



## MELANCOLIE DEMOCRATIQUE EN EUROPE CENTRALE ET ORIENTALE

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**A l'occasion du 20<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire de la chute du mur de Berlin, le magazine américain *Journal of Democracy* a publié une série d'articles de politologues venus des Etats-Unis et d'Europe. Nous reproduisons ci-dessous la contribution de Jacques Rupnik, directeur de recherches au CERI. Après l'enthousiasme des premières années puis les réformes politiques et économiques qui ont rapproché les pays d'Europe centrale et orientale de leurs voisins occidentaux, tous sont à la recherche d'un « nouveau paradigme démocratique », écrit Jacques Rupnik, rendue d'autant plus nécessaire que le modèle libéral-démocratique semble en crise.**

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism, the founding moment for democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, comes at a time when the term “democratic revolution” evokes less a frisson of excitement than a slight twinge of embarrassment in the countries concerned.

In Poland and Hungary, one could attribute this to their experience of transition as a peaceful, negotiated affair. Not the celebration of revolution, but rather the complete rejection of all revolutionary logic seems to many a Pole and Hungarian to be 1989's best and truest legacy. Not Paris in 1789, but the “Spanish model” of the 1970s was foremost in the minds of the Polish and Hungarian roundtable participants who secured their respective countries' unexpectedly smooth exits from totalitarian thralldom.

But the consensus ends there. In Poland, the twentieth anniversary of the (nearly) free elections of 4 June 1989 was marked by three separate ceremonies held in three different cities. One featured President Lech Kaczynski, one was overseen by Premier Donald Tusk, and the third was held at parliament in Warsaw. In Hungary, the twentieth anniversary of the May 1989 opening of the border with Austria passed with a notable lack of public fervor and the conspicuous absence from any observance of the main opposition leader, Viktor Orbán. In late June, with the global economic downturn pinching badly, a poll was released suggesting that almost half of all young Hungarians thought life under what used to be called “goulash communism” was better than life today.

Even in Berlin, where the fall of the Wall on 9 November 1989 gave the communist collapse its iconic moment, the atmosphere was muted in the wake of revelations that Mikhail Gorbachev had played a larger role in bringing the Wall down than had previously been realized. More seriously, an astonishing poll released in March 2009 found that a majority in what had once been East Germany thought that life had been better under the old German Democratic Republic (GDR). “Ostalgie” seems to have spread to a new generation that remembers the GDR and its one-party communist dictatorship only vaguely, if at all. The democratization of East Germany through its 1990 reunification with the West—the least painful of all the Eastern bloc transitions—is now seen as a mixed blessing by its greatest beneficiaries.

Looking south to the Czech Republic, we see that the globally resonant “velvet revolution” is now spoken of by Czechs with caution and even diffidence.

Former dissident and deputy Senate chairman Petr Pithart prefers the term “takeover”; the actor and Charter 77 signatory Pavel Landovský suggests the “abolition of serfdom”; and the media refer modestly to “the events of November 1989” or simply “November.” Interestingly, nobody in Prague claims to own the “copyright” on the term “velvet revolution” or can identify its author. Václav Havel, that revolution’s most prominent figure, attributes the name to a Western journalist. The term, like so much of what followed, seems to have originated in the West.

“Ostalgie” notwithstanding, there is no actual desire in Central and Eastern Europe to return to dictatorship. But there is, unmistakably, a “crisis of expectations,” and even a sense of “the revolution betrayed” that expresses itself as disenchantment with democracy after two decades of experience with it. No one pines for communism to come back, but it is clear that

democracy can no longer derive its legitimacy from 1989 and the overwhelming rejection of the old regime which that year witnessed.

Even a cursory overview of recent developments unlikely to make it into Western newspapers reveals reasons for the absence of “1989 triumphalism” in the old Warsaw Pact countries. The Baltic real-estate bubble has burst, and Latvia in particular is facing social unrest for the first time. Hungary and Slovakia (which has a Magyar minority) are involved in a simmering war of words and nerves. In Prague, an unelected caretaker government run by an ex-communist statistician holds office while fresh elections are delayed due to an intense political controversy over a Constitutional Court ruling.

Anyone who thinks that the prospect of a populist or nationalist challenge to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe had peaked when the Kaczynski twins held the premiership and presidency of Poland at the same time in 2006 and 2007 should now think again. Elections remain free and fair, but participation is declining. All the right institutions exist, but on close inspection they look like empty shells. There is no alternative to democracy, but there is little trust in its institutions, and the political elites that presided over two decades of transition seem utterly exhausted.

One could, of course, dispel such doom and gloom with a mostly positive account of democratization in the region that might go something like this: The professed goals of 1989 were to establish basic freedoms and democratic government, to reach prosperity by using the market-based economy as the likeliest road, and to “return to Europe” (which in practice meant joining the EU as a community of free nations ensuring peace on the Continent). These goals have, on the whole, been achieved—at least across a belt of Central Europe stretching from the Baltic states southward to Slovenia. Democracy has no overt challengers; elections change governments, not regimes. After an initial slump, the switch to markets resulted in a decade of rapid growth and improved living standards for most people. Accession to the EU was completed between 2004 and 2007, making Europe’s eastern “suburbs” at last part of the continent’s prosperous, democratic mainstream. Things have not gone nearly so well in the nearby Balkans or along the periphery of the former Soviet Union, where hybrid regimes are still confronting unfinished tasks related to the building of independent nation-states and the consolidation of democratic constitutional orders.

If things have basically gone well and could be much worse (as the less-happy plight of nearby countries indicates), why are Central and East Europeans so reluctant to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of their region’s escape from communist bondage and the

achievements made since then? At bottom, it seems that from one country to the next there is an atmosphere of burnout and exhaustion surrounding the transitions to democracy, markets, and European integration.

### **Early-Onset Democracy Fatigue?**

In the immediate aftermath of 1989, there were expectations that the process of building democracy after totalitarianism would be an experiment pregnant with significance for all democracies. A process in which all the building blocks of free self-government (constitutions and parliaments, civil society and citizenship) would have to be redefined or even reinvented drew strong international attention because it was seen as an experiment that might inspire some of the tired democracies of the West. What came about instead was the rapid and faithful imitation of Western models across Central and Eastern Europe. In this respect, 1989 differed sharply from 1968, when the idealists of the Prague Spring had harbored the notion (or the delusion) that a true “third way”—a model entirely different from both the communist system and from Western ways—could be brought about. The great imitation that followed 1989 was generally successful, at least as far as the constitutional and institutional framework was concerned. The only problem was that it involved following a model which itself was already showing symptoms of fatigue and even crisis. Having taken on the fundamentals of Western democracy, Central and Eastern Europe now seem also to be taking on Western democracy’s ills, including steadily dropping rates of political participation, a huge gulf between citizens and political elites, low trust in parliamentary and state institutions, and the rise of populist and nationalist challengers to liberal democracy.

Looking back, Václav Havel now says that “we fought for a different political system from the one [that] we ended up with.” The disappointments of postrevolutionary life “could to a degree have been predicted, but [they] turned out to be much worse than anyone expected.” Why then was the “democratic invention” of 1989 so promptly pushed aside? Since it was a negotiated transition between moderate communists and dissidents that helped to give birth to the new democracies, it may be useful to start the assessment of what happened to the democratic hopes of 1989 by examining the worlds of those who were once dissidents and of their former opposite numbers, those who had been communists.

## Too Good to Win?

Until recently, the transition paradox could be summed up more or less as follows: In 1989, the democratic culture of Central and Eastern Europe, in the form of various dissident movements, rose up and overwhelmed the decaying political structures by means of which communist rulers had been straining to keep democracy in check. Yet once the “game” of ordinary parliamentary politics began, the onetime communists, with their superior levels of cohesion and experience, outplayed the more democratic but less well-organized former dissidents.

This might be seen as a phenomenon that would predictably set in once the initial, highly participatory phase of democratization (which saw voter turnouts topping 90 %) gave way to a more routine climate in which professionals such as former communist apparatchiks could readily defeat value-oriented amateurs. Parties replaced movements while election managers and experts eclipsed dissident intellectuals whose visions of an “antipolitics” based on ethics and civil society were ill-suited to the realities of everyday party and parliamentary competition. On this reading, the dissidents and the political culture that they represented lost because of their virtues—they were, depending on your judgment, ill-suited or simply “too good” to win.

Another and more critical view argues that the ex-dissidents became irrelevant precisely because they abandoned the dissident legacy: Their actions in 1989 and later provided the democratic legitimacy for a free-market experiment that had its rationale but also its political constraints and its losers. The “shock therapy” that took place in Poland under the auspices of Solidarity’s Lech Walesa and Jacek Kuron succeeded in economic terms but meant putting aside the political legacies of and social concerns associated with Solidarity. Those most intent on practicing politics in the dissident tradition (emphasizing ethics, rights discourse, the rule of law, and civil society) were soon pushed aside. In June 1992, Czechoslovakia’s last election before the “velvet divorce” saw the ex-dissident Civic Movement fail to reach the 5 percent threshold required for a seat in parliament. In Poland and Hungary, electoral formations hewing to the dissident tradition have now met similar fates. Both these accounts raise the old question about the status of democratic dissent under communism: Were the dissident groups that sprang to prominence in 1989 only the tip of a massive democratic iceberg lurking just below the surface of communist-run societies, or did the dissidents represent mere pockets of civic virtue within societies that by and large had always been rather compliant and passive in the face of communist rule?

Beyond the cast-aside legacies of dissent there is also the variety of paths that former communist parties have taken. In Central Europe, the communists have become social democrats. (Only the Czech Republic has an unreconstructed Communist Party that regularly gets more than 10 percent of the vote). In the Balkans, by contrast, the communists converted to nationalism: milder in Romania and Bulgaria, more radical in the Yugoslav lands, where Slobodan Milosevic brought Adam Michnik's mordant quip about nationalism being "the last stage of communism" to life in an especially horrifying way.

Unlike their counterparts in the Balkans, the ex-communist parties of Central Europe have not acted as major impediments to democratization in their respective countries. They have not only endorsed the new democratic system, but have also ardently promoted markets as well as membership in NATO and the EU.

The role that these parties are playing in the current democratic malaise stems less from their obvious reluctance to confront the communist past than from their infatuation with the state. Under communism, the nomenklatura ruled the state through the party. More recently, the nomenklatura has proven itself adept at insider trading and self-dealing during state-asset privatization. As Anna Grzymala-Busse has argued, where party competition is limited so is state capacity, leaving ample opportunities for the spread of political corruption. The ex-communists in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have been widely associated with the spread of such practices.

Robert D. Putnam has famously argued that social capital—networks built on trust, in other words—is a key to fostering civic engagement and a democratic culture. The countries of the old Eastern bloc, however, are vexed by the presence of social capital in a perverse form. The strongest networks inherited from the past, such as those of the nomenklatura, are forces for corruption dedicated to getting around laws and regulations in order to serve their members' selfish interests. The corrosive effect that such groups can have on trust in democracy and the rule of law is not hard to imagine. The ex-communists, it seems, have gone along with democracy in no small part because they have felt that they could "work it" to their advantage, and in doing so have fed the current miasma of democratic disenchantment that hangs over the region. There were good reasons why the countries of Central and Eastern Europe opted for the free-market model as they emerged from state socialism. The command economy had been an utter failure, and markets seemed to provide the clearest break from it. "No experiments!" and "The 'third way' leads to the Third World!" were the watchwords of the day as local free marketeers such as Poland's Leszek Balcerowicz endorsed the U.S. economist Jeffrey Sachs's "shock therapy" approach. This

rested on the assumptions that there is only one true model of a free-market economy, and that it can be replicated anywhere as long as it is implemented so quickly that legal and institutional constraints do not have time to sidetrack it.

Beyond the ideological commitment to free markets there was the pressure of the “Washington consensus,” backed by the IMF and the World Bank, to pursue rapid privatization, deregulation, and more open labor markets—all at the same time. The state was seen as the enemy of freedom, a legacy of the old regime to be dismantled through the joint efforts of political liberals (often ex-dissidents) who wanted to enhance human rights and individual freedoms and economic liberals who wanted to enhance the scope of the free market.

The achievements of the market model in Central and Eastern Europe are undeniable. Over the last decade, the region’s economies have on average grown twice as fast as those of Western Europe. This made the shock of the worldwide 2008 financial and economic crisis all that much greater. When you come out of communism, you can hardly imagine that capitalism could really fall into crisis—that, after all, had been the worn-out claim of communist propaganda. Central and East Europeans built capitalism without much capital of their own—most of it came from abroad—and discovered that you cannot insulate yourself from larger crises or have “capitalism in one country.” The East’s free marketers had opted for the “Anglo-American” model as opposed to the continental one, which they considered too heavily regulated and burdened with an overgrown welfare state. Yet since the crisis hit the United States and Britain especially hard and forced their respective governments to take drastic actions that included nationalizing banks, the “Anglo-American” preference has become more difficult to sustain.

With the state stepping back in to rescue capitalism, post-1989 market liberalism lay shattered. Local variations notwithstanding, Central and Eastern Europe’s political and economic elites have all had to confront the reality that their chosen model was in crisis. The “liberal” moment within the larger process of transition has come to a close. With the boom years behind us and free-market ideologues forced to keep a lower profile, there is now room for a long-delayed debate about “what kind of capitalism” is best suited for today. Until recently, a certain confusion reigned. The cultural left was economically on the right (favoring markets) while the cultural right (nationalist conservatives such as the Kaczyńskis in Poland and Orbán in Hungary) was economically on the left (statist). Now the “varieties of capitalism” question looks as if it may become a salient issue around which future realignments in Central and East European politics might take place.

## The Limits of Europe

The EU's effective use of conditionality during the accession process played a key role in aiding democratic consolidation across Central and Eastern Europe. Democracy and human rights were laid down as absolute requirements, not subject to any negotiation. The EU stressed its prospective new members' willingness and ability to implement the EU legislation known as the *acquis communautaire*. Indeed, the EU insisted so strongly on this that it has been charged with having undermined genuine party competition and the parliamentary process. There is something to the argument that the EU's eastward expansion of its single market and shared legal norms threatens to empty domestic politics of its substance. Like the adoption of democracy and markets, "Europeanization" is also based on imitation. Yet there is no denying at the same time that it has done much to promote the stable rule of law. In Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, illiberal political elites found that the costs of resisting EU integration were too high to pay in domestic electoral as well as economic and diplomatic terms. The same logic is now at work in Croatia and even Serbia.

Now that the "big bang" created by the admission of ten new member states is over, and given the travails that the EU has been suffering as it struggles to reform its governance and redefine its project, it is widely thought that further enlargement (aside from the entry of Croatia) is not on any near-term agenda, and that in any case it is not the only type of relationship that the EU can or should develop with its peripheries. The countries of the western Balkans—Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia—are clearly committed to eventually making the transition from their current status as European protectorates to full acceptance as actual EU members. For others (from Ukraine to the Caucasus), "neighbourhood policies" or "Eastern partnerships" are all that is on offer, at least in the medium term. But can the "transformative power" of the EU be effective in helping the democratization of former Soviet republics when EU membership is not a plausible goal? Some commentators in the new member states have written about "membership without belonging." What if formal membership itself becomes less and less likely the farther east you go? It now seems clear that for the next twenty years the pattern successfully implemented in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 is unlikely to be repeated outside the Balkans. EU expansion is reaching its limits and has begun to decline as an influence on the region.

The twenty years since 1989 have brought us to the close of a triple cycle. We have seen the acute excitement of democratic transition and consolidation give way to symptoms of “democracy fatigue” and elite exhaustion. We have seen a successful economic transition away from state socialism fall victim to a crisis of the free-market model. And we have looked on as the EU’s transformative power has reached its geopolitical limits. The nations of Central and Eastern Europe successfully imitated a model that is now in crisis. Like the rest of the world, they currently find themselves in search of a new democratic paradigm.