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From Communist to Post-Communist Politics

East-Central Europe's transition from Communist rule to pluralism is impossible to grasp adequately without an appreciation of the practices of Communist rule in the region. The extension of Soviet power after its victory in the Second World War generated the political space for the creation of Communist states across the region by 1948-9. The degree to which Communist rule was the product of Soviet occupation and thus, external imposition, and domestic political mobilization, brought about by radicalization brought about by the Second World War varied across from state-to-state. In Yugoslavia, the fact that Communist rule rested principally on domestic political mobilization allowed it break free of Soviet influence in 1948, after Stalin attempted to reign in the country's leadership. Albania was also an example of a state where Communist rule was established through domestic mobilization – when Yugoslavia split with Moscow, it allied itself with the Soviet Union, in order to preserve its independence from Belgrade, though it would, in turn, split with Moscow in 1961. In the rest of the region Communist rule was established under the hegemony of the Soviet Union. Policies of social transformation – rapid industrialization and the collectivization – were introduced across the region that copied the practice of Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1930s. Yet, it would be a mistake to overstate the degree to which Soviet practice was imposed across the region – as Communist rule matured it would become clear that it rested on a confluence of factors that were both external and internal to the countries of the region. These constellations of external and internal factors determined the dynamic of Communist politics, and the eventual pattern of transition at the end of the late 1980s.

The death of Stalin in 1953 sparked a major crisis of Communist rule, though its roots lay in a lack of political legitimacy, reaction to the political repression of opponents, low standards of living that existed as a consequence of the regimes' industrialization drives, and opposition to other policies, especially the collectivization of agriculture across rural areas in the region. During the mid-1950s this crisis generated by the apparent bankruptcy of socialist governance generated frequent explosions of popular discontent. Currency reform provoked waves of strikes in Czechoslovakia in May and June 1953; attempts to cut industrial wage-level and raise productivity sparked open revolt across East Germany in June of the same year; discontent combined with moves towards de-Stalinization to generate popular unrest in the Polish city of Poznań in June 1956, and outright political crisis in October. Most spectacular was the Hungarian Revolution of October-November 1956, in which the regime collapsed as a result of overwhelming pressure on the streets, and was only restored as a result of the intervention of Soviet troops.

The crisis of Communist rule in the mid-1950s affected, to differing extents, all of the countries of the region. This crisis had two contradictory effects on the patterns of Communist governance. On the one hand it powerfully underlined the serious limits of support for, and the power of Communist states over their populations, that left a heritage which in many states where the crisis had been most severe – especially Hungary – which would set the stage for events at the end of the 1980s. On the other hand, in overcoming the crises Communist rule was consolidated successfully, to varying degrees across the region. This process of consolidation rested on a fundamental re-constitution of

Communist rule; a consolidation that represented a dictatorial, East-Central European variant of the post-war settlement. While Communist governments in different nation-states differed widely in the terms of their governmental practices and strategies, this settlement had several common elements, which to a greater or lesser extent were visible in all of the states of the region. Firstly, the regimes aimed to integrate the industrial working-class into the system. Communist parties claimed to rule in the name of the working class, yet at the same time many workers had taken to the streets. In order to bridge this gap, the regime's sought to placate them through labor and wage policies, and improving material rewards – this was done very successfully in states like Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and less well in Poland, setting the stage for later political crisis. Secondly, they tightened their grip over the countryside, completing the collectivization of agriculture, in all states save Yugoslavia and Poland. Even outside these states collectivization went hand-in-hand with attempts at compromise with farmers that went furthest in Hungary. Thirdly, Communist regimes paid close attention to the standard-of-living, and to the material welfare of their populations, aware that anger at low living standards had played a decisive role in undermining their legitimacy. This also involved the modernization of the housing stock, and the development of a “socialist consumerism”, that went furthest in market-oriented Yugoslavia outside the Soviet Bloc. Fourthly, the Communist regimes aimed to re-cast the bases of their legitimacy and their claim to govern; they became less openly revolutionary and their use of repression more selective. Some, especially in Romania, deployed nationalism to legitimate their rule; others modified their practices, presenting themselves as advocates of a less repressive Communism than had existed in the early 1950s (Pittaway, 2004, pp.65-85).

As early as the mid-1960s this model of “consolidated” Communist rule confronted three obstacles. The first was economic: economies based managed through mechanisms of central planning, developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s that had been transferred to East-Central Europe in the late 1940s, were simply incapable of delivering the increases in living standards necessary to provide the material foundations for East-Central Europe’s variant of the post-war settlement. The second was social: industrialization, urbanization and the expansion of state-provided public services had created a large intelligentsia – a group of the highly qualified – who demanded greater cultural autonomy, and more opportunities to participate in an authoritarian political system that claimed it ruled on behalf of the working-class. The third was political and external: the Soviet Union regarded the maintenance of Communist rule across Eastern and Central Europe as a central foreign policy goal. This made many within the Soviet leadership deeply suspicious of reform, less it lead to outright regime collapse. These obstacles were revealed clearly by the end of the 1960s. States sought to overcome the first of these problems through experimenting with economic reform that aimed to improve the productivity of industry through greater use of market-based incentives to correct the distortions in the planned economy. This process went the furthest in Yugoslavia and Hungary, and, in both cases brought political tension. It threatened the state’s settlement with the industrial working-class, thus generating discontent that questioned the legitimacy of the regime. The second obstacle became visible with the emergence of popular demands for greater political liberalization that by the late 1960s had brought a wave of discontent in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia, and threatened it,

elsewhere. It culminated in Czechoslovakia's "Prague Spring" in 1968 when the ruling party under its newly appointed secretary, Alexander Dubček, launched a program of parallel political and economic liberalization. Consequently it was Czechoslovakia that encountered the third obstacle – the Soviet leadership, concerned that Dubček's political reform would destroy the established political order intervened to bring the country's experiment of "socialism with human face" to an end.

The Decay of Communist Rule

The Soviet Union's decision to end the Prague Spring, taken in concert with hard-liners in the Czechoslovak party in August 1968, represented a turning point. In the country itself Dubček's successor, Gustav Husák, instituted a policy of "normalization", in which the party was purged, large numbers of supporters of reform were removed from white-collar occupations and demoted to manual jobs as part of a policy of intimidation, while economic reform was reversed, and social peace bought through privatized consumerism (Williams, 1997; Simečka, 1984). Within the Soviet Bloc, it demonstrated clearly the constraints that the Soviet Union placed on reform, showing that Moscow was inherently suspicious of substantial political reform. It generated a climate where, for example, Hungary's market-oriented economic reforms were moth-balled during the early 1970s, and the party began to limit the freedom given to intellectuals during the relatively liberal 1960s. In East Germany, it played a role in the replacement of Walter Ulbricht by Erich Honecker, at the head of the regime, and Honecker's consequent avoidance of economic reform. The fear of many Communist leaders that reform might escape their control

further contributed to this reversal; leading the normalizing climate to spread even outside the Soviet Bloc to relatively liberal Yugoslavia, when Belgrade moved to restrain the party in the constituent republic of Croatia in December 1971, after they advocated openly greater autonomy from the centre (Lampe, 1996, p.313).

While the reversals of reform across the region did not lead to the restoration of repression on the scale of the early 1950s, they proved disastrous for three inter-related reasons. Firstly, they alienated sections of East-Central Europe's intelligentsia from the Communist regimes, shutting the door to their participation in decision-making. Among a minority of them this led to the emergence of open "dissident" opposition during the decade, especially where normalizing tendencies had been at their strongest, and most prominently in 1977 in Czechoslovakia when 243 intellectuals signed a document – known as Charter 77 – demanding that the country's leaders guarantee basic human rights to its citizens. It also closed the door to their involvement in politics and the economy at a time when the region faced a hostile international economic climate. This, indeed, was the second reason: the region's economies all, to some extent, depended on cheap energy prices and on trade with countries outside the Soviet Bloc, to maintain the standards-of-living of their populations, and thus their internal social settlements.

Increasing turbulence in the world economy had combined with the 1973 oil crisis to produce recession in the capitalist world economy and thus, falling demand for the goods that the states of East-Central Europe exported (Csaba, 1990). At the same time, it increased market prices for energy. These changes increased pressure on the economies of the region at a time when economic reform was suspended or reversed – the third

reason why normalizing tendencies would prove so disastrous for Communist regimes.

At a time when measures to improve the efficiency and productivity of the economy were most necessary, the states, for political reasons, turned their backs on them.

The economic consequences were ones of mounting indebtedness, which culminated in the beginnings of outright economic crisis at the turn of the 1980s – Hungary was forced to shift to austerity and renewed reform by 1978, faced with the prospect of outright insolvency. Romania and Poland were forced to change policy as a result of insolvency in 1981, while Yugoslavia turned to the International Monetary Fund in order to escape a similar position in 1983. While in other states financial collapse was not as spectacular, governments across the whole of the region had to cope with deteriorating economic performance, and a worsening fiscal situation caused by mounting indebtedness, as a consequence of policy mistakes made since the early 1970s. Although for much of the decade the true gravity of the economic situation was hidden from populations, during the late 1970s it was visible through stagnant real wages, a huge semi-official economy, the deterioration of the quality of public services, and mounting corruption right across the region. Attempts by some regimes to paper over the cracks through limited austerity measures provoked open protest; in 1976 such measures sparked strikes in Poland, and in Romania in the following year miners in the Jiu Valley region struck as a consequence of cuts to pensions and sick-pay.

It was in Poland, where the economic crisis had spun out of control, and where an intellectual-based “dissident” opposition coalesced with working-class protest, that crisis

erupted most spectacularly. A series of strikes in Poland's Baltic ports in August 1980, launched as a protest against attempts to force the population to pay more for meat as part of an austerity package designed to avert insolvency, span out of control after the government's attempts to settle them encouraged a nationwide strike wave. Aided by "dissident" intellectuals, the organizers of these strikes coalesced into a national organization, known as Solidarity (*Solidarność*). A mixture of a free trade union and a rallying point for political opposition to the Communist state, Solidarity became a political movement that claimed to represent the whole of the Polish nation, ranged against the Communist state during 1981. Though the movement fragmented and was driven underground after the state moved to smash Solidarity by introducing martial law in December 1981, its defeat was only temporary; in many ways, it anticipated the outright collapse of Communist states at the end of the decade (Laba, 1991).

Both the heyday of Solidarity and its eventual suppression coincided with the onset of the financial crisis generated by the outright insolvency of many Communist states in the region. This crisis generated a turn to austerity, in which the living standards of many East Europeans either stagnated or declined. The nature of the responses of the region's Communist regimes differed, though all pursued policies of restriction. Poland, under its military ruler, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, used the advantages of martial law to push through massive price rises as part of a package to stabilize the economic situation. In Hungary, consumer prices were hiked in 1979, industrial prices were overhauled in 1980, limited privatization was introduced into the retail sector, major de-centralization of the management of enterprises was planned for 1985 and the country joined both the IMF

and World Bank in 1982. In Yugoslavia an IMF-imposed stabilization package scrapped food subsidies, devalued the currency, and instructed enterprises to lay-off workers, in order to balance their books. While each of these states employed policies of marketization, which undermined the planned economy and resulted in increasingly visible inequalities, which generated popular discontent, other states imposed austerity in the context of the unreformed structures of the planned economy. This was done in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, where the debt crisis was less severe than elsewhere in the region. This approach was pursued most wholeheartedly in Romania, whose leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu set its complete repayment as a central policy goal. Production was directed to export for hard currency, in order to finance debt repayment. While the debt was almost paid off by 1989, the social costs were enormous. The rationing of basic foodstuffs was introduced in 1981, as endemic shortages of basic goods spread. Energy use was subject to progressive restriction which culminated in crisis in the winter of 1984-5 when the homes of many urban Romanians went unheated.

Discontent in Romania, which exploded into violence when factory workers struck and rioted in Brașov in 1987, was met with considerable repression. Elsewhere in the region, the discontent brought by stagnant or falling living standards, and the creeping dismantling of the Communist regimes' social settlement, led to a de-composition of state authority, which most often was manifested in a climate of passivity towards political and social institutions. The scope of open opposition to the regime grew, especially in the westernmost states of the region, as the small "dissident" oppositions of the 1970s, often restricted to a tiny number of intellectuals, was swelled with a diverse range of activists –

nationalists, the religious, environmentalists, pacifists, campaigners for gay and lesbian rights – who sought the ability to act independently to the state. Politics demands that aimed at the creation of a “civil society” independent of the state created a space in which the various strands that made up the opposition could coalesce, aimed this, while opposition discourses of “Central Europe”, that emphasized the links of many of the western states of the region to those beyond the cold war frontier, contributed to the de-legitimization of Communist rule (Kenney, 2002). Often there were marked national differences between these oppositions; in Serbia within Yugoslavia, a sense of national resentment at the politics of compromise between Yugoslavia’s constituent republics, led to a prominence for nationalist demands not seen to the same extent elsewhere in the region (Magaš, 1993). In Poland, on the other hand, the driving of Solidarity underground during martial law between 1981 and 1984, had created a diverse and large opposition that organized itself as almost a “parallel society” to that promoted by the regime. In Bulgaria and Romania opposition remained relatively weak – though in Bulgaria the Communist regime’s policies of active discrimination against the country’s Turkish minority sparked protest. In Albania, isolated from the rest of the region as well as the outside world, it was non-existent. Slovenia within Yugoslavia, however, Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, were all characterised by diverse opposition movements ready to press for greater democratization by the mid-1980s (Ramet, 1991).

The Collapse of Communist Rule

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, was appointed to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Over the following years, Gorbachev began to openly admit that the Soviet Union suffered from similar chronic economic, social and political problems to those present in the Central and Eastern European states.

Consequently, the Soviet leadership, previously suspicious of any innovation in Central and Eastern Europe, became progressively more open to deep-seated economic and political reform. Driven too by a foreign policy of rapprochement with the west following the years of renewed Cold War under his immediate predecessors, Gorbachev's policies of radical reform and a relaxation of political control over the Soviet Union's Central and Eastern European clients provided the backdrop to the collapse of Communism in the region. Yet there was also a domestic backdrop, shared by states like Yugoslavia which were outside of the direct Soviet sphere of influence – a backdrop of intractable economic crisis, crumbling authority and mounting opposition.

The way in which this crisis played out and how it led to the outright collapse of Communism differed in each of the individual states; it was in those Central and Eastern European states which were most open to political reform, or where the strength of organized opposition was the greatest, where revolutionary transformation occurred first. In these states – Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia – what sparked outright collapse were the attempts of each of the Communist regimes to re-cast the social bases of their rule; this then interacted with the social and political crisis of confidence in each of the countries to produce outright collapse. Perhaps the best managed of these transitions was the Hungarian one, where almost until the end of 1989 the local ruling party managed to

control the process. Hungary's Communists were aware of the growing crisis of authority; a younger, better educated membership frustrated at the hold of an older generation on leadership, looked to political change during the late 1980s. With persisting economic problems in the country and János Kádár, the country's leader since 1956 showing increasing signs of age, groups within the party maneuvered to secure the succession. Furthermore reformers within the party leadership, most notably Imre Pozsgay, looked to re-cast the basis on which the party governed, by seeking an alliance with political traditions outside the party – especially nationalism. With his encouragement nationalist intellectuals founded the country's first non-Communist political organization since 1956 - Hungarian Democratic Forum in September 1987. This led to the effective breaking of the party's monopoly over political organization, as a number of different groups – political liberals, farmers, the religious, students, and trade unionists – formed their own organization during 1988. Kádár's own removal in May 1988 simply exacerbated the power struggle within the party, as hardliners were sidelined by both Pozsgay, and the Prime Minister, Miklós Németh. By spring 1989, Hungary's Communists were formally committed to a multi-party system and the introduction of a capitalist market economy to replace to the socialist economic system. At the same time an increasingly organized opposition grew in strength – they brought 150,000 onto the streets of Budapest on 15 March 1989, the anniversary of the outbreak of the 1848 revolution. They were increasingly unified forming an “opposition round table” and demanding negotiations with the government over the nature and timetable of democratic transition – negotiations, which were granted in summer 1989, and led to a basic

agreement over most of the details of Hungary's transition to democracy by September (Bozóki, 2002)

In Yugoslavia, opposition mobilization was shaped by the divisions between the constituent republics and the growing influence of nationalism, especially in Serbia. Therefore, Communist responses to their decline in authority tended to reflect this, thus the parties in the individual republics became significant as political actors. The collapse in Yugoslavia began when the leaderships of the League of Communists in both Serbia and Slovenia addressed the different national mobilizations under way in each republic. Discontent over the issue of Kosovo, an autonomous province within the republic, provided the focus for increasingly broad popular, nationalist mobilization in Serbia, which demanded an end to its autonomous status. One senior figure within the Serbian party, Slobodan Milošević, began from 1987, to appropriate the slogans of nationalist mobilization for his own purposes – firstly extending his control over the Serbian Communist Party, and then sought to use it to re-shape the nature of Yugoslav politics, by seeking to create a Yugoslavia that was centred around Serbia and Serbian interests. Meanwhile the Slovene party sought to appease its opposition by seeking autonomy and later independence, after the elevation of Milan Kučan to head the republic's Communists in 1986. As relations with the centre deteriorated and fear of Milošević's project to re-cast Yugoslavia grew within Slovenia, the party embraced democratization within the republic, and turned to demand outright independence; especially after Milošević succeeded in ending Kosovo's autonomous status within Serbia in May 1989. Fear of Belgrade's intentions initiated similar process in neighboring Croatia, where

political organization independent of the Communist party emerged and grew during 1989 (Woodward, 1995).

The third case was that of Poland where opposition was at its strongest, and where the economy remained crisis-ridden throughout the 1980s. Jaruzelski, and the Communist Party, turned towards reform by granting a full amnesty to political prisoners in September 1986 and prepared a reform package to be put to the population in a two question referendum in November 1987. As a result of low turnout the two propositions – one on political, the other on economic reform – failed to gain the support of the required 50 percent of the total electorate for the referendum to stand. Despite rejection at the ballot box, the government persevered with renewed austerity into 1988; workers responded with a strike wave in May and then a further outbreak of industrial disruption in August as workers demanded compensation. This unrest prompted the Communist party to inch towards negotiations with the opposition, including Solidarity. These culminated in the beginning of round table negotiations between government and opposition in February 1989, which sat until April and set the ground rules for Poland's transition. Solidarity was legalized, as part of a compromise between the party and the opposition. Jaruzelski remained president but all of the seats in Senate and 35 percent of the seats in the *Sejm*, the lower house of parliament, would be elected on a competitive, democratic basis. In the June 1989 elections, which took place over two rounds, opposition candidates standing for Solidarity won a landslide winning 65 percent of the vote and 99 of the 100 Senate seats. In elections to the *Sejm* they won all the 161 seats they contested. After protracted attempts to form a government, Solidarity demanded the

position of Prime Minister. In August 1989 Tadeuz Mazowiecki emerged as the first non-communist head of government in over forty years leading a coalition government which included the Communists.

The developing revolutions in Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia, and statements from Moscow that the Soviet Union would not stand in the way of radical political developments in the countries within the Soviet sphere of influence, sent shock waves throughout the rest of East-Central Europe. The crisis began to focus on East Germany. Hungary – a popular holiday destination for East Germans – dismantled its physical border with Austria in May 1989. Because of this and the developing political revolution in Hungary, many spent the summer in the country, in the hope of escaping to the west. As summer ended many tourists refused to return home instead demanding that they be allowed to leave Hungary for West Germany, through Austria – a request that was granted by the Hungarian government in the teeth of furious opposition from East Berlin in September 1989. The opening of the border led to a wave of mass migration. This stimulated popular protest, initially centred on the city of Leipzig, but which quickly spread across the country. The authority of the regime collapsed quickly, as Erich Honecker was forced to step down. The revolution culminated in the events of November 1989 when the East German state opened the country's western border in Berlin, and the decision of the regime in November 1989. The dramatic scenes in Berlin that accompanied this, have not only come to symbolize the events of 1989; they represented a dramatic escalation of the revolutionary wave that gripped the region (Fulbrook, 1995, pp.241-65)

Within a day of the opening of East Germany's western borders, on 10 November 1989, reformers within the Bulgarian party organized by the Foreign Minister, Petûr Mladenov, ousted Todor Zhivkov, the Communist party general-secretary, from office, allowing Mladenov to become president, against a backdrop of growing opposition activism that centered both on the protection of the cultural autonomy of Bulgaria's Turkish minority and, more significantly, on the activism of the environmentalist opposition movement "Eco-Glasnost". As a result of what had been an effective coup within the party, opposition movements railed, founding the Union of Democratic Forces that demanded a wholesale transformation of Bulgaria's political system. This culminated in the opening of roundtable talks with the opposition in January 1990. East Germany's revolution, however, had a direct and immediate effect on its neighbor, Czechoslovakia. Eight days after the opening of Berlin border in East Germany, 15,000 students gathered for a demonstration in Prague to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler's suppression of student opposition to the German occupation and dismemberment of Czechoslovakia on 17 November 1989. The commemoration turned quickly into explicit political protest and violent confrontation with the police. The demonstrations ended in excessive violence as the police broke up the protest; the popular anger that violence had ignited was exacerbated by rumors of the killing of one student by the police. Student protest quickly spread and was joined by Prague's actors who began a strike in support of the students that in turn spread quickly beyond the capital. Major demonstrations on 20 November in Prague, Ostrava, Brno and Bratislava demanded political change, while the Czech opposition organized itself, founding Civic Forum that unified an older generation of the

opposition, which consisted among others of Charter 77 signatories like Václav Havel, with younger activists. In Slovakia the opposition formed a parallel organization, Public Against Violence. Over the course of the following week the Communist regime lost control of the country as it was convulsed by ever larger non-violent protests, as the students and dissident intellectuals like Havel, were joined by veterans of the Prague Spring, most notably Dubček, and by a large section of the population, including many from the industrial working class, frustrated at the stagnation and decay of the 1980s. The spread of revolution to the factories, the collapse of party control of the media and the unwillingness and ability of the party to resort to military force, provoked the resignation of the party leadership at the end of the week. As negotiations over the composition of a new government were mired in disputes over its composition as the party attempted to cling to power, before finally forming a coalition government with the opposition, which backed the election of Václav Havel, key mover behind Charter 77, to become president (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992).

The wave of change left only one socialist dictatorship still firmly in place within the Soviet bloc by mid-December 1989. During the late 1980s many within Romania's Communist Party and within the state grew increasingly frustrated with both the country's economic situation and Ceaușescu's increasingly bizarre cult of personality. Widespread anger with the economic situation turned to popular revolt, which radiated from the city of Timișoara, after the security services moved in to arrest and remove a troublesome Hungarian Protestant minister, László Tókes on 14 December 1989. In an unprecedented act of protest members of his congregation defended their minister,

initially surrounding his house. Soon protests began outside the local headquarters of the Communists, which were broken up by the army and security services, who fired on demonstrators. Events in Timișoara provoked two processes that together combined to produce revolution. Large sections of the army and the party laid plans to remove Ceaușescu, while at the same time the news of events in Timișoara provoked widespread popular revulsion that paved the way for outright revolt. When Ceaușescu was shouted down at a mass rally in Bucharest on 21 December, that he himself had called, revolution broke out. Popular demonstrations were fired on by representatives of the security services.. The regime lost control of the country as the army sided with the demonstrators, as the revolution rapidly spread beyond Bucharest to major provincial population centers. The following day Ceaușescu fled the capital, only to be captured by the army, while a new organization, the National Salvation Front, seized power. Heavy fighting followed between the army alongside demonstrators and the security services until the new government executed Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu on Christmas Day 1989, and broadcast the execution on television, thus ensuring the victory of Romania's violent revolution (Siani-Davies, 2005).

The events of the autumn had a radicalizing effect on the revolutions already underway elsewhere. In Hungary they ended any chance that either the ruling party or Imre Pozsgay would emerge in real positions of power as a result of the revolutionary changes underway in the country. In September against the background of the opening of Hungary's western border to East Germans, an increasingly impotent Communist Party voted to re-constitute itself as the Hungarian Socialist Party. In the same month the

national roundtable achieved partial agreement on arrangements for political transition, allowing Hungary to transform itself from a “people’s republic” to a democratic republic on 23 October – the thirty-third anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 Revolution. However, the disputed clauses in the agreement, including provisions for a directly-elected president, which were believed to help Imre Pozsgay take the post, were the subject of a referendum forced by a number of parties. Held in November on the weekend following Jakeš’s resignation in Czechoslovakia, the party was defeated, effectively winning the case that Hungary should be a parliamentary and not a presidential republic, thus blocking Pozsgay’s attempts to win for himself a key position in the new political system. The November referendum and ensuing scandals over the bugging of opposition politicians’ telephones by state security agencies effectively destroyed the chances of the Socialists in forthcoming elections set for spring 1990. These events thus ensured that Hungary’s transition would mark a clean break with socialist rule.

The Challenge of Post-Communism

At the beginning of 1990, outside of Albania, Communist regimes had collapsed across the Central and Eastern European region; Albania’s regime would collapse in 1992, in events that echoed those three years earlier in the rest of the region – a consequence of the small Adriatic states isolation, and its extreme and isolationist version of Communist rule. Elsewhere, with the exception of East Germany which unified with West Germany in 1990, and thus ceased to share its fate with the other countries of the region, the difficulties faced by the new political elites that had taken over responsibility for

government were formidable. The conflicts generated by a series of often inter-related challenges defined the nature of post-Communism across the region. The first and fundamental related to the role of nationalism in shaping the nature of post-Communist statehood, which had especially tragic consequences in Yugoslavia, but were by no means confined to it. The second challenge related to the creation of democratic institutions, and more problematically, the spread of democratic practices, among political elites and throughout populations. The third was the management of the economic crisis left by Communist regimes, and the attempt to overcome it through the integration of the region into the capitalist world economy, as well as the social tensions this generated. Fourthly, the legacy of the Communist regimes themselves presented a major issue, which had polarizing effects on the politics of some states in the region.

Revolutionary change in 1989 re-opened the possibility of changes in political borders between states. This made viable nationalist projects that had not had any realistic possibility of realizing their goals during the Communist era. This was an especially serious issue in Yugoslavia, where the collapse of Communism combined with the fatal weakening of common Yugoslav institutions, and a dynamic that pointed to eventual independence for the state's constituent republics. What made the fragmentation of Yugoslavia especially violent was the determination of firstly the Yugoslav army, and then, increasingly as Yugoslavia dissolved, the Serbian Communist leadership, to resist moves towards independence in other republics. This provoked open military conflict in states that sought independence from Belgrade where substantial Serb minorities lived. Thus, the political representatives of Serbian minorities in Croatia, the Yugoslav army

supported by the Serbian leadership in Belgrade launched a war in summer 1991, provoked by Croatia's decision to seek independence. War broke out in similar circumstances, in multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992. This three-year war, cost thousands of lives, brought tremendous material destruction, led to large-scale enforced movements of population as victorious armies sought to "ethnically cleanse" newly occupied territories of members of opposing ethnic groups. Ended as a result of the threat of western military intervention and diplomacy in 1995, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina revealed the tragic consequences of violent nationalism and state fragmentation.

The war in the former Yugoslavia, which rumbled throughout the 1990s, however, was exceptional, both in the way in which attempts to change political borders resulted in conflict, and in the failure to restrain nationalist radicals. Czechoslovakia split peacefully in January 1993, after the new political elites in the Czech and Slovak components of the federation failed to agree on economic reform. Furthermore, while Yugoslavia was the only state in the region where they resulted in a war, nationalist and ethnic tensions, often fuelled by those seeking political gain were not unusual in the first years following post-Communist transition. In Transylvania, for example, where Romanian nation-building had been promoted by the Ceaușescu regime, democratization produced mobilization around issues of nationality, both among the Hungarian minority, as well as the Romanian majority. Political conflict promoted by this pattern of democratization spilled over into several days of riots in the city of Tirgu Mureș in March 1990, when representatives of a Romanian nationalist groups laid siege to the offices of the political party of the region's Magyars. Tension continued to exist throughout the decade,

especially in Cluj, where the Romanian ultra-nationalist, Gheorge Funar, was elected mayor in 1992, and remained in office until 2004. Despite the persistence of considerable ethnic tension in Transylvania throughout the 1990s, the region remained largely peaceful throughout the decade.

While conflicts around nationality and ethnicity rumbled throughout the early post-Communist period, all states created political systems that were based on multi-party systems, with representative bodies based upon free elections. In some states, the transition to fully-fledged democratic political systems was easier than in others. Hungary's negotiated transition brought about the creation of a parliamentary republic, and free elections held in March and April 1990. Poland's model of compromise between party and opposition broke down to be replaced with a wholly democratic system, following presidential and parliamentary elections in 1990 and 1991. Likewise, transition to a functioning parliamentary democracy in the Czech Republic, and in Slovenia was relatively trouble-free. It was in south-eastern Europe, where the creation of democratic institutions was initially problematic. In May 1990 in Romania the National Salvation Front won elections which were widely regarded as flawed, and retained power until the front split into two in 1992, after which new elections were held, in which sections of the front, around its leader Ion Iliescu, held power through an alliance between the left and ultra-nationalist right. True alternation of power in the country only came as a result of the outcome of elections in 1996. In Bulgaria, the transition was protracted; while the first elections in 1990 had allowed the country's former Communists, re-named the

Socialists to win power, political instability forced new elections in the following year, which brought the opposition to power.

If the transition to democratic systems was problematic, yet achieved relatively quickly, then the spread of democratic practices was marred by signs of authoritarianism in many of the states of the region. In Slovakia, politics was dominated between 1993 and 1998 by the powerful personality of Vladimir Mečiar. Mečiar's regime, particularly following during his stint in office following the October 1994 elections, was characterized by policies of authoritarian nation-building, and undemocratic behavior directed at political opponents. Nation-building was underlined by the making of Slovak as the sole official language of state in 1995, and moves in the same year to make the instruction of Slovak compulsory in schools attended by the Magyar minority. Slovakia was not the only state in the region where the new political elite infringed democratic norms of behavior. In the former Yugoslav states, both Serbia's Slobodan Milošević and Croatia's Franjo Tuđman, were both noted for their authoritarian behavior, while Albania's first post-Communist president, Sali Berisha, elected after the Communists were driven from power in 1992, was similarly criticized for muzzling opposition and jailing political opponents (Kenney, 2006, pp. 100-27).

As political authoritarianism cast a shadow over the uneven development of democratic systems in Central and Eastern Europe throughout the 1990s, then the transformation of the economies of the region contributed most markedly to social tension. All countries in the region attempted to transform crisis-ridden socialist economies, into capitalist market

economies in the hope that this would eventually create economic prosperity. Oppositions and reformist groups had come to believe, by the end of the 1980s, that market “reform” provided a generalized solution to the “failures” of socialist economies. Furthermore, western Europe’s relative prosperity seemed to add to the appeal of outright market transformation. These factors, the prestige of political liberalism, and the generalized anti-socialist climate of the first transition years created a climate remarkably favourable to the import of neo-liberal economic prescriptions into Central and Eastern Europe. Western financial institutions, like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, applied pressure on governments in order that they implement packages of economic stabilization in the region. Poland’s 1990 stabilization package, termed “shock therapy” by many commentators, freed prices, slashed state subsidies, made the currency convertible, cut state spending and held down wages. While most other new governments shied away from such radical measures, often wary of the social and political consequences, all were to attempt to build market economies, on the ruins of what had been left by Communism. All governments inherited crisis-ridden economies as a consequence of the economic decay of Communist rule; all sought western financial assistance and some level of economic integration with western Europe. Economic transformation was also driven forward by the nature of post-Communist economic collapse.

Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe was affected by a severe recession that lasted into the mid-1990s in most countries. Behind this recession lay the collapse of established patterns of trade, triggered firstly by the insistence of western financial bodies

that new governments abandon previous trading arrangements established by the Soviet Union. This was further exacerbated by the outright collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991-2, thus destroying the markets of much of Central and Eastern European industry. Furthermore, western Europe slipped into recession in 1991-2, making it considerably more difficult for the countries of the region to re-orient their exports. These factors resulted in a severe recession. Economic transformation generated considerable social tension, which increased demands of the state for social protection at a time in which state revenues fell, leading to persistent budget deficits. At the same time, as poverty and unemployment increased, greater demands were placed on a shrinking safety net.

Policies that sought to stabilize economies through severe austerity were combined with measures that opened up the region's economies to multi-national capital, largely through massive privatization of state assets. While privatization and the opening of economies to foreign direct investment were often combined, post-Communist governments had other motives for transferring state assets to private owners. Though they certainly believed that private ownership would transform bureaucratically-run state enterprises into efficient profit-making companies, privatization was also conceived as a tool of post-Communist social engineering that would lead to the creation of a new capitalist class. With this intention early post-socialist governments pursued a wide range of privatization strategies from the sale of businesses to foreign multinationals, to policies of restitution to former owners. Some states, particularly Poland and Hungary, designed privatization policies to encourage foreign direct investment in the country. Czechoslovakia, prior to its break-up, encouraged wide share-ownership by giving vouchers to the population,

which could be exchanged for shares in newly privatized companies. The dismantling of the region's state sectors continued apace, driven by the mid-1990s as much by the need of many governments to alleviate chronic state indebtedness, as governments divested themselves of public utilities, and physical infrastructure, as speedily as they could, often under pressure from international financial institutions (Pittaway, 2004, pp.216-8).

The creation of market economies generated social tensions, as societies polarized. To this was added enormous political tension generated by dispute over the degree to which states had made a clean break with their Communist pasts. Many states in the period immediately following 1989, attempted, often under pressure from those who had suffered persecution for political reasons, to pursue policies that aimed "to call to account" those who perceived to have served the Communist regimes. These measures went furthest in Czechoslovakia prior to its break-up. The so-called "lustration act" passed in October 1991 gave the Interior Ministry the power to dismiss or demote those determined to have worked for the state security services of the socialist regime. The measure was unevenly applied and partially reversed by Czechoslovakia's successor states, but nevertheless was far more radical than anything attempted elsewhere (Borneman, 1997, pp.152-3). Yet the anti-Communist moment that made such measures possible did not last long; by the mid-1990s, those parties that were legal successors to the ruling parties of the Communist era had won considerable public support partly as consequence of social tension, generated by the difficult post-Communist transition; they won power in election in 1993 in Poland, in 1994 in Hungary, and in 1995 in Bulgaria. Such victories led many who had opposed the regimes to see as the result of the

incomplete nature of the changes of 1989; a factor which underpinned an undercurrent of polarization across the region during the 1990s (Pittaway, 2004, p.226).

Further reading

There are a number of general works on Central and Eastern Europe, which cover the collapse of Communism and the early transition years (Kenney, 2006; Pittaway, 2004; Swain & Swain, 2003) that provide a good introduction to cross-regional trends. In so far as individual countries are concerned the literature is uneven – we have excellent studies of the transition and its origins in East Germany (Fulbrook, 1995), Hungary (Tökes, 1995), Romania (Siani-Davies, 2005), and, Yugoslavia (Magaš, 1992; Woodward, 1995). Except for Kenney's recent survey (Kenney, 2006), there are no usable overviews of the post-1989 period in the region, though there are some worthwhile studies that focus especially on dissent and political opposition in the 1980s (Kenney, 2002; Ramet, 1991).

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