

## **Impact of International System on Democratic Transitions: A Comparative Study between Democratization in Post-Cold War Serbia and Post-Arab Spring Libya**

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*This research investigates the impact of international system on the democratic transitions of Post-Cold War Serbia and Post-Arab Spring Libya. Adopting Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's "Linkage and Leverage" model as an analytical point of departure, exogenous structural factors such as ties with the West and susceptibility to Western democratizing influence are assessed and compared in the two cases. The research suggests that nascent democracies such as Serbia's are far more likely to succeed in a unipolar system where the West, as the global hegemonic force, opts to genuinely engage in active and persistent democracy promotion so long as it serves the West's own interests. By contrast, more recent democratic transitions in cases such as Libya's, which transpired in an increasingly multipolar system with waning Western influence and the rising clout of authoritarian powers, must depend far more heavily on favorable domestic factors as well as local political dynamics in order to successfully democratize. Additionally, the study builds upon Levitsky and Way's framework by exploring the causality of linkage and leverage effects, which is brought about by change in polarity that is created in part by a shift in the US and Western foreign policy towards offshore balancing.*

**Keywords:** *International System, Polarity, Democratization, Serbia, Libya, Arab Spring*

### INTRODUCTION

Against the current backdrop of democratic recession and authoritarian resurgence around the globe, as evident from waning influence of the West coupled with the rising clout of China and Russia, this study aims to examine the impact of the international system on democratization trends. This is important because past literature on democratization has mainly focused on domestic factors, such as level of economic development, education, civil society, and elite bargaining. The international dimension as a cause of democratization has been generally neglected and understudied, being confined to indirect variables such as regional proximity (e.g., the "snowball" effect), membership in international organizations, or geopolitics. The international system as a variable in itself has largely been unexplored.

In an attempt to isolate the international system as an explanatory variable, this study will compare two cases with similar domestic variables: the case of post-Cold War Serbia's successful democratization process during the 1990s and early 2000s, and the case of post-Arab Spring Libya, which has been mired in civil strife since the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The hypothesis under investigation is that polarity, or the way in which power is distributed in the international system, has a consequential impact on nascent democratic transitions. As a corollary, external powers have a notable role in influencing regime transitions, possessing the ability to substantially affect regime consolidation and outcome in the long term, a capacity that hitherto has been downplayed in the democratization literature.

That successful democratic transitions took place in ex-communist Eastern European

countries within merely a decade or so is an incredible accomplishment which is oft overlooked, especially when considering that the transition was achieved despite numerous obstacles. As Christian Haerpfer (2009, 313) points out, the collapse of single-party communist regimes in Europe had produced a dangerous vacuum of political institutions and values, made even more challenging based on the fact that three transformations had to be achieved: a political transformation from a communist one-party state to a pluralist democracy, an economic transformation from a collective command economy to a free market economy, and finally a social transformation from a communist society to a liberal society. In addition, states like Serbia faced even more hindrances, being plagued by ethnic wars up until the late 1990s due to the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Yet despite these strenuous challenges, these aforementioned countries managed to become democracies by the early 2000s.

Upon closer inspection, it would appear that the transition was inevitable, simply for the fact that there was no better alternative. For in those years, democracy was seen as the only legitimate form of political organization, while market capitalism came to be seen as the most economically viable model for development. In other words, democracy practically became the “only game in town”. Crucially, throughout that period the West was keen to export the notion of democracy as well as the neoliberal economic paradigm abroad, in the form of indirect moral and financial support, and in some cases direct intervention. As such, Western-led democracy came to be associated with political values such as liberalism, freedom of speech, and the separation of powers, as well as with economic values such as deregulation and free trade.

With such a backdrop in mind, the West’s response to the Middle East’s “Berlin Wall” moment, over two decades later, could not have been more contrasting. In 2011, a comparably historic display of civil resistance to autocratic rule occurred in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>1</sup> region, in the form of the Arab Spring protests. Although the pro-democracy forces managed to topple three longstanding dictators in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, this mass display of civil discontent did not produce the same results as in Eastern Europe.

#### THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AS THE “MISSING VARIABLE”

At first glance, it may appear that domestic factors such as the Islam religion and values, severe repression fueled by money derived from oil (oil rents), political co-optation, economic development and resource distribution, education, the absence of strong civil society, as well as ethnic and tribal divisions, are the main factors contributing to authoritarian persistence in the MENA region. Indeed, an entire body of literature has been devoted to explaining what has become known as Arab “exceptionalism”, the notion that Arab autocracies are somehow immune to democratic change, with analyses invariably focusing on the aforementioned endogenous variables.

Nevertheless, the main argument of this study is that the international system also played a pivotal role which cannot be neglected. The concept of polarity, or the way in which power is distributed within the international system, has direct consequences to the fluctuation of global democracy as a political institution. Democracy reached its zenith in the 1990s when

<sup>1</sup> The “Middle East” region and the “MENA” region are used interchangeably throughout this work.

American power was at its peak, and its regression has coincided with waning Western influence coupled with the rise of authoritarian China and Russia. As the world gradually moves from unipolarity towards multipolarity, the emergence of alternative forms of governance other than liberal democracy have become increasingly appealing, especially to states in political transition. Without external Western assistance in the same manner that was given to Eastern European states during the post-Cold War years, it is surmised that democratic aspirations in the MENA region will not be realized. The international systemic environment at present and in the foreseeable future simply does not favor democratic transition and consolidation, not only for the MENA states but also in other regions beyond. In this sense, the Arab Spring may have occurred at the most inopportune time, perhaps two decades too late.

In spite of attempts in recent years to place more emphasis on external factors, two major shortcomings remain. The first is that there has been scant effort to integrate the above various mechanisms of international influences into a coherent theoretical framework. Most studies either simply present a long list of the many international variables, or limit their focus to a single mechanism. As such, Michael McFaul (2010, 3-29) contends that the literature has remained largely descriptive, with few testable hypotheses or aggregating theoretical statements. The second is that there is, in McFaul's words, a "missing variable" which would complement the quest for a unified general theory of democratization: that of the international system.

One influential work by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way manages to integrate the large number of seemingly disparate mechanisms of international influence into a concise theoretical framework, thereby avoiding a superfluous "laundry" list of competing factors. They achieve this through the "Linkage and Leverage" model, which organizes the post-Cold War international environment into two dimensions: linkage to the West and leverage in relation to the West.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS: LINKAGE AND LEVERAGE MODEL

Levitsky and Way's theory is essentially a third image, structural framework for analysis which argues that the successful democratic transition of states since the end of the Cold War is in large part due to "linkages" to Western liberal democracies as well as "leverage" vis-à-vis the West. "Linkage" is defined as the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people and information) with the West (namely the US, the EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions). "Leverage" is defined as governments' vulnerability to external (i.e. Western) democratizing pressure. Levitsky and Way refer to leverage not as the exercise of external pressure by the West, but rather to a regime's vulnerability to such pressure. Leverage is high in countries that lack bargaining power and are heavily affected by Western punitive action. Leverage is low in countries that possess substantial bargaining power and/or can weather Western punitive action without substantial harm.

It is important to emphasize and make a clear distinction here between leverage vis-à-vis the West of states that find themselves in democratic transition, and actual Western democratizing pressure. To be sure, leverage of states in relation to the West does not equate to Western democratizing pressure. High or low leverage against the West may or may not

**Figure 1.** Linkage – Leverage Effects on Democratizing Pressure

	<b>High Linkage</b>	<b>Low Linkage</b>
<b>High Leverage</b>	Consistent and intense democratizing pressure	Strong but intermittent and “electoralist pressure”
<b>Low Leverage</b>	Consistent but diffuse and indirect democratizing pressure	Weak external pressure

Source: Levitsky and Way (2010, 53)

lead to pressure from the West for that state to democratize. The foreign policy decision to pursue Western democratic pressure depends on a number of factors, with perceived Western interests being one of the most important. It is worth stressing that leverage in Levitsky and Way’s model measures the susceptibility of states to Western democratizing pressure, as opposed to the West’s leverage over other states and the capacity of the West to pressure those states to democratize.

Leverage is rooted in three factors, namely the country’s size and military strength (the bigger the size, the lower the leverage), the existence of Western competing security interests (leverage is lower if there are Western security interests involved), and the presence of countervailing, anti-democratic powers, termed by Levitsky and Way as “Black Knights” (leverage is lower if the country is supported by “Black Knights”, i.e. powerful authoritarian states like China or Russia).

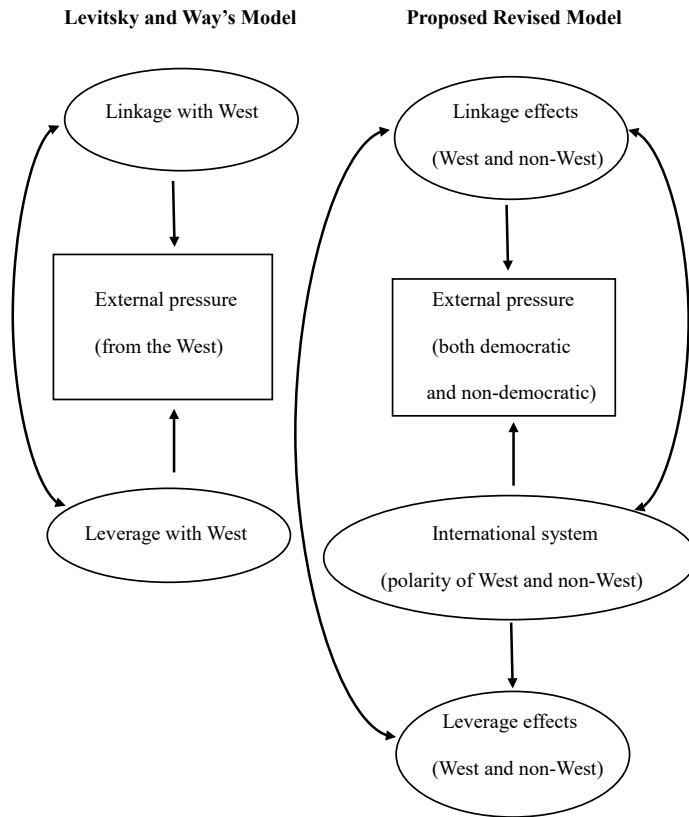
According to the model, successful transitions to democracy are most likely to occur when both linkage and leverage are high. Should either, or both, linkage and leverage be low, external pressure for democratization will not be sufficient nor sustained, thus an authoritarian outcome is more likely. In such cases with low linkage and/or low leverage, the only way to achieve a democratic outcome is from within the state itself, through a strong domestic “push” to democratize.

The interplay between linkage and leverage in the democratization process is operationalized in the following table (Figure 1):

Levitsky and Way apply the theory to test against the transition to democracy of 35 “competitive authoritarianism” cases which newly emerged in the post-Cold War era. These regimes are defined by the authors as hybrid regimes that are “competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to seriously contest for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5). Elections exist, but are neither free nor fair, and opposition parties stand little chance to win. In other words, these states are democracies only in name.

The case studies Levitsky and Way employed their theoretical model to include countries from nearly all regions of the world. Conspicuously, there was no country from the MENA region. This is understandable, however, given that the Middle East had been staunchly autocratic throughout the past few decades up until the time the authors’ research was conducted (1990s and 2000s) and published (2010). Nevertheless, the Arab uprisings of 2011 has provided a political opening for at least four states, namely Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Due to the fact that each case has been met with different transitional outcomes, thus providing the social scientist with diverging dependent variables, these post-Arab Spring cases provide an ideal, and indeed timely, opportunity to test Levitsky and Way’s theory

**Figure 2.** International System and the Linkage and Leverage Model



Source: Author's illustration

against real-world data.

One limitation of the Linkage and Leverage model that must first be addressed, however, is that in Levitsky and Way's original model, only ties to the West and leverage vis-à-vis the West are scrutinized. This is understandable to a certain extent, as they conducted their research largely during the 1990s and 2000s, when Western power was at its zenith. Yet in doing so, the model assumes that Western power is a given, perhaps even constant, and thus unable to take into account the fact that power distribution in the international system is fluid and fluctuating. Hence, it is necessary to build upon the analytical paradigm by introducing the concept of polarity, whereby Western power can be compared and contrasted vis-à-vis non-Western ones. This concept is visualized in the diagram above (Figure 2):

In the original model, Levitsky and Way's assumption is that linkage and leverage effects vis-à-vis the West are already existing per se. There is no mention of any causal connection as to what brought about these effects. To address this limitation, the distribution of power in the international system in the form of polarity is proposed. By doing so, linkage and leverage effects would no longer be the exclusive domain of the West, as non-Western powers can also impact on regime transitions. For instance, in a more multipolar world, China and Russia can provide an alternative, non-democratic influence to countries considering democratization as

compared to a unipolar world in which the West acts as hegemon.

Although it is arguable that the inclusion of ‘Black Knights’ by Levitsky and Way already introduces the concept of polarity into the model, the proposed revised model will enable these ‘Black Knight’ powers to be scrutinized in terms of their linkage and leverage effects vis-à-vis states in political transition as ‘equals’ to the West. In other words, rather than merely being a ‘disruptive’ influence on democratizing prospects, states such as China and Russia can assume a more impactful role of ‘influencer’ in the revised model.

In this manner, external influence may be exerted not only towards democratization by the West, but also by non-Western powers to perpetuate authoritarianism among favored regimes, or even some other form of governance which may be preferred by the pressuring hegemon. Moreover, the international structure as a variable would not be stationary, but rather dependent on what kind of international system is in place at any given time. This would have the added benefit of enabling the theoretical framework to ‘travel’ across a wider universe of cases throughout spatial and temporal divides. As such, the model can be constantly up-to-date, readily applicable to different time periods, regions, and international systems.

#### COMPARING POST-COLD WAR SERBIA TO POST-ARAB SPRING LIBYA

Although there are several European cases which experienced democratization during the 1990s to 2000s, including Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, the choice to comparatively pair Serbia with Libya is most attractive and beneficial due to similar endogenous variables, in particular the circumstances that befell each country during the period of transition, namely that both were subject to NATO bombings for several months, and both suffered through grave sectarian violence (although in Serbia’s case NATO intervention came because of, and not prior to, civil conflict, whereas in Libya’s case major civil hostilities occurred subsequent to NATO military action). Hence when compared, the impact of the international system as an external variable can be isolated.

##### **Serbia’s Linkage with the West**

During the Cold War period, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the only communist state in Europe which developed close relations with the European Economic Community (EEC). Following the 1948 Tito-Stalin Split, Yugoslavia pursued a policy of neutrality, eventually becoming one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, though in reality the country pursued close ties with West. In 1953, Yugoslavia signed the Balkan Pact with Turkey and Greece, both NATO members, enabling the country to indirectly associate itself with NATO. The intention was to integrate Yugoslavia into the Western security defense and economic aid orbit due to threats Belgrade received from Moscow (Terzic 2008). Yugoslavia was the first Eastern European nation for which the EEC accepted the possibility to start technical talks on cooperation, and in 1967 a formal declaration on the establishment of relations was signed. That same year, Yugoslavia became the first communist country to open its borders to all foreign visitors and abolish visa requirements, and there were approximately five times more Yugoslav students studying in the West per capita than any other communist country in the 1970s (Levitsky and Way 2010, 104).



Political and economic relations between Yugoslavia and the West continued to intensify throughout the 1970s. In 1977, the EEC granted Yugoslavia access to the European Investment Bank, and by 1980 the bank provided two loans for linking the country's high-voltage electricity distribution networks to the Greek and Italian grids, and for constructing part of the trans-Yugoslav road. During 1977-1978, Belgrade was the host city of the first follow-up meetings of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Trade wise, the EEC responded to Yugoslavia's economic reforms as well as the country's refusal to remain aligned with the Soviet Union by negotiating a trade agreement in 1970, and granting the benefits of the Generalized System of Preferences in 1974. A major cooperation agreement was then signed in 1980, detailing provisions concerning trade, financial aid, industry, science and technology, energy, agriculture, transport, the environment and tourism (Pinder 1994, 138).

Thus by 1990, Serbian industry was characterized by a relatively high degree of integration with Western markets. As a matter of fact, at the outbreak of Serbia's war with Croatia in 1991, Yugoslavia was the EEC's second largest trade partner in the Mediterranean area, just after Algeria, with 90% of industrial imports from Yugoslavia to the EEC not subject to any duty (Thomas 1999, 163). Nevertheless, due to the escalation of hostilities and violations of human rights, by November 1991 all agreements on cooperation between the EEC and Yugoslavia were suspended, and UN sanctions were implemented by 1992 (Djukanovic 2015).

For Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia, high linkage proved to be a double-edged sword. Due to the extensive trade ties with the West, the sanctions hit the Serbian economy hard, with massive hyperinflation estimates in the region of 1.5 billion percent annually (Doder 1993). While Milosevic could use sanctions to rally nationalist fervor, economic collapse meant that by the late 1990s the regime was unable to dispense patronage and pay state salaries. Increasingly, the Serbian army, police forces, and business elite "no longer believed Milosevic could protect their interests" (Cohen 2001, 321-322). The deep state that had propped up Milosevic for the past decade began crumbling beneath him, and their lack of support proved crucial to his downfall in October 2000.

High linkage with the West also led to extensive Western media coverage, large-scale refugee flows, and pressure by transnational human rights networks, which made it difficult for Western powers to ignore the impact of violence and instability in Europe's "backyard". Indeed, the 1995 Srebrenica massacre had served as a "wake up call" in the West (Pond 2006, 30), and Milosevic's 1998 offensive in Kosovo grabbed Western headlines. This eventually prompted US President Bill Clinton (mired domestically in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, it should also be noted) to take interventive action in the form of NATO's 1999 air raids to "defuse the powder keg at the heart of Europe".<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, apart from the sharp increase in aid prior to the 2000 elections, the West was active in ensuring that a democratic system of governance was established in post-conflict Serbia. This was achieved largely through EU conditionality, with Serbia and Montenegro starting negotiations in 2005 to join the EU Stabilization and Association Agreement, designed specifically for countries of the Western Balkans as part of the wider European Neighborhood Policy focused on EU enlargement.

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<sup>2</sup> Address made by Bill Clinton on March 24, 1999, regarding military action against Yugoslavia. Accessed at <https://milllercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-24-1999-statement-kosovo> (July 1, 2020).

The effect that EU conditionality has on domestic political transition during the pre-accession process cannot be understated. In addition to granting free trade access to the wider EU market and opening up the country to foreign investment and expertise, the EU also provided over 5 billion euros to Serbia in donor assistance between 2000 to 2005 (International Monetary Fund 2006). Crucially, EU conditionality provided incentives for internal governance reform. Opposition politicians knew that their pre-election rhetoric would be judged against their post-election actions through EU monitoring reports, hence the EU's leverage in this matter compels aspiring governments to tackle politically challenging reforms such as creating an independent civil service, reforming the judiciary, or accelerating bank privatization, and to sustain these reforms over time (Vachudova 2010, 99). In this context, in the 2000s Serbia's political elite considered the support of Western governments, institutions, and NGOs to be of great importance, and thus sought to cultivate an image of "pro-European politicians" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 112).

Indeed, the cost of exclusion was massive. The steady flow of trade, foreign direct investment, aid and expertise is diverted away from states that fail to enter the queue to join an enlarging EU towards those that choose to do so. These states that receive such benefits are more often than not neighboring states within the region, thus the demonstration effect has a powerful impact that makes it difficult to be ignored. In Serbia's case, the successful democratization of states such as Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia undoubtedly had a huge impact on Serbian politicians and the general populace. Hence, despite fears of diminished national sovereignty and increased economic vulnerability, the goal of EU accession created incentives for states to satisfy entry requirements, even though they would have to voluntarily subject themselves to a battery of unilateral monitoring and reporting. As one observer notes, at no time in history have sovereign states voluntarily agreed to meet such vast domestic requirements and then subjected themselves to such intrusive verification procedures to enter an international organization (Vachudova 2010, 90-91).

### **Serbia's Leverage with the West**

Western leverage is high vis-à-vis Serbia, as Serbia is a small-sized country with comparatively low military and economic clout. "Black Knight" support existed in a limited capacity in the form of strong condemnation by Russia of NATO's bombing campaign, questioning the international legitimacy of interventive military action, having not been authorized by the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, as Levitsky and Way point out, the West did not fully exploit Serbia's high leverage via the exertion of democratizing pressure until after 1995, once the Dayton Agreement was signed, as it was in the West's interests to cooperate with Milosevic to achieve their collective foreign policy goal of ending the Bosnian War while maintaining the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign entity (Levitsky and Way 2010, 105). Thus, Western democratizing pressure was limited up to the mid-1990s. Following Milosevic's downfall, however, Western democratizing pressure became heavily rooted in EU conditionality, which provided the nascent Serbian democracy with strong incentives to make the internal political and economic reforms.

Analysts have generally viewed the fall of Milosevic in light of domestic factors such as the Otpor student resistance movement and the importance of having a unified opposition, citing Serbia as a prime case of defeating dictators through the ballot box. To be sure, Otpor, which was established in 1998, played a prominent role in galvanizing national discontent against Milosevic, exposing the weakness of the regime through often humorous street



theater, concerts, rallies, and an unusually large-scale distribution of pamphlets, posters, and other materials that mocked the regime. Appealing largely to the youth and disillusioned voters, by 2000 membership had swelled into the tens of thousands, with over 100 branches throughout the country (Bunce and Wolchik 2010, 145-146).

Its message about a united opposition was also clear: rally behind one presidential candidate in order to garner more votes than Milosevic. In this sense, the remarkable decision by Zoran Dindic to drop out of the race, despite heading the largest party within the opposition coalition, in favor of Vojislav Kostunica, who public opinion polls showed was the more popular opposition candidate, was a critical step (Bunce and Wolchik 2010, 146). Kostunica managed to defeat Milosevic in the general elections in September 2000, and despite the regime's last ditch attempts at electoral fraud, overwhelming public backlash in the form of hundreds of thousands of protesters eventually led to Milosevic's resignation on 7 October 2000.

Yet support from the West cannot be neglected. The US and EU provided significant backing to the opposition during the period leading up to the presidential elections, sharing the common aim to bring about the demise of Milosevic. These funds, to the tune of USD 100 million were used to support independent media, activists' salaries, polling, and a massive get-out-the-vote campaign (Carothers 2001, 3). While seemingly small, this was in fact an extraordinary sum, considering that in the prior decade, from 1988-1998, only USD 50 million had been spent on democracy promotion efforts (Jennings 2011). Aid was financed both through formal, institutionalized channels via organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and Freedom House, and as well as through informal channels, in particular through the actions of ambassadors to the country (Bunce and Wolchik 2010, 149). As one British diplomat remarked, there was "so much money pouring into the opposition that Milosevic would have been justified in cancelling the elections on the grounds of outside interference (LeBor 2004, 304).

The West also saw the importance of uniting the opposition, and one of the conditions attached to aid was that the opposition parties overcome their divisions, seen as the only way to assure victory over the regime. Another condition was that the nationalist-oriented opposition parties such as the Serbian Renewal Movement and the Democratic Party of Serbia cease their anti-Western rhetoric and support the country's entry into Euro-Atlantic structures based on a fulfillment of the necessary political and economic reforms (Boduszynski 2010, 198). During the NATO bombings, the American Embassy in Belgrade evacuated to Budapest in neighboring Hungary, and received members of the Serbian opposition on a regular basis. In addition, monthly interagency meetings between governmental and non-governmental actors active in Serbia were held in Washington (Jennings 2011).

Indeed, the Serbian case clearly demonstrates the extent to which international influence can have impact on regime transition. As the war in Bosnia moved into its fifth year in the mid-1990s, the US was working to forge peace, and needed both Milosevic and Croatia's Franjo Tudjman to do so. As a result, the Serbian protests of 1996-97 against Milosevic's failure to respect local election results elicited little American attention (Bunce and Wolchik 2009, 100). Yet within a couple of years, following the Kosovo crisis and with the Dayton Agreement no longer a serious constraint, Washington had shifted its stance on Milosevic, instead seeing him as the main impediment to Balkan stability.

The political will to oust Milosevic can be encapsulated in Bill Clinton's remarks during NATO's 1999 bombing campaign, "Realistically, [peace in the Balkans] will require a democratic transition in Serbia, for the region's democracies will never be safe with a

belligerent tyranny in their midsts.” It is plain from this quote that, with America’s creed of democracy at its zenith, Washington equated democratic transitions to peace-building along the lines of the democratic peace thesis, and that the US saw itself as the shining beacon of liberal democracy.

As a consequence of both local and external influences, the presidential elections in 2004 were free and fair, with few (if any) irregularities, low incidence of media abuse, and much more balanced state-run television (Levitsky and Way 2010, 113). In just a few years after the cessation of civil conflict, Serbia had achieved democracy, to a substantial degree due to Western linkage and leverage. The country’s past links to the West, as well as the fact that its democratic transition occurred at a time when Western liberal democracy was synonymous to economic prosperity, helped ensure that Serbia could successfully democratize. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said about Libya.

### **Libya’s Linkage with the West**

In contrast to Serbia, Libya did not maintain close ties to the West during the Cold War era. Indeed, the Soviet Union supplied arms and military advisers, including nuclear technology, to Gaddafi’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya during the 1970s (Central Intelligence Agency 1975). Throughout the 1980s, bolstered with funds generated from the 1970s oil price spike, Gaddafi openly supported rebel activities across the world in alliance with the Soviet bloc and Fidel Castro’s Cuba, setting his regime on the path to Western isolation in the politically charged Cold War environment (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 167).

Relations with the West came to a head when Libya was linked to the bombing of a Berlin nightclub in April 1986, resulting in the deaths of two American servicemen, leading to US President Ronald Reagan’s decision to launch retaliatory airstrikes on Tripoli and Benghazi ten days later. Libya’s status as an international pariah was all but confirmed following the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, which killed 270 people, mostly US and British citizens.

By the 1990s, due to low oil prices, poor economic management and crippling international sanctions, Libya’s economy was in dire condition, and the ruling regime concluded that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant Libya’s interests may be best served by rapprochement with the West. Years of back-door diplomacy eventually culminated in a deal for Libya to give up its ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons as well as compensate the victims of its terrorist activities in return for the lifting of sanctions, putting an end to Libya’s isolation.

Indeed, Libya was seen as an unopened treasure chest, possessing Africa’s largest proven oil reserves but lacking the investment and expertise to extract it (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 169). In 2007, British Petroleum signed an agreement with Libya’s state-owned National Oil Corporation, by which the former would invest a minimum of USD 900 million to prospect for oil in what the British company called its “single largest exploration commitment” (Wray 2007). This followed the signings, both in 2004, with Shell worth USD 200 million (Tran 2004), as well as a major gas pipeline deal with Italy’s ENI company, the Western Libya Gas Project (Energy Information Administration 2015). Apart from oil, construction magnates from various countries such as Brazil, Canada, China, and South Korea sought to capitalize on large-scale infrastructure programs including new housing projects and the overhaul of roads, bridges, airports, and utility networks. Foreign investment skyrocketed from USD 143 million in 2003 to USD 4.7 billion in 2008, while visitor numbers rose fivefold during the

same period (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 170).

Yet by the late 2000s, it became apparent that Libya's vast economic potential would not translate to worthy profit. Opaque bureaucracy, unpredictable government policies, and corruption resulted in severe delays, meaning that the country could not deliver on its original promises. For instance, although the aforementioned British Petroleum exploration deal was signed in 2007, the company did not manage to start drilling until early 2011, nearly four years later (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 174). One of the most notorious affairs which encapsulates the difficulty in doing business with Libya was a bizarre episode with Switzerland involving one of Gaddafi's sons, Hannibal. After the Swiss police briefly arrested Hannibal and his wife, who were accused of beating their domestic staff in a Geneva hotel, the regime promptly withdrew an estimated USD 7 billion from Swiss banks and boycotted all Swiss companies and citizens. Libyan police even took the extreme measure to remove bars of Swiss chocolate and watches from Tripoli's upscale shops. The Swiss government responded by blacklisting and freezing the assets of 186 Libyan senior officials (Noueihed and Warren 2013, 173-174). The farcical charade demonstrated that Gaddafi and his regime were not bothered to truly integrate into the global economy, nor were they interested to acclimatize to the norms of international diplomacy. Above all, the episode embodies Gaddafi's failure to build real bridges with the West, a crucial factor which ultimately led to his demise.

Nor did Libya benefit from neighboring the EU, unlike in Serbia's case. Although Libya's geographical proximity to the south of the Mediterranean may not be so distant (Tripoli is less than two hours flight time to Rome), culturally, ethnically and socially Libya and Europe seem worlds apart. As such, post-conflict Libya did not garner the same attention given to Serbia, a fact which is clearly reflected upon measuring the level of external assistance given to each country. One striking statistic should suffice. Since 2014, the EU has allocated a total of 46.3 million euros to humanitarian aid in Libya, with paltry sums of 9 million euros and 8 million euros in 2018 and 2019 respectively (European Commission 2019). This is nearly one hundred times less than the 5 billion euros which was granted to post-conflict Serbia by the EU during 2000 to 2005 (International Monetary Fund 2006).

Strikingly, the Arab Spring and its aftermath had no effect whatsoever on increasing the level of funding from Europe, for the EU also made available the same amount of 9 billion euros for the Southern Neighbourhood region (for which Libya is a part of) during 2007 – 2013 as the period of 2014 – 2020. This indicates that the EU apparently did not bother to, nor were they interested in, taking a leadership role in the post-Arab Spring MENA, which lies in stark contrast to their proactive involvement in post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe. Fundamentally, since EU conditionality has never been a consideration for MENA countries, aid and assistance to the region has neither strictly been tied to internal governance reforms nor directly aimed at democratic transitions. As a result, the EU's leverage with regards to the democratization process in the MENA region has also been limited.

As far as Libya is concerned, the EU's absence from the reconstruction and rebuilding of post-Gaddafi Libya is puzzling, especially since the EU has considerable vested interests in the country, mainly with regards to oil and immigration. Prior to the uprising, Libya accounted for 10 percent of EU oil imports (Gelvin 2015, 87). Europe is also wary of an unstable Libya resulting in a massive influx of African immigrants, which Gaddafi had helped keep in check during his reign. Yet despite these interests, the EU showed a remarkable lack of leadership in the case of Libya. As Marco Pinfari points out, it is quite revealing that none of the four major summits held in the weeks that followed the beginning of the NATO

military operation were hosted by the EU in Brussels, whereas France, the UK, the African Union and the Arab League hosted one each (Pinfari 2012, 41).

This was seen as a missed opportunity for the EU. As Sven Biscop aptly summarizes, the crisis in Libya is a textbook example of a situation in which the EU should have taken the lead and proved that it is an actor worth noting, especially since in this crisis three key conditions calling for a forceful EU-led role were present – a UN mandate, support from the relevant regional organization (the Arab League), and an unwillingness on the part of the US to take the lead. Instead, Biscop contends that the lack of “European unity” over the modes and contents of external intervention into the affairs of Libya was the main cause of the inability of the EU to act effectively both during and after the crisis (Biscop 2011). For example, while France and the UK advocated military action, other members states, most notably Germany, maintained substantially more cautious positions.

Like with the EU, the US also did not assume a significant role in post-Arab Spring Libya, a decision which President Barack Obama would later admit was his “worst regret” during his presidency.<sup>3</sup> In a revealing interview with the Atlantic in April 2016, Obama made his opinion on this matter evident:

*“So we actually executed this plan as well as I could have expected: We got a UN mandate, we built a coalition, it cost us USD 1 billion – which, when it comes to military operations, is very cheap. We averted large-scale civilian casualties, we prevented what almost surely would have been a prolonged and bloody civil conflict. And despite all that, Libya is a mess. When I go back and I ask myself what went wrong, there’s room for criticism, because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya’s proximity, being invested in the follow-up.”*

In a veiled criticism, he noted that French president Nicolas Sarkozy lost his job the following year, and that British Prime Minister David Cameron soon stopped paying attention, becoming “distracted by a range of other things.” Obama also understandably blamed internal Libyan dynamics, stating: “The degree of tribal division in Libya was greater than our analysts had expected. And our ability to have any kind of structure there that we could interact with and start training and start providing resources broke down very quickly” (Goldberg 2016).

As a result, the US merely provided humanitarian aid (around USD 30 million in 2019), and observed Libya from afar. Indeed, it should be emphasized that over the past two decades since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, America had been spread thin by the war on terrorism, with security operations in over 80 countries around the world, not least in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Washington committed over 200,000 troops and trillions of dollars to stabilize the war-torn countries (Crawford 2019). Furthermore, Washington had little national interest in Libya, as Libyan oil accounted for only 0.6 percent of American oil imports (compared to over 10% imported from Saudi Arabia), and is geographically located in an area of relatively low strategic importance (Gelvin 2015, 87).

The West also erroneously associated their notion of democracy with the symbolism of the ballot box in post-Gaddafi Libya, rushing to have general elections held in 2012, which Libyans were entirely unprepared for. As one analysis claims:

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Fox News, April 10, 2016. Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkIhkBEGKY> (November 19, 2019).

*“Libyans themselves were complaining, ‘Why have elections been foisted on us?’ This is a country with no political culture, no experience of politics, not even any experience of civil society or any kind of political activism. Elections happened very quickly. Political parties had about 18 days to campaign, in a society totally unfamiliar with that political system.”* (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019, 25)

Yet the most regrettable aspect is the negligence on state-building, for despite considerable segments of the Libyan population holding aspirations for the country’s democratization, the Western bastions for liberal democracy made minimum effort to support those hopes. Simply put, unlike in the Balkans, there was no coherent strategy nor master plan whatsoever to assist Libya in post-conflict reconstruction or to oversee any sort of political transition to democratic rule. Consequently, tribal politics supplanted the power vacuum which Gaddafi left, an inevitability given that the “Brotherly Leader” had intentionally kept the governing institutions and bureaucracy weak, effectively making Libya a “stateless state” during his four-decade reign (Boduszynski 2013, 88).

### **Libya’s Leverage with the West**

Apart from having low linkage, Libya also has low leverage with the West. This is not due to the presence of a large economy or strong military, as would be the case for countries like Russia or China, but rather as a result of Libya’s vast oil resources. One of Levitsky and Way’s criteria for measuring leverage is how much oil the country produces, with oil-rich states having low leverage, and thus being less susceptible to Western democratizing pressure. The authors’ definition of an oil-rich country is the production one million barrels of crude oil per day (Levitsky and Way 2010, 372). In 2010, Libya produced approximately 1.65 million barrels per day, surpassing the threshold and thereby categorized as a low leverage country (British Petroleum 2011, 8).

With the combination of internal dynamics which are not conducive to democracy and the scarcity of much needed external support, it is thus no surprise that Libya has become a failed state, as exemplified by the many armed clashes that have taken place during the past decade, and characterized also by the rise of Islamic militant groups, one of which was behind the terrorist attack on the American Consulate in Benghazi in September 2012 that took the life of Christopher Stevens, the US Ambassador to Libya (Beauchamp 2019).

Herein, then, lies the key question: Why did the West not exert democratizing pressure and support Libya’s state-building process post-Arab Spring as it had in the Balkans in the 1990s and 2000s? Three explanations seem plausible. Firstly, there was simply no political will. After the dust of NATO’s operation had settled, Libya was not high on the agenda of Western leaders, who had a myriad of other problems to deal with, both domestically and internationally, such as the war in Syria, terrorist attacks on European soil, the slumping economy, and Brexit to name but a few, not to mention concerns about reelection campaigns, as was the case for Obama and European leaders like Sarkozy, Cameron, and Germany’s Angela Merkel. In that context, supporting the Libyans’ state-building financially was certainly not a major vote-getter.

Secondly, there was a lack of monetary resources, largely due to the 2008 global financial crisis. According to one estimate, the crisis cost America in the region of USD 20 trillion. At the same time, Europe was mired in the sovereign debt crisis which peaked during 2010-2012, with the EU and IMF having to prepare bailout packages totaling over 300 billion



euros to resuscitate the Greek economy alone (Better Markets 2015). As one Western diplomat bluntly remarked, “The sort of money we put in Eastern Europe just isn’t there” (Nelson 2018).

Finally, from a meta level perspective, unlike in the 1990s, there was no grand strategy in place by the West to “export” democracy to states in political transition. The international structure of the post-Cold War, which saw a robust and unchallenged trans-Atlantic alliance keen on cultivating an overarching framework of democracy promotion based on beliefs of peacebuilding through the democratic peace ideal had, by the 2010s, given way to an emerging multipolar world order. Simply put, a weakened and fractured West has seen democracy promotion as a foreign policy agenda falling in priority. Coupled with the rise of authoritarian powers such as China and Russia, achieving democratization has become a far more difficult task for countries such as Libya that lack the appropriate internal dynamics to begin with.

Up to the early 2000s, American presidents, Democrat and Republican alike, practiced the policy of liberal internationalism, aiming to achieve global structures within the international system that are inclined towards promoting a liberal world order. To this effect, opening up markets to free trade, neoliberal economic policies, and representative political systems were all encouraged and supported. The ultimate goal was to pursue lasting peace among like-minded democracies, based on the principles of the democratic peace theory.

Nevertheless, the costly and protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with the 2008 financial crisis and political quagmires in post-Arab Spring MENA, injected a degree of realism into American views towards democracy promotion and had a major impact on how Washington determined its foreign policy. Despite their stark differences, both Obama and Trump shared the belief that the US should reduce its presence in the Middle East, avoid intervention when US interests are not heavily affected, and allow for regional allies to take up more responsibility in security arrangements and post-conflict resolution.

This concept of “leading from behind” is based on offshore balancing, defined by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt as foregoing “ambitious efforts to remake other societies and concentrate on what really matters: preserving US dominance in the Western Hemisphere and countering potential hegemonies in Europe [Russia], Northeast Asia [China], and the Persian Gulf [Iran]. Instead of policing the world, the US would encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary. This does not mean abandoning the US’ position as the world’s sole superpower or retreating to ‘Fortress America’. Rather, by husbanding US strength, offshore balancing would preserve US primacy far into the future and safeguard liberty at home” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, 71-72).

The problem with this strategy during the past decade can be summed up in two ways. First is that America’s allies have not “stepped up to the plate” to fill in the void left by US retrenchment. Libya is the best case in point, where the EU had the historic opportunity to take the lead but failed to do so. Second is that America has taken the strategy to the extreme, retreating to isolationism while in the process irritating traditional allies, emboldening authoritarian powers, and effectively abandoning its preeminent position in the liberal world order.

Under the Obama administration, China was able to flex its military muscle in the South China Sea, Russia annexed the Crimea, and the Islamic State was able to gain a strong foothold in the Middle East. Furthermore, with lack of leadership and insufficient assistance from US allies, the Arab Spring descended into a bitter winter, with Libya and Syria suffering



bloody civil strife. When Obama tried to “pass the buck” regarding Libya state-building, EU allies did not pick up the baton.

Yet whereby Obama had at least rhetorically voiced his support for democracy, his successor made clear his strong disdain for democratic principles. Among other questionable actions, not least consistently proposing steep cuts to the budget related to democracy promotion, Trump’s penchant for admiring strongmen like Russian leader Vladimir Putin while attempting to “cozy up” to brutal and repressive dictators such as Kim Jong-un stood out. Trump’s actions marked a sharp break from other US presidents in the postwar period, who cooperated with certain authoritarian regimes for strategic reasons but never wavered from a commitment to democracy as the most desirable form of government.

## CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the impact of international system on the democratic transitions of Post-Cold War Serbia and Post-Arab Spring Libya. The cases were selected due to their relatively similar domestic indicators. Most significantly, both countries suffered heavily as a result of civil strife and NATO intervention, enabling the rare opportunity for scholars to test international relations theories from a comparative perspective. By applying the cases to Levitsky and Way’s “Linkage and Leverage” model (revised and updated to include the notion of change in polarity), it is found that the argument of why Serbia achieved democracy in a short period of time despite the domestic conflicts while Libya continues to be mired in internal power struggles can be explained not only through endogenous factors, but also exogenous ones.

As transitology literature largely focuses on domestic factors, by employing the “Linkage and Leverage” model to analyze the external dimension of democratic transitions in countries from two different time periods, it can be surmised that the international system has a consequential impact on nascent democracies that has previously been understudied. Indeed, the parallel of civil strife and NATO intervention of the two countries does not mean that any country or set of countries under comparable conditions will have similar outcomes of democratization process. In other words, the result of this study may not yet guarantee its “generalization”, and further research into a broader range of cases is certainly called for.

In this regard, it is hoped that the proposed amendment to Levitsky and Way’s model which incorporates international system can be an original contribution to the literature, providing an analytical framework that is up-to-date and readily applicable to a wider universe of cases. Specifically, as an inter-regional and inter-temporal study which focuses on the external structure, this work endeavored to address the gap in the literature between international relations theory and Middle East area studies, which primarily places emphasis on domestic variables to explain authoritarian perpetuation in the Arab world.

To be sure, domestic factors mattered. Serbian state institutions were much stronger than Libya’s, which literally had to build its state “from scratch” following decades under Gaddafi’s dictatorship (Vandewalle 2012, 9). The ouster of Milosevic did not lead to a widespread breakdown in governance and security (Schulte 2013, 51). On the other hand, following the downfall of Gaddafi, Libya’s simmering regional, tribal, and ethnic divisions boiled over and degenerated into sectarian strife. The deteriorating security situation also made it difficult for UN officials and NGOs to work in Libya (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2019, 23).

Yet on the flip side, the argument can be made that although Serbia experienced serious ethnic tensions and fighting at the local level, they were eventually overcome in no small degree through Western mediation (Dayton Agreement), military intervention (NATO's Kosovo air campaign), and condition-based financial aid packages linked to EU integration. Additionally, although Western leverage was low in the case of Libya, it does not exempt from the fact that the EU was well positioned to assume a leadership role in the reconstruction of Libya. This is especially so given the fact that Washington, in contrast to its policies in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, adopted a "light-footprint" strategy by not deploying post-conflict peacekeeping forces, limiting its military contributions to during the NATO air campaign, which opened up the opportunity for other allies to take the lead (Chivvis et al. 2012, 1).

Instead, after Gaddafi was toppled, what followed was not an internationally coordinated grand strategy of reconstruction and rebuilding, but rather a "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach characterized by improvisation in response to the situation on the ground as opposed to proactive planning, which in turn facilitated the emergence of local militant groups (Chivvis et al. 2012, 16). It is crucial to mention here that the West also misjudged the weakness of Libya's state institutions and the Libyan opposition, specifically its ability, or lack thereof, to rein in the militias as well as to unite and evolve into a stable government. Unlike the unified opposition in Serbia, political forces in Libya have been unable to coalesce into a collective movement with clear developmental visions for the country, rendering effective Western engagement and support unattainable (Randall 2015, 210).

In the final analysis, a plausible explanatory variable is that democratization in Serbia was facilitated in large part by high linkage and high leverage vis-à-vis the West, enhanced by intense Western engagement, especially post-conflict. The West poured financial assistance into the rebuilding of Serbia, while providing a blueprint for the country's path to democratization in the form of EU conditionality. This also occurred at a time when Western power was at its zenith, and Western leaders were expressly trying to build a community of capitalist democracies. In Libya, the West arguably managed to avert a humanitarian crisis, though very little was committed afterwards. There was simply no political will, as leaders of the Western world did not see any clear interests nor immediately obtainable benefits to be found in the country (although Italy may beg to differ, having to bear the brunt in dealing with the Mediterranean refugee crisis). The geographical and tribal divisions fomented under Gaddafi's rule also prevented the West from gaining any traction in the country.

Most crucially, there was no parallel to the role the EU played in Southeastern Europe regarding internal governance reforms during the political transition period. It also did not help that Libya's revolution came at a time when Western power was on the wane, still reeling from the effects of the global financial crisis and the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, apart from nominal humanitarian aid, the West could only encourage democracy in Libya through moral suasion and the demonstration effect. Yet with the current predicament of the West and leaders such as the former US President Trump who cared little for promoting democracy abroad, not to mention the coronavirus pandemic which has adversely affected the West, even that prospect is severely lacking. It remains to be seen how the new Biden administration's push for the "coalition of democracies" would affect the declining share of democracies in the world and the future of democratic movements in non-democratic countries.

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