Workshop proposal submitted by Nieves Pérez-Solórzano and Jean-Michel De Waele for the ECPR Joint Sessions - Nicosia, Cyprus; 25 - 30 April, 2006

Interest politics in Post-communist democracies

Workshop outline and relation to relevant literature
Most literature on the theory and practice of democratisation regards interest representation as an essential precondition for democratic governance. Stable modern structures of interest intermediation, an institutionalised political system and a stable political society constitute the basis for a successful transition to and consolidation of the democratisation process. Hence, a democratic state is characterised by the ability of citizens to formulate preferences, communicate those preferences to the government (either individually or collectively) and have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of government. (Dahl, R. 1971).

The process of regime change initiated in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in 1989 created the conditions and the impetus for the development of interest group politics in the region. The systemic change has resulted in the multiplication of interest groups and interest representation bodies in post-communist democracies, while the spectrum of interest groups developing in CEE is similar to that in traditional liberal democracies (i.e. labour, business, ethnic minorities, women, environmentalists, youth, NGOs etc.). However the rules of the game for interest articulation that evolved in the West during lengthy periods of relative political stability are neither clearly defined nor commonly understood in the post-communist context. Recent research reveals a number of features which highlight the specific nature of interest politics in the post-communist environment with regard to the ability of organised interests to mobilise support, to engage in the sometimes ill-defined channels for interest intermediation, to exercise influence in the policy process, and to find a distinctive niche in the political spectrum independent from that inhabited by political parties. This research points towards the immaturity of interest politics in Central and Eastern Europe, interest groups’ limited success in mobilising sufficient resources and support; the dominance of party politics as a constraining factor delaying the emergence of additional forms of interest intermediation; the limited availability of legislation governing interest intermediation and the new opportunities and challenges offered by EU accession (Mcmenamin, 2004, Perez-Solorzano 2004, Sharman, 2004).

This workshop aims to bring together ongoing theoretically informed and empirically guided research in the field of interest politics in CEE. The study of post-communist politics has developed considerably since regime change began in Central and Eastern Europe at the end
of the 1980s to include aspects of comparative politics, political theory and democratization. While areas such as electoral politics, political party systems, institutional engineering, public policy initiatives and the impact of EU accession have attracted scholarly attention, the study of participatory democracy and the role of organised interest politics have been neglected by academic research. Moreover, when addressed, the issue of participatory politics in post-communist democracies is discussed against the background of Western comparative politics and a normative discourse both in its conceptualisation and theoretical assumptions, which limit the analysis of interest intermediation in Central and Eastern Europe by not accounting for the impact of domestic political cultures, historical experience and the communist legacy. While there are numerous publications that focus on the study of civil society, social movements and their role in the transition process, domestic interest politics are studied mostly in isolation from one another, while the normative debate is largely separate from empirical analyses. Systematic comparative studies are virtually non-existent despite the wealth of empirical material from a number of countries which have embraced participatory politics in one way or another. Despite a handful of exceptions, the opportunities and challenges to interest politics derived from EU accession are largely ignored.

In order to better understand these processes, this workshop will examine interest politics both theoretically and empirically in specific sectors in relation to the domestic and transnational levels. This workshop will study interest politics in post-communist democracies against the background of systemic change and democratisation. Specifically, the analysis will focus on the role, strategies, effectiveness and transnational linkages of sectoral interests in post-communist democracies. Given the scarce literature on the subject the workshop will offer researchers interested in this field a rare opportunity to test some of the generally agreed attributes of post-communist interest politics while placing the debate in the context of the pluralist, neo-corporatist and policy networks approaches and assessing the impact of EU accession on the domestic environments for interest intermediation. Therefore, the following issues will be addressed:

1. A mapping out of interest politics in post-communist democracies by answering the following questions: Who do these organisations represent? Are they elitist or do they reflect general public interests? Do they actually reflect public opinion? How do they relate to the state and other political actors? How effective are sectoral interests in affecting policy outcomes? How do the opportunity structures for interest intermediation differ across CEE?
2. The role of organised interests in the context of the democratisation discourse in Central and Eastern Europe. What features of systemic change have facilitated the emergence and contributed to the success of interest politics? How useful are democratisation approaches in explaining the nature of interest politics in post-communist democracies? How applicable are paradigms such as pluralism, neo-corporatism and policy networks to interest politics in post-communist democracies? While it could be argued that the study of politics is intrinsically linked to the comparative method, do Western benchmarks distort the analysis of interest intermediation in CEE? Should post-communist politics develop its own benchmarks derived from the comparative study of interest politics in Central and Eastern Europe alone? This line of inquiry relates closely to the question of why some theoretical frameworks employed to shed light on the role and impact of interest group politics in the policy process are more suitable than others in the examination of interest group activity CEE in view of the observed patterns of state dependency (largely as a result of the legacy of forty or so years of communist economic planning) and the comparative insights that can be drawn from an analysis of interest group politics in different post-communist democracies.

3. The repercussions of the European Union on domestic modes of political participation and interest intermediation. The accession of several post-communist countries to the EU has opened up a brand-new discussion about the future of democratic development in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. While procedurally all of these countries can now be said to have consolidated their democracy, as explained above, the structures for interest intermediation remain relatively new and are generally less stable than in Western Europe. As a result, it is necessary to understand the impact of EU membership on the national and transnational repertoires for interest intermediation. These will be illustrated by the transnational linkages derived from EU accession either through contacts with EU level organisations or as a result of the EU prescribing advice on collective action and participatory democracy.

**Type of contributions**

We expect empirically driven and theoretically informed papers. We welcome research shaped by domestic and/or sectoral case studies as well as comparative studies amongst several post-communist democracies. We encourage discussion about the transnational dimension of post-communist interest politics.

**Participants**

The following scholars have been approached as possible participants in the workshop:
Additional funding
We are currently seeking funding from the following institutions and bodies: British Academy, the University of East Anglia, the Volkswagen Foundation, and the Open Society Institute, le Fond National de la Recherche Scientifique, l’Université libre de Bruxelles, la Communauté française Wallonie Bruxelles.

Biographical notes
Jean-Michel De Waele is a professor in Politics at the Université libre de Bruxelles and the director of the Groupe d’analyse socio-politique des pays de l’Europe centrale et orientale (GASPPECO/ Group for Socio-Political Analysis of Central and Eastern European Countries). His research interests include:

- Political parties in Central and Eastern Europe
- The social and political actors in Central and Eastern Europe
- The impact of the EU enlargement on the political scenes of the new members states
- The MEPs from the new member states and their socialisation and integration in the European political arena.

Recent publications

Nieves Pérez-Solórzano is a lecturer in Politics in the School of Political, Social and International Studies and a member of the ESRC Centre for Competition Policy at the University of East Anglia in the UK. Her research interests include:

- The politics of European integration. As part of her contribution to the ESRC Centre for Competition Policy she is currently working on the development of competition policy in the EU.

- The politics of participation in the EU. She is currently working on the nature of participatory democracy in the EU and the potential of the European constitution's provisions to promote citizens' participation. This research is financed by CIDEL (Citizenship and Democratic Legitimacy in Europe a joint research project financed by the European Commission's Fifth Framework Programme).

- The impact of the 2004 enlargement on the structures for interest representation in the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe. This is a project financed by the British Academy which focuses on a comparative analysis of the Europeanisation of business interests, and civil society in the new EU member states.

Recent publications:

- “EU Accession and Interest Politics in Central and Eastern Europe” in Perspectives on European Politics and Society, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2004

The Organisation of Business Interests in Central and East European Countries for EU Representation” in Justin Greenwood (ed.): The Challenge of Change in EU Business Associations, Palgrave, London, 2003


Forthcoming Publications
