Studies of transition generally focus more on the immediate events and processes and less on the historical background which shapes it. Nevertheless, historical legacies and the extent to which a transition state has a ‘usable past’ are generally recognized as having an important bearing on the transition outcome. The term ‘historical legacy’ and the issue of ‘usability’ are, however, not systematically researched in the study of transition. Paradoxically, the more routinely employed concepts of ‘path dependency’ and ‘initial starting conditions’ tend to focus on the predetermining effects of decisions taken at the outset of the transition process rather than exploring the influence of historically rooted factors which may be equally important. Moreover, it is also important to take into account not only whether a ‘usable past’ is present in a particular case but also whether the elites that drive the transition process are willing to draw on it. The decisional calculus of elites is of central importance in transition studies as successful reforms are viewed as being largely dependent on the attitudes and behaviour of elites and how differences between elite segments are negotiated in the ‘games’ of transition. This kind of emphasis on the role of elites in implementing universalizable progressive change tends to overlook how the context in which transition occurs can have significant constraining effects on the outcome. Transition states are not a tabula rasa. Schmitter’s definition of transition as an ‘interlude’ between regimes is much too passive in this regard as it suggests a pause and thus fails to capture the essential dynamic attributes of transition, which involve the transformation of one type of regime into another. Consequently, the legacy of the old regime will continue to loom large over the transition process itself. Transitions involve the dismantling of the old regime, generally by the transformation of old elite power networks.
and the institutional structures which they colonize. It generally involves significant change to the institutional architecture of the state organization. This is not to say that such structures and institutions must be completely displaced, as this would not be a transition but a revolution. Logically, then, transition is the bridging period between regimes which links the old and new structures and elites in a dynamic interplay of change, which is mainly characterized by new forms of ‘institution-building’.

One of the most underestimated aspects of post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe is the extent to which they are influenced by the legacies of the communist regimes. While we do not wish to argue that historical legacies overly determine post-communist transition outcomes, the communist-era institutions were the starting-point for domestic political struggles and the interaction with EU conditionality. A specific institutional legacy, including in some cases politicized and regional-level governing structures, meant that post-communist political choices and EU conditionality did not evolve in a vacuum. Moreover, historical legacies also underpinned the resurgence of national and regional identities in the context of transition and Europeanization. As Wolczuk has pointed out: ‘Democratization, administrative efficiency, fiscal considerations, EU accession requirements and so forth were cited as the compelling reasons for regionalization, rather than the accommodation of diversity.’

On coming to power after the Second World War communist leaderships rode roughshod over pre-existing regional and local identities and territorial organization, and imposed changes to the territorial organization of power based on two main logics; firstly a power logic, to ensure that state organization was adjusted to secure the power and control of communist parties; and secondly, a functional logic, to configure state organization in a way that maximized the efficiency gains expected from the centrally planned economy. This chapter explores the communist legacy in the organization of sub-national governance structures in Eastern Europe to highlight the complexities of reform faced by post-communist leaderships as they grappled with reform during transition. It demonstrates how one of the key legacies inherited from communism was a systematic weakness of effective institutions of governance at the regional and local levels. The reason for this legacy is straightforward. Communist systems were highly centralized authoritarian systems that were institutionally engineered to secure compliance with communist rule. Communist systems were organized around the Leninist principles of ‘democratic centralism’,...