic systems, Hollander notices the following:

These changes may be interpreted not merely as repudiation of political-economic systems antithetical to those of the United States (and other Western countries) but also as amounting to an implicit endorsement of the political practices, social

values, and cultural beliefs of the West, and pre-eminently the United States. Not only had most of the communist or post-communist states – with some notable exceptions – ceased or significantly reduced the production and distribution of anti-American propaganda; what is more important, they demonstrated that the major putative alternative to the political pluralism of the West offers little. (Hollander, 1992: 444-445)

Since they witnessed the failure of an anticapitalist system, nowadays Eastern Europeans are not as averse to American-type capitalism as many West Europeans are. They are also more open to Americanization: instead of opposing American influence, they welcome and embrace it. As Hollander shows:

(...) *the people living in the formerly or by now partially communist systems have displayed a great yearning for everything American (and Western), from clothing to music, from free enterprise to American-style checks and balances, and ideals of a civil society.* (Hollander, 1992: 445)

Post-communist European reconfigurations

Another author who tries to identify the main factors which determined Eastern European pro-Americanism is Stephen Brooks. While agreeing that the Cold War played an important role in shaping specific positive perceptions of America, he claims dissatisfaction with the structure of the European Union and distrust in its effectiveness should also be taken into consideration:

Pro-American feelings in Eastern Europe are rooted in gratitude toward Americans for supporting their thwarted aspirations during the cold war. But they are also fueled by skepticism and mistrust of the European Union, which most of their countries have joined in recent years, or at least by a certain idea of the EU that critics associate with domination by France and Germany. For these Euro-skeptics, the United States serves as an alternative to what they see as the bureaucratic, socialistic, and Franco-German dominated EU. (Brooks, 2006: 119)

An extremely thorough and lengthy analysis of attitudes to America in former communist European countries is provided in the volume *With Us or Against Us. Studies in Global Anti-Americanism*, edited by Tony Judt and Denis Lacorne, where an entire chapter is dedicated to Central and East European countries' relation with the United States. Jacques Rupnik – the author of the respective chapter – begins the discussion by showing that opposing perceptions of American presence and influence seem to have created a split within Europe. “The transatlantic divide” – he states – “became an intra-European one with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe tipping the balance in favor of the American leadership” (Rupnik, 2005: 93).

Like many other researchers, Rupnik admits that the American support offered to communist countries during the Cold War justifies to a large extent their present allegiance to the American cause (Rupnik, 2005: 97-98). If American military and political power is perceived as a threat by West European countries as France – considered by Rupnik to be “the archetype of European anti-Americanism” (Rupnik, 2005: 94) – in many Central and Eastern European countries it is seen as a prerequisite for maintaining security and not allowing the Soviet Union to become as powerful as it used to be:

The two Europes are out of sync in their attitudes toward the implications of the end of the Cold War. In West European eyes, the Eastern Americanophilia is, at best, an anachronism. In East-Central Europe, Franco-German challenge to American leadership is seen as a reckless undermining of their security. They closely associate their security with NATO and the U.S. presence on the continent. The French may be concerned about a unipolar world; the East Europeans have no nostalgia for a bipolar one. (Rupnik, 2005: 98)

Thus, according to Rupnik, the political support offered to America by some East and Central European leaders is part of a strategy to establish and maintain ties with NATO to preserve the status quo. But he also points out to the possibility that some of these leaders may overtly manifest a pro-American attitude to prove their own willingness to leave behind old-fashioned communist principles and adopt new democratic ones, thus gaining more legitimacy:

Interestingly, the most committed to support the American leadership and the war in Iraq were the veterans of Soviet bloc communism such as Poland's premier, Leszek Miller and Romania's president, Ion Illiescu. (...) They are now in office and, in the contest between old Europe and America, they chose, quite pragmatically, the most powerful. This provides a double advantage: the completion of the political laundering of the ex-communists as respectable democrats now receiving from Washington the title of the most trusted allies on one hand, and the prospect (at least the hope) of more tangible dividends on the other. (Rupnik, 2005: 99)

Another factor that is often used to justify positive feelings toward America in post-communist European countries is their citizens' admiration of the American social system, and their confidence such a system could help them get rid of all the traces of their former centrally planned, command economy-type structures:

(...) the American free market model seemed doubly attractive in the post-communist transition. After half a century of state control over economic and social life, you do not want just to improve it but also to dismantle it. For that purpose, free market liberalism promoted by the United States and the myth of America as a society without a state seemed highly attractive. (Rupnik, 2005: 103)

In the eyes of East-Europeans, America appears as a symbol of a society based on principles as respect for civil rights, freedom of choice, low level of control exercised by the authorities and low State interference. Irrespective of whether this perception is accurate or not, its impact cannot be denied.

Rupnik's analysis is an extremely balanced one. He cautions against the danger of generalizing, and assuming that all post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe have the same view on America's influence, or that official policies or elite discourse completely match public opinion in the respective countries. He also suggests it is important to understand that pro-American attitudes in the post Cold War era could represent only a stage, not a permanent situation, so their evolution should be closely monitored (Rupnik, 2005: 95-109).

The need for an objective view on Eastern European pro-American attitudes

Another researcher who shows special interest in Eastern European Americanophilia is Janos Matyas Kovacs. In a chapter dedicated to this issue – “‘Little America’. Eastern European Economic Cultures in the EU” – he tries to identify cultural, social and economic proofs of American influence in Eastern Europe, as well as to point out to some of the reasons why American models are so successful here². Kovacs begins his analysis by stating that his intention is not to demolish general assumptions related to Eastern European pro-Americanism, but rather to qualify them and to add more elements to the interpretation they provide. There are three main types of such generalizations that are mentioned. The first one is related to the elites, which are pro-American supposedly due to their feelings of rejection of former communist regimes, or due to their strategic needs on the international scene. Furthermore, their expressed pro-Americanism is considered to be rooted in the fact that anti-Americanism has been adopted by extreme nationalist parties. A second assumption is the one according to which anti-Americanism is rejected as a rule by young, well-educated, socially involved people, while other groups have not clarified their position yet. The last claim is that the main instrument of Americanization in Eastern Europe is represented by McWorld³ (Kovacs, 2004: 33).

Kovacs does not deny the validity of these assumptions. However, he claims more factors should be taken into consideration for a better understanding of the reasons why former communist countries in Eastern Europe do not share the same negative

² As Kovacs himself explained, the ideas presented in this chapter are based on a joint research project which targeted eight Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.

³ The concept was developed by Benjamin R. Barber (see Barber 1992; 1995) and it is used to refer to globalizing trends aimed at establishing uniformity and universalizing tastes, habits, or consumption patterns.

perception of American influence as Western Europeans. Before showing what these elements are, he states it is important to understand that there may be instances when acceptance of American values is not always the result of a voluntary or conscious decision:

One cannot ignore a massive and robust process of Americanization over the past decades in which people at large vote with their feet for institutions, policies and concepts that they regard as American and good, and build institutions such as the flat tax, private pensions, or Valentine's Day into their daily life. Conversely, Eastern Europeans who embrace these and other U.S. signifiers are often not aware of the fact that they have chosen the "American option" of post-communist transformation. (Kovacs, 2004: 30)

Coming back to the widely-spread assumptions described above, Kovacs considers it is important to go beyond appearances and identify the real origins of specific attitudes. For example, he states that the perception of pro-Americanism as an attitude specific mostly to the elites is a simplistic one. In his opinion, political elites' public support to the United States is to a large extent determined by the masses' positive opinion of America and of social, economic and cultural aspects they perceive as American:

A large section of the political elite is, in my view, not simply committed to certain American ideals and geopolitical considerations and/ or afraid of its domestic rivals, but is also exposed to the support by electorates, business lobbies, and NGOs, who respect the United States precisely because they are confident it embodies an attractive and useful destination for post-communist transformation. It would be foolish for the elites to distance themselves from the people by challenging what the latter regard as American and accept with pleasure, be it a new pattern of consumption (shopping malls, online banking), a particular lifestyle (wellness fashions and suburban housing) or an economic institution (the credit card and partial privatization of health-care). (Kovacs, 2004: 34)

For Kovacs it is obvious that political parties would not be allowed to hold dominant positions unless they express the same opinions as those of the population. Therefore, elite pro-Americanism in Eastern European countries and political discourse in favor of the U.S. are clear signs of similar attitudes among ordinary citizens and influential social groups.

The study focuses not only on attitudes and discourse, but also on real proofs of American influence and fields in which American models were adopted. References are made for example to the presence of numerous American NGOs or transnational companies in Eastern Europe, as well as to Eastern Europeans' countries close collaboration with NATO. Kovacs also identifies the impact of American-type capitalism models on various economic practices and he

emphasizes the need to recognize the benefits of importing specific American values pertaining to high culture, which play an important role in the analyzed European countries' effort to create new social and economic structures:

These cultural goods, which are incorporated in scientific theories, religious beliefs, administrative skills, work routines, legal procedures, and the like, are widely used in designing post-communist government reforms, managing privatization, organizing civic initiatives or restructuring the universities. (Kovacs, 2004: 36)

However, despite the numerous examples of American practices and values taken over by Eastern Europeans, the adoption is subject to a process of selection. American models are not accepted indiscriminately, and people simply reject aspects of the American culture which they perceive as incompatible with their own culture. In support of this claim, Kovacs mentions several highly contested legal practices – extreme forms of punishing criminals, facilities provided to people who wish to acquire guns, or the tendency to solve matters by suing other people or institutions –, as well as cultural values which might actually prove beneficial, such as active involvement in the life of the community. These aspects are widely spread in the United States, but they were not integrated in the culture of the countries he refers to (38). Due to these reasons, Kovacs considers that even though acceptance of American influence is definitely stronger than in Western Europe, “any thesis of sweeping Americanization in Eastern Europe today (...) would be a gross overstatement” (Kovacs, 2004: 38).

Another important contribution Kovacs brings to the analysis of pro-Americanism in Eastern Europe is his idea that to a certain extent countries in this area were subject to what he calls “Americanization by default” (Kovacs, 2004: 43). There are three dimensions involved in this type of Americanization. The first one – which in my opinion is also the most intriguing – is related to how the communist regime actually forced people to resort to attitudes specific to a capitalist society in order to distance themselves from the official propaganda and cope better with the harsh conditions imposed by the authorities:

(...) if we look behind the mask of the once “really existing” communist type of man, we discover a Janus-faced economic culture based on state paternalism and informal markets, public ownership and private redistribution, central commands and decentralized bargaining, over-regulation and free-riding, collectivist economic institutions and individual (or family-based) coping strategies, learned helplessness and forced creativity. (40; emphasis in the original)

Paradoxically, those Europeans who had the experience of living in communist countries learned for example to rely more on personal trust and agreements than

on institutional arrangements and rules designed by specific organizations, which according to Kovacs is a feature of capitalism (Kovacs, 2004: 40).

The second dimension of Americanization by default is related to the relationship between Eastern European countries and the rest of Europe. After 1989, when the former were finally free to establish contacts with the West, they felt ignored by the other Europeans, which determined them to turn towards the United States of America as a model and source of support (Kovacs, 2004: 43).

The last aspect is mainly a socioeconomic one: during the transition period, the need to quickly reorganize the formerly communist structures, matched with the low level of opposition from groups as trade unions for instance facilitated the adoption of harsh austerity measures which imposed a fast-paced liberalization. This “shock therapy”, Kovacs states, “was often mistaken by observers for a programmatic and general breakthrough of the spirit of American capitalism in the region” (Kovacs, 2004: 43). However, he emphasizes the strong impact of local conditions, which required or at least encouraged the adoption of American-type economic models.

Conclusions

As I have shown in the previous sections of my article, according to scholarship in the field of European-American relations, people living in countries from Eastern Europe are to a large extent pro-American. Unlike Westerners, they seem ready to welcome American influence and eager to establish closer ties with the U.S. This attitude is to a large extent determined by people’s direct exposure to communist regimes and the Soviet influence. During the Cold War, America was perceived as a better alternative due to aspects as: its status as the main force opposing the Soviet Union, negative reactions to official anti-American propaganda, or the economic and social inefficiency of Soviet structures and values. In the post Cold War period, Eastern Europeans still feel they need American presence to maintain security. On the other hand, political elites rely on pro-American discourse to gain the citizens’ trust by showing them they are willing to move forward and leave behind communist values, replacing them with the values of democracy that people associate with America.

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