

## Democratization in Central Europe

*András Bozóki*

### Abstract

Democratization in Central Europe is a success story in historical perspective. Twenty years after the spectacular collapse of communism, most countries, which had belonged to the “buffer zone” between West Germany and the Soviet Union, now belong to the European Union. The transition was relatively short and was characterized by negotiations, self-limiting behavior, and nonviolence of the participants (with the exception of the Romanian revolution). The ideas of 1989 included negative freedom, free market liberalism, consensual democracy, civil society, and the wish to return to Europe, determined by the social, political, and economic legacies of communism. The short transition was followed by a longer and more difficult consolidation, which was parallel with economic restructuring, privatization, and deregulation. The pain of economic transformation was socially accepted as an “inevitable” part of the process. Social peace could therefore be based on the patience of these societies as well as on the hope to enter NATO and the European Union. In a way, it was an externally driven consolidation. In 2004, most of the Central European countries joined the European Union, which caused a landslide political change in their internal politics. While countries of Central Europe are now inside the EU, which caused some parallel changes in the leadership, the end of post-communism did not seem to bring fundamentally more innovative political elites into the leadership of these societies.

**Key words:** Democratization, transition, negotiated revolution, Central Europe, communist legacy, institution building, consolidation, European integration, post-communism.

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The traditional “buffer zone” between Germany and Russia, from Finland to Greece, is generally called East Central Europe. It consists of (at least) three

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**András Bozóki** is Professor of Political Science at Central European University, Budapest. <bozokia@ceu.hu>

distinct parts and identities today. One is the group of *Baltic states* (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), which had been traditionally independent but belonged to the Soviet Union for seventy years during the twentieth century. They regained freedom and sovereignty in 1991. The second group of countries constitutes *Central Europe* and is the so-called Visegrád countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary), plus Slovenia, which all became democratic between 1989 and 1990. Historically speaking, parts of Croatia and Romania also belonged to this cultural-geographical area. The third group of countries belongs to the *Balkans*, or, in other words, Southeastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia). While all Baltic and Central European states belong to the EU, among the Balkan states only two have recently entered the Union (Bulgaria and Romania).

In this essay, I focus on Central Europe, but I will make some intraregional comparisons as well. Historically, the idea of Central Europe itself had different meanings.<sup>1</sup> First and foremost was the legacy of dissent and the recurrent fights for freedom in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.<sup>2</sup> Second, with the revitalization of Central Europe, most literary people envisioned a project to recreate historical similarities among cities such as Krakow, Prague, Dresden, Vienna, Bratislava, Kosice, Budapest, Cluj, Timisoara, Subotica, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Trieste. Third, Central Europe had some historical resonance with the era of Hapsburg Europe, a reference developed in the post-Iron Curtain period. Fourth, and finally, some people revived the pre-World War I German concept of *Mittleuropa*, advocated by Friedrich Naumann and other German national liberals at the beginning of the twentieth century. These thoughts, however, have been partly swept away by the attractiveness of a larger unit, the European Union. The idea of Central Europe, however, has not been forgotten; rather, it contributed to the formation of the so-called Visegrád-countries, a cooperation among Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary after 1991.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that countries of Central Europe became new democracies is not attributable to a single factor only. There are numerous internal and external causes that brought about the collapse of the old regime in its particular way, in this particular time.

As far as the *internal* causes are concerned, one must stress (1) the impact of previous revolutions and reform attempts; (2) the diminishing performance

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood, eds., *In Search of Central Europe* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1989); Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (New York: Vintage, 1992); and Stephen Borsody, *The New Central Europe* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gregorz Ekiert, *The State against Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Béla K. Király, ed., and András Bozóki, associate ed., *Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-94* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1995).

of the economy; (3) the exhaustion of the social reserves of the regime; (4) the disintegration of the ideology; and (5) the willingness to compromise on the part of the new and the old elite.

Among the most important *external* factors, one must number (1) the defeat in the Cold War; (2) the crippling consequences of the arms race; (3) the social and ethnic conflicts that made the Eastern Bloc burst at the seams; (4) the coordinated, evolutionist strategies of the democratic opposition in a number of these countries; (5) the corresponding, human rights-based foreign policies of the Western countries, initiated by U.S. President Carter in the 1970s; and finally, (6) the rise to the top of the Soviet party hierarchy of First Secretary Gorbachev, who introduced a style of politics open to compromise. This latter factor is widely acknowledged as the “Gorbachev-factor.” Taken by themselves, any of these causes constituted an important and integral part in the process, but the fact that they occurred more or less simultaneously created highly favorable circumstances for the democratic turn.

The societies of Central Europe are composed of educated people. Despite the economic and social grievances—the poor salaries in the public sector, the comparatively low level of living standard,<sup>4</sup> and the growing gap between rich and poor in urban centers versus the countryside, and between different regions of the country—the social structures of these countries do not resemble those of Latin America or some parts of Southeast Asia. Knowledge, culture, and human capital, in general, enjoy high respect, while democratization and economic transformation were based on the patience of the deprived.<sup>5</sup> The largely successful transitions to democracy in Central Europe resulted in a long and sometimes bumpy process of consolidation.

In the transition period, the popular wish to get rid of the old regime helped to overcome the social costs of economic transformation. In the period of democratic consolidation, the very chance to join the European Union contributed greatly to maintaining the efforts to deepen and extend democracy. While Central European countries received no aid comparable to the Marshall Plan in post-World War II Western Europe, and therefore had to make painful efforts themselves to catch up, external influences worked in favor of success in consolidating democracy.

Central European countries had to combat tremendous problems to complete the tasks of the double or “triple transition”<sup>6</sup> (from dictatorship to democracy, from state socialism to capitalism, and, in many cases, from nonstates to democratic nation states). Transitions to democracy had significant social and

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Central Europeans almost always tend to compare themselves to citizens of Western European societies, and never to the peoples of Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The meaning of their relatively low living standard should also be understood accordingly.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Béla Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition* (Cambridge, MA: M. I. T. Press, 1997).

economic costs. For Central European countries, although formal political and human development indices show remarkably good figures, the level of economic development still poses problems. These democracies are relatively poor ones by European standards. This is not to say that any serious breakdown of democracy is probable in these countries in the foreseeable future; rather, their comparatively poor economic conditions make their integration into the European Union difficult. The possibility of breakdown of democracy does not deserve as much attention as the possible survival of informal, semi-corrupt structures and practices, and the conditions of “shallow democracy” (i.e., half-democratic or not-fully-democratic practices inside the formal democratic framework of rule).<sup>7</sup>

Almost two decades after the historic democratic transition, all countries in Central Europe have been repeatedly rated as “free” by Freedom House. On a scale of 1 to 7, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and also the Baltic republics, receive the best grade in political rights (1) and in civil liberties (1). Comparing these countries to those that joined the European Union recently (Bulgaria, 1 [political rights], 2 [civil liberties], free; Romania, 2 [political rights], 2 [civil liberties], free), we can say that transitions to democracy in East Central Europe proved to be a true success story in a historically short period of time. Democratization in West Balkan countries, especially Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo, remains highly problematic.

Still, the major dividing line, from a formal democratic point of view, is not so much located between Central Europe and the Balkans any longer. Instead, it is located between the whole East Central European zone (which includes the three Baltic states, too), and Eastern Europe proper, with its post-Soviet republics (Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). It seems that, in the Balkans, the problems of definition of national political community were the greatest obstacle to democratization. But when they were solved, most of those countries quickly moved closer to Freedom House’s fully free category.

In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became members of NATO; in 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined NATO as well. In May 2004, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia joined the EU after several years of negotiations. Bulgaria and Romania became members of the EU on January 1, 2007. Democratization and “Europeanization” went on hand-in-hand. Integration of Central Europe into international democratic political organizations is well on its way. This was a process of “*externally supervised consolidation*,” which came to an end after the accession of new member states

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

to the EU. National elites now need to find common ground to create a widely accepted vision for the future for their respective countries. This seems to be a difficult task in the period of post-accession depression, when political elites and dominant social groups are sharply polarized along the lines of neoliberal modernizationism versus nationalist populism.

In the following, I shall first analyze the meaning and modes of the revolutionary changes of 1989, by focusing on the nature of the roundtable talks and their impact on the subsequent democratic regime.<sup>8</sup> Second, I will deal with the impact of communist legacies on the nature of post-communist democracies. Here, I will discuss the visions of a future democracy and the historical references of the participants in the transition, which were recalled in order to distance themselves from some points in the past, while revitalizing others. An evaluation of the effects of the “negotiated revolutions” as new beginnings will be offered as well.

### **Nonviolence and Negotiations**

The most striking feature of Central European transitions from communist rule was the self-limiting behavior of their participants. While they were radical in their aims concerning regime change, at the same time, they were sophisticated and self-limiting in their political behavior. This was valuable knowledge learned by the democratic opposition under decades of communist rule: radical goals and strategies should not prevent political actors from behaving in a coordinated, compromise-seeking, self-limiting, nonviolent way. Compromises in tactics and intransigence in seeking final goals could, indeed, go hand-in-hand. In order to achieve their radical goals, leaders of the opposition in Central Europe had to convince the members of the reformist wing of the communist leadership that they would not be killed or jailed during the transition to democracy. Moreover, in some countries with reformist communist traditions, they even convinced the communists that a possible peaceful transition served their own interests as well.

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<sup>8</sup> Former analyses of the Hungarian roundtable talks include László Bruszt, “Negotiated Revolution in Hungary,” *Social Research* 57, no. 2. (1990): 365-87; András Bozóki, “Hungary’s Road to Systemic Change: The Opposition Roundtable,” *East European Politics and Societies* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 276-308; id., “The Opposition Roundtable,” in *Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-1994*, ed. Béla K. Király and András Bozóki (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, distributed by the Columbia University Press, 1995), 61-92; Rudolf L. Tőkés, *Hungary’s Negotiated Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); András Sajó, “Roundtable Talks in Hungary,” in *Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, ed. Jon Elster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 69-98; and András Bozóki editor-in-chief, Márta Elbert, Melinda Kalmár, Béla Révész, Erzsébet Ripp, and Zoltán Ripp, eds., *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve: Kerekasztal-tárgyalások 1989-ben*. [The ‘script’ of the regime change: Roundtable talks in 1989] 8 vols. (Budapest: Magvető, vols. 1-4; Új Mandátum, vols. 5-8, 1999-2000) (From now on: ARF.)

Among the East Central European political transformations, transition to democracy came first in Poland; therefore, the Polish opposition had to behave in the most cautious manner. Accordingly, the Polish roundtable talks were not so much about paving the way to a full democracy, as about agreeing, first, on the legalization of Solidarity, and second, on holding semi-democratic, partially fixed elections.<sup>9</sup> Despite the Polish elections of June 1989, elections could not yet be regarded as fully democratic ones.

Historically, however, we must recognize that Polish negotiations began as far back as August 1980. Polish dissidents were the pioneers in initiating open negotiations with the communists in the region.<sup>10</sup> The first talks between the activists of the newly formed Solidarity and the leaders of the communist party in the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk marked the beginning of the end of the communist regime. The self-limiting revolution of Solidarity in 1980-1981 established a model for other opposition groups in East Central Europe. Before Solidarity, people in East Central Europe had made two major attempts of different types to change communist rule: a *revolution* (in Hungary in 1968) and political *reform* (in Czechoslovakia in 1968). Although both of these changes proved to be internally successful, they both provoked Soviet military intervention and were not able to resist external military power. Any sort of resistance (intraparty or extraparty, violent or peaceful) seemed to be hopeless. The historic solution to this deadlock came with the idea of “new evolutionism,” a strategy based on nonviolent noncooperation with the oppressive party-state and the revitalization of civil society.<sup>11</sup> This strategy aimed to strengthen civil society to make it prepared for future negotiations over rights and freedoms.

While the task of the Polish and Hungarian roundtable talks was to extricate their countries from dictatorship, the German and Czechoslovakian roundtable talks occurred only *after* the oppositions’ peaceful revolutions. Therefore, in the latter cases, the goal of the opposition in the negotiations was the establishment of the institutional order of the new regime, since it already had disengaged itself from its dictatorial regime. Poland was the first to transition away from dictatorial rule, but ended up with semi-free elections in 1989. As the second opposition to attempt a transformation, the intention of the Hungarian negotiators was to follow the Polish path but to go further and achieve more than the Poles.

Only in the case of Hungary did the roundtable talks aim to achieve both

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<sup>9</sup> On the Polish negotiations, see Wiktor Osyatinski, “The Roundtable Talks in Poland,” in *Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, ed. Jon Elster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21-68.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Neal Ascherson, *The Polish August: The Self-Limiting Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1983), and Jadwiga Staniszkis, *Poland’s Self-Limiting Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> See Adam Michnik, “A New Evolutionism,” in Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

goals simultaneously: extricating Hungary from the old regime, and creating the institutional order of a democratic regime.<sup>12</sup> The Hungarian negotiators often referred openly to the Polish precedents.<sup>13</sup> They argued that the Polish opposition was able to arrive at a compromise with the communists on semi-free elections in June 1989 because it was much stronger than the Hungarian opposition. The Polish opposition could afford to accept substantial compromises in the early stages, because it was strong enough to mobilize the masses on the streets and to change the results of the roundtable talks later on. According to this argument, the Polish dissidents could accept a compromise without damaging their political credibility.

The Hungarian national roundtable negotiations of June–September 1989 benefited, in many respects, from coming after the Polish elections; it was considerably easier to be second than to be the path-breaker. As it happened, the Hungarian negotiations also fell in the period of time between two significant historic events: the suppression of the student demonstration at Tiananmen Square in China (June 1989), and the formation of the first non-communist government in Poland in four decades (September 1989). In Poland and Hungary, it was the roundtable talks that led to significant changes, but in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, they only legitimized and institutionalized the changes after the fact. Yet, one way or another, an essential change of regime took place in all these Central European countries.

It was only the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Romania where the roundtable talks did not play any significant role in the process of transition. In East Germany, the “GDR-revolution” of the fall of 1989 was quickly forgotten when the option of German reunification became available.<sup>14</sup> In Romania, the parallel putsch and revolution of December 1989 brought a heterogenous political group to power (the National Salvation Front), led by ex-communist politicians. They were not even interested in a power-sharing formula: indeed, they used the “roundtable” as a façade of democratization only.<sup>15</sup> In fact, their main concern was to prevent the emergence of democratic

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<sup>12</sup> For the minutes of the Hungarian negotiations, see Bozóki et al., *ARF*. On the historical context of the Hungarian negotiations, see Rudolf L. Tókécs, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and András Bozóki, ed., *Alkotmányos forradalom* [Constitutional revolution] *ARF*, vol. 7 (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000). On the Hungarian negotiations, in English, see András Bozóki, ed., *The Roundtable Talks of 1989: The Genesis of Hungarian Democracy* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Both the communists and the opposition, independently from each other, sent delegates to Poland in May 1989 to learn about the first-hand experiences of the Polish negotiators.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Osmond, “Yet Another Failed German Revolution? The German Democratic Republic, 1989–90,” in *Reinterpreting Revolutions in the Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Moira Donald and Tim Rees (London: Macmillan, 2000), 140–158.

<sup>15</sup> Calin Goina, “Románia esete: Tárgyalások a forradalom után” [The case of Romania: Negotiations after the revolution], in *ARF*, vol. 7 (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000), 766–779.

pluralism before the elections. The following table summarizes the transition paths in Central Europe:

Table 1. Characteristics of Transition from Communist Rule in Central European Countries

	Czechoslovakia	GDR	Hungary	Poland	Slovenia
Old Regime	Authoritarian	Rather authoritarian-transitory	Authoritarian-military	Authoritarian-transitory	Totalitarian
Opposition	Unified	Unified	Divided	Unified	Unified
Way of change	Mobilization (peaceful)	Mobilization (peaceful)	Negotiated (peaceful)	Negotiated (peaceful)	Negotiated + secession war
Privatization	Controlled by the state	Controlled by the new state	Spontaneous	Spontaneous	Controlled by the state
Boundaries of democratic community	Created by separation	Created by unification	Given	Given	Created by secession
First elections	Free (1990)	Free (1990)	Free (1990)	Semi-free (1989)	Free (1990)

**Characteristic Political Values of 1989**

Among the political values espoused by participants in the transition to democracy, the idea of *freedom* was primary, understood both as a liberal and a democratic value. Freedom as a liberal value meant that people could finally exercise their human rights and civil liberties. They were free to talk to one another openly, both in private and in public; there would be a free press, and the right of free association and party formation would be guaranteed as inalienable rights of all citizens. Freedom was understood in a negative rather than a positive sense,<sup>16</sup> requiring the state (the party, the police, the military, and so on—the government as a whole) to allow individuals to pursue their activities free of harassment, interference, or control. It was freedom *from* something, that is, freedom from the intervention of the state. This was clearly the cumulative outcome of two major political influences: first, the legacy of dissent in Central Europe, which valued high human rights and equal human

<sup>16</sup> On these conceptual differences, see in detail, Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 15-36.

dignity (as expressed in the writings of Václav Benda, István Bibó, Václav Havel, György Konrád, Milan Kundera, Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik, Jan Patočka, and others),<sup>17</sup> and second, the impact of the then dominant Western neoliberal, neoconservative ideologies, represented by theorists such as Friedrich A. Hayek and Milton Friedman and politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

The democratic conception of freedom was understood as *popular sovereignty*, reclaimed after so many decades of Soviet domination, during which the presence of Soviet advisors and the Red Army determined political outcomes. The idea of popular sovereignty begs for the definition of political community. When the boundaries of political community (and, therefore, the identity of the democratic state) were questionable, newborn democracy was often distorted by ethnically defined nationalist or nationalizing policies. In many ways, nationalism and democracy were not far removed from each other: they both based themselves on the idea of popular will.<sup>18</sup> Where the borders of the state had been clearly defined and the anti-communist civic movements clearly demonstrated their commitment to democracy, the end of communism was meant to have been a beginning of a regime based on democratic citizenship. All of the countries with a roundtable-type of transition belong to this category. Where, however, these social conditions had not existed, especially in the case of nondemocratic federations, popular will was used and abused by leaders who transformed themselves from communist into nationalist politicians in order to maintain power. In these countries, democracy was diminishing to the level of partly-free and nonfair elections.<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising that none of these countries was able to produce a negotiated way-out from the dictatorship.

It is worthy of note that democracy was understood as a *representative* form of governance, wherein people exercised their constitutional powers not so much directly as through the activity of their elected representatives. If democracy, as Robert A. Dahl and others have said,<sup>20</sup> has three major components—competition, participation, and civil liberties—it is significant that negotiators at the roundtable talks emphasized the first and the third

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<sup>17</sup> For their thoughts, in English, see for instance, Václav Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless*, ed. John Keane (London: Hutchinson, 1985); Václav Havel, *Living in Truth* (London, Boston: Faber & Faber, 1987); György Konrád, *Antipolitics* (London: Methuen, 1984); Adam Michnik, *Letter from Prison and Other Essays*; and István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination: Selected Writings*, ed. Károly Nagy (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> See Staffan Darnolf and Yonhok Choe, "Free and Fair Elections: What Do We Mean and How Can We Measure Them?" a paper presented at the 17<sup>th</sup> IPSA World Congress, Seoul, South Korea, August 18-21, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

components, and tended to somehow ignore the second. Because communism had based itself on the forced, involuntary participation of the masses, people grew distrustful of the value of political mobilization initiated at the top. They came to prefer, especially in Hungary, a liberal, “nonparticipatory” democracy. This tendency correlates with the high value of individual freedom understood mainly as “negative” freedom.

One reason the regime change was effected so smoothly was the participants’ insistence on peaceful means. *Nonviolence* was highly valued and taken seriously by all sides. One could venture to say that nonviolence was as highly prized as freedom. The participants’ commitment to nonviolence and their genuine desire to reach consensus through negotiations is one of the legacies of 1989.<sup>21</sup> In Poland, already in the Solidarity revolution of 1980-1981, the most remarkable feature of that social movement was its complete lack of violence. As one of the analysts of the Polish revolution observed,

it was exactly that historical contradiction in terms: peaceful revolution. Recall that ten million people were actively involved. Discontent erupted on an unprecedented scale. After eighteen months of defying the Communist system and with no Bastilles stormed, no guillotines erected, not a single pane of glass broken we triumphed. The rationale of non-violence was to be found later on in the history of all democratic oppositions of East Central Europe throughout the 1980s, leading to 1989. Partly it was pragmatic: the other side had all the weapons. But it was also ethical. It was a statement about how things should be. It was not only a peaceful revolution but also a compromise revolution.<sup>22</sup>

In Hungary, ordinary people had no wish whatsoever to repeat the bloody revolution of 1956, and their behavior was also influenced by the evolutionist strategy of the opposition. The communists, still in power, also wished to come through the crisis without resorting to violence. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, where the situation in 1989 was more dangerous and threatening violence, each side was anxiously anticipating the need to respond to the violence of the other. Fortunately for all, no one initiated hostilities.

Nonviolent conflict resolution was ensured by the then still living legacy of *self-limiting political actions*.<sup>23</sup> Even the so-called radical opposition was, in fact, quite moderate by comparison with other radical democratic opposition

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<sup>21</sup> See the minutes of the negotiations, especially *ARF*, vol. 2 (Budapest: Magvető, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Janusz Ziolkowski, “The Roots, Branches and Blossoms of Solidarnosc,” in *Spring in Winter: The 1989 Revolution*, ed. Gwyn Prins (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1990), 56.

formations in other transitions to democracy, especially in Latin America. This ideal of moderation was the result of the decade-long cooperation of the democratic opposition groups of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. In Hungary, the reason for the tremendous importance attached to nonviolence lies in the legacy of the violent revolution of 1956. But even in the countries of repeated mass mobilizations, none of the parties wanted to initiate violence, thus consciously kept their revolution “velvet.”

One of the most important lessons of 1989 was that it was possible to complete a “double transition” in a nonviolent way. It is truly amazing that in most countries of Central Europe,<sup>24</sup> unlike in the much-praised Spanish or Portuguese transitions, *nobody died* in political conflicts during the period of transition to democracy.

However, the so-called “triple transition,”<sup>25</sup> where the redefinition of political community and the clarification of national boundaries were also at stake, posed a more difficult task for those who favored nonviolent conflict resolution. The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia occurred via civil and secessionist wars and ethnic cleansings, establishing a negative example. The counter-example of the Czech and Slovak “velvet separation” shows that not only the problems to be solved matter, but also the sequence of political steps. In Czechoslovakia, democracy was first established, which created a respected framework for conflict resolution for both Czech and Slovak political leaders. Therefore, they could negotiate the terms of the separation. In Yugoslavia, parallel processes of democratization and the redefinition of the national political community were mixed up, which did not allow much room to use any mutually accepted procedural rules for peaceful separation. Rather, the situation helped nationalist leaders to abuse the notion of democratic political community (*demos*) by identifying it with “pure” ethnic community.

The legacy of 1980-1981 was a real starting point for the negotiation process not only in Poland but also, it was indeed significant for all Central Europe.<sup>26</sup> This peaceful, deliberative approach to building consensus and democracy through negotiations had been a long and difficult process. As a result, *consensual democracy* came to be seen as the ideal form of democracy. The negotiators consented to the continuation of transitional institutions beyond the period of transition, thereby allowing those institutions to become established as integral parts of the new democracy. This consensualism was later harshly criticized by some representatives of the new elite, who wanted

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<sup>23</sup> For the notion of “self-limiting revolutions,” see Ascherson, *The Polish August*, and Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution*.

<sup>24</sup> Here, I refer to Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland.

<sup>25</sup> Offe, *Varieties of Transition*.

<sup>26</sup> For the documents of the Gdansk negotiations, see Anthony Kemp-Welch, ed., *The Birth of Solidarity: The Gdansk Negotiations, 1980* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

a more sweeping change in the power relations of the elite. I do not mean to suggest that I consider a broad consensualism to be the ideal form of democracy. But this broadly defined notion of consensus was the, perhaps naïve, approach to democracy during the transition, influenced by many different thinkers in political philosophy and some of the theorists of civil society.<sup>27</sup>

Until 1989, the victory of democracy was envisioned as *a victory of civil society* over the state. A strong state was understood to be the sign of a weak democracy and vice versa.<sup>28</sup> The achievement of the Hungarian Opposition Roundtable was that it transformed the dreams of a united front, and a loose umbrella organization of opposition, into the reality of a newly formed political elite. Although it can be described as internally divided and conflict-ridden, the Opposition Roundtable also succeeded as a cooperative, consensus-oriented body of the opposition. Its identity was built around the value of consensus. Civil society was somehow identified with democratic social movements, which fight for real democracy against the existing institutions. Until 1989, many activists and some theorists believed that political parties and governmental institutions were inherently nondemocratic, therefore, they should be substituted by the unwritten, noninstitutionalized, self-evident, general consensus of civil society. This positive understanding of civil society existed as long as the party-state was intact. But it soon became clear that the old concept of a unified civil society belonged to past myths of antitotalitarian movements, rather than to the practice of a future democracy based on pluralism and divided interests.

The political visions of the opposition were based on the idea of the Central European countries' "*return to Europe*," and the new politicians of these new democracies optimistically assumed that "the West" would be eager to welcome the newcomers into the community of European democracies. Among the political forces in the post-communist regimes, some initially advocated the idea of a popular "third way," small-scale ownership capitalism between global communism and global capitalism, but subsequently abandoned it in favor of Konrad Adenauer's "social market economy" as the means to a safer, more gradual, and less painful transition. Liberal parties, on the other hand, influenced by contemporary neoliberalism, advocated a fully liberal market economy based on a noninterventionist state.<sup>29</sup> In the international arena, for a time, Finlandization served as a model for how Hungary might overcome its past, and the example of Austria's development was repeatedly raised as well. Both cases suggested a neutral military status, which was the best relationship

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<sup>27</sup> See for instance, Ziolkowski, "The Roots, Branches and Blossoms of Solidarnosc."

<sup>28</sup> Mihály Vajda, "East Central European Perspectives," in *Civil Society and the State*, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988), 333-360.

<sup>29</sup> On the linguistic battles of the transition, see András Bozóki, "The Rhetoric of Action: The Language of the Regime Change in Hungary," in *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*, ed. András Bozóki (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 1999), 263-283.

with the Western powers that post-communist countries could hope for at the time. In Hungary, successful “Finlandization” policies of Finland and the neutral status of Austria or Sweden were highly valued and often quoted. Only after 1990 did more and more politicians begin to raise the possibility of joining NATO.

In sum, nobody from Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia) questioned that these countries were part of Europe, both geographically and culturally. In their eyes, the return to the luckier peoples of the “European family” seemed to be a quick, self-evident, automatic process. They presupposed that Western states would value their long struggle for democracy and would be ready to pay the price of their reintegration. The Central European left regarded “Europeanization” as a process: a project of political and economic modernization. The political right, on the other hand, tended to argue that the major cultural characteristic of Europe was Christianity, which was shared by these countries. Consequently, “Europe” for them was not a program but a state, a regained status after the collapse of communism. The following table summarizes the tremendous tasks and problems faced by the transitions in Central Europe:

Table 2. The Tasks and Problems of the Transition in Central Europe

Terrain	Direction of change	Result
Political regime	Dictatorship to democracy	Completed
Economic regime	State socialism to capitalism	Completed
Political community	Building of the nation-state	Completed / controversial
Social transformation	Change of elites	Completed / controversial
Symbolic legitimacy	Moral justice and / or rule of law	Controversial
Welfare regime	Catching up to West European level	Lagging behind
Foreign policy	Reintegration to Europe	Completed

Naturally, “to complete” a process does not mean that it exists without conflicts or controversies today. It means only that there was an agreement for the completion of the historic turn itself, both in politics and the economy. At present, many social problems should be tackled, which stem from the very nature of democracy and capitalism. But these are not the problems of transition any longer; rather, they are conflicts inherent to the new regime.

## The Communist Legacy

The communist era represents different legacies for countries of Central Europe. It was most damaging for those which had had democratic traditions and flourishing market economies. Those countries suffered most which had inherited the most developed social structure from the pre-communist times. The damage was most clearly seen in the Czech part of former Czechoslovakia, and also in East Germany, in other words, in the most developed parts of the region. In these countries, communism systematically destroyed the functions of civil society and social relations as well as the prospects of a rational economy. In other countries of East Central Europe, the effects of communism were a bit more mixed. Here, totalitarianism destroyed social solidarity and civil society, but also destroyed the semi-feudal structures of the pre-communist regime.

There is a debate in the literature whether state socialism should be seen as a traditional or a modernizing regime. In the most modernized countries of Central Europe, communism meant a sort of refeudalization: the communist party hierarchy eliminated previous social relations and replaced the formerly existing horizontal relations with a vertical and politically dominated one. Communism also prevented people in Central and Eastern Europe from experiencing the emancipatory impact of the “quality of life revolution” of 1968, which occurred in many Western societies where it fundamentally transformed the way of thinking of young people. It is also important to note that communism was *not* a result of endogenous political development in Central Europe: it was forced on these societies from outside. Communism was not a home-grown system; it was implemented by the Red Army and by the Moscow-trained party apparatchiks, who followed and copied mechanically the Stalinist model. With the partial exception of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the communist movement never had a mass following in Central and East European societies.

However, in many ways, communism was a modernizing regime—especially, in the Soviet republics, but also, to some degree, in Central Europe. In the 1950s, it violently fostered urbanization and (an outdated model of) industrialization. It pushed millions of people to move from the countryside to urban centers. By opening up the labor market for women, for economic and ideological reasons, it officially pushed society toward the acknowledgement of some sort of female “emancipation.” Female suffrage was also generally acknowledged, although voting remained meaningless owed to the lack of political freedom. Finally, and most importantly, communism placed great emphasis on general elementary and high school education, and by doing so, it virtually eliminated illiteracy.

An interesting side-effect of communism was that the lack of achievement motifs in the formal economic and political spheres caused many people to turn either to the private sphere or to top performance in the nonpolitical and noneconomic spheres. Sports served that goal on a popular level, but this

situation also fostered the survival of traditionally high-prestige grand culture (classical music, arts, literature, philosophy) in Central Europe. For a period under communism, Central Europe was increasingly identified with high culture in the eyes of noncommunist intellectuals. As an escape from reality, Central Europe was interpreted by these intellectuals as the land of individual giants such as Bartók, Dvorák, Freud, Haydn, Kafka, Koestler, Lukács, Mahler, Mozart, Neumann, Schiele, Wittgenstein, and others. This idealized perception of the intellectuals helped the intellectuals themselves to maintain their own self-esteem and distinctive identity in order to preserve their relative autonomy under the communist regime.

It is not easy to summarize the pros and cons of communist legacy, because the communist system, despite its generally negative effects of uniformity, did not have the same impact on all the countries of Central Europe. It hurt the most developed countries and regions more extensively than underdeveloped nations. In general, communism had many more and deeper negative, devastating effects, than positive ones. Even its positive effects should be seen as only *relatively* positive ones, and only in retrospect, in the light of post-communist development. The following table, compiled by the author, summarizes these effects:

Table 3. The Communist Legacy: Pros and Cons in Retrospect

Positive	Negative
Supported social mobility	Oppressed freedom, trust, and civil society
Stressed equality	Created a culture of corruption and fear
Eliminated illiteracy	Double standards (formal vs. informal rules)
Urbanization	Minimized foreign travel and interaction
Available healthcare and housing	Dependency on the omnipotent party-state
Regional mobility inside the country (relatively developed, available public transportation)	Made Central Europe a satellite of the Soviet Union (lack of sovereignty)
Eliminated semi-feudal hierarchies	Created rather closed societies (xenophobia, racism, prejudices, cynicism, pessimism)
Women to enter the labor market	Women were “emancipated” as a workforce only Created new hierarchies based on loyalty and not on achievement (refeudalization)
Invisible unemployment (hidden inside the workplace)	Cynical attitudes about public good
Free (but quantitatively restricted) access to higher education	Oppressed or distorted national identity and citizenship Relativized ethical standards in society

The pros and cons of the communist legacy should not be considered only quantitatively. In fact, most of the positive sides had their own negative consequences for further development. At the end of the day, it is clear that the negative effects proved to be far more important, and that it would have been much better for these societies to have avoided the whole communist experience.

### **The Tradition of Institution-Building**

Following communism, countries of Central Europe had to reinvent and reconstruct examples of successful noncommunist institution-building from their history. The rebirth of political life after World War II offered a good reference point. In Hungary, bill 1946: I on the legal status of the President of the Republic has frequently been cited as a “little constitution” of immediate postwar times.<sup>30</sup> This legislation detailed the procedure to be followed in the election of the president, and by adopting this bill, the opposition aligned itself with the *parliamentary traditions* of Hungarian politics against any other presidential system or the tradition of monarchy. Metaphorically, the post-World War II rebuilding of the country was often referenced to compare it to the enormous task of rebuilding Hungary in the post-communist near future. Communism was frequently compared to the destruction of the war. Democratic politicians sometimes remarked bitterly that post-communist society lacked the enthusiasm and optimism of the post-World War II generation. In Hungary, the period of 1945-1946 was clearly seen as a new beginning, even though it had been halted by the communist coup. Also in 1945, postwar Hungarians founded a legacy of a peacefully established democratic regime, based on a noncommunist center-right umbrella party (the Independent Smallholders' Party). The establishment of such a legacy in Poland and Slovenia was impossible, since the communist takeover took place very rapidly after World War II.

Further back in history, in 1848, the “Springtime of the Peoples” provided the idea of national liberalism (which demonstrated that the more traditional values of “homeland” could be brought into harmony with the ideal of “progress”). In Central Europe, the nineteenth century represented the beginning of the era of nation-states, which were linked inseparably to institution-building. Therefore, interestingly, 1848 was a more important historical reference for peaceful institutional change than a revolution and nationwide fight for freedom and independence. Both legacies were seen as favoring institutional rearrangement rather than revolutionary upheaval.

It was an important achievement of the Hungarian Opposition Roundtable to establish the historical continuity of 1848 - 1945 - 1989, and thus to present

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<sup>30</sup> The text of the 1946:I bill can be found in *ARF*, vol. 3 (Budapest: Magvető, 1999), 645-648.

itself as the proper heir of all the peaceful, yet radical, democratic traditions of the history of Hungary.<sup>31</sup> Poland rediscovered the legacy of General Józef Piłsudski,<sup>32</sup> which was an inspiration to introduce a semi-presidential democracy later on. In Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, the newly elected president, often referred to an early “founding father,” Tomas G. Masaryk.<sup>33</sup> However, the Slovaks later made clear that, for them, the tradition of Czechoslovakia did not represent an attractive alternative to independence. While the democratic opposition led by Havel was relatively influential in Bohemia, its activities were far less known in the Slovak part of the country. Havel was not a “moral hero” for most Slovaks, who were searching for an alternative historical legacy to represent both democracy and independence. (That search proved to be problematic, since the only independent Slovak state to exist in modern history had been, in fact, a puppet state of the Nazis.)

Other countries, liberated from the Soviet Union in 1990-1991, tried to dig deeper into the early twentieth century to reconstruct national, liberal, and/or democratic traditions from their pre-Soviet past. Latvia, for instance, reinstalled its 1922 constitution. In Hungary, despite some right-wing governmental efforts to revitalize the Horthy era (1919-1944) and to make it somehow more respected, past nostalgia embraced pre-World War I Austria-Hungary, and the progressive legacies of the dualist monarchy (as the era of economic development, constitutional liberalism, and early federalism). These elements gave Jürgen Habermas the idea to claim that these transitions were, in fact, “rectifying revolutions” (*nachholende revolution*), which tried to recover continuities and to reconnect present societies to the broken, pre-communist past.

## Elite Change and Democratic Transition

As shown in table 2, the tasks of transition from communist rule to democracy were as follows: (1) political regime change to democracy; (2) transition to capitalism in the economy; (3) definition of the boundaries of the political community (nation-state)<sup>34</sup>; (4) completion of the change of the elite<sup>35</sup>; (5)

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<sup>31</sup> See especially the contributions of József Antall in the August 29, 1989 meeting of the Opposition Roundtable. See: János Kis, “1989: A víg esztendő” [The merry year] *Beszélő* 4, no.10 (1999): 22-46. For the documents, see: *ARF*, vol. 3 (Budapest: Magvető, 1999), 520-653.

<sup>32</sup> See Andrzej Garlicki, *Józef Piłsudski, 1867-1935* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Edward P. Newman, *Masaryk* (London, Dublin: Champion Press, 1960).

<sup>34</sup> On this problem, see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); János Kis, “Beyond the Nation State,” *Social Research* 63, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 190-245; and Stefan Auer, “Nationalism in Central Europe: A Threat or Chance for the Emerging Liberal Democratic Order?” *East European Politics and Societies* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 213-245.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Iván Szelényi and Szonja Szelényi, “Circulation or Reproduction of Elites during the Postcommunist Transformation of Eastern Europe,” *Theory and Society* 24, no. 5 (October 1995): 615-638.

initiation of change in the moral-normative standards of society by effecting some sort of “historical justice”; and finally, (6) shift of the focus of foreign policy to the return to “Europe.”<sup>36</sup>

While participants in the transitions of 1989-1990 were mainly concerned with tasks 1 and 2, and they also had to face, in some countries, task 3, later on, it became clear that people of the transition societies felt that these changes were incomplete. It was the right-wing political forces that aimed to accelerate the process of elite change and historical justice. This created a clash between left and right, in which the left preferred to stick to the norms of rule of law, while the right wanted to suspend rule of law for a while, until historical justice had been completed. The idea of democratic society then had to accommodate the idea of just society. While for the left fair procedures were seen as the soul of rule of law, for the right, democracy was understood as the realization of just society.

Critics of negotiated transitions repeatedly point out that former communists dominated the public and commercial media and the privatization processes, through which they could transfer public moneys into (their) private hands. This was an arresting thought: to picture the roundtable talks as the safety-net whereby communists could perpetuate themselves into the future. Polish President Lech Walesa used similar arguments many times between 1990 and 1995 to undermine the credentials of the roundtable elites. This line of argument often targeted the intellectuals who played a vital role in the process of nonviolent transition.<sup>37</sup> True, the political negotiations proved to be far more important than the talks about the economy. Participants were interested, first and foremost, in bringing about the fundamental institutional changes necessary for a new democracy. They did not enter into extensive discussions about privatization and issues of economic transformation, because they simply did not feel entitled or empowered by the people to discuss issues of economic policy. At the very beginning of the talks, the Hungarian Opposition Roundtable resisted rewriting the constitution. Its members argued that this was something that should be done in the future by the freely elected parliament and the new government.

Economic change was to prove more challenging than political change, especially, given that the negotiators of the opposition were not at all certain whether they should control privatization at all. In Hungary, non-communist participants of the transition finally acceded to spontaneous transformation, although they had always spoken against it. They thought that the best way

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Csaba Békés, “Back to Europe: The International Background of the Political Transition in Hungary, 1988-90,” in *The Roundtable Talks of 1989*, ed. András Bozóki (Budapest: CEU Press, 2002), 237-272.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. András Bozóki, “Intellectuals in a New Democracy: The Democratic Charter in Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 173-213.

to arrive at capitalism would be to start with socialist market societies. But, if they were in favor of capitalism, they could not credibly oppose spontaneous privatization. They interpreted this spontaneous privatization as a form of original capital accumulation, the “hardware” of capitalism. They opposed extensive replacement of the elite in order not to lose experts. The outgoing communist technocratic elite already had secured its role in the economic transformation and enacted privatization legislation prior to the trilateral talks in June 1989. New laws dealing with the future of state-owned enterprises and economic transformation had been passed in 1988 or early 1989. Therefore, these topics were not at issue at the roundtable talks. The economic committees found themselves in a vacuum at the negotiations. In the end, it was left to some *ad hoc* expert committees to come up with concrete recommendations.

In analyzing the outcome of the roundtable-type revolutions,<sup>38</sup> one can say that the benefits were far more significant than the costs. The costs have been mainly psychological, observable in public morale: people feel that something was done without their participation, and that the economic transformation and the redistribution of wealth were effected without democratic controls. They feel that they have been robbed somehow by the emerging Big Business interests. The managers and the technocratic elite—all those who were already co-opted by the elite in the 1980s—are viewed as the ultimate winners from the transformation. Ordinary people tend to think that they were the victims of communism before the regime change, only to become the victims of globalization after it. The old regime had collapsed and the institutions, created in the negotiations of 1989, survived. Groups of the elite, the people, mental outlooks, practices, and popular perceptions of change all changed much more slowly. The “end” was clear, while the “beginning” remained much more complex, multifaceted, controversial, partly done, and endlessly debated.

## **The End of Post-Communism**

Ten countries joined the European Union on May 1, 2004. Among them were the Visegrád countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. On the day of the accession, all four countries had a center-left government in power. Only a day later, Leszek Miller, the Polish premier, was forced to resign. His resignation was followed by that of the Czech social democrat prime minister, Vladimír Špidla, in June. In August, that very same summer, the head of the center-left government of Hungary, Péter Medgyessy, was also forced to resign unexpectedly.

The governing coalitions did not fail, but their leaders did. “Too weak,”

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Andrew Arato, “The Roundtables, Democratic Institutions and the Problem of Justice,” in *The Roundtable Talks of 1989: The Genesis of Hungarian Democracy*, ed. András Bozóki (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2002), 223-235.

“lacks energy,” “cannot communicate effectively, either with the supporting coalition parties, or with the people”—these were some of the accusations against every one of them. It appeared that the initial successes of the new governments’ materialist-redistributive politics faded away quickly in the memory of the people. Collective memory can be recalled only if the memory experienced fits into the scheme of a communally understood and interpreted narrative, that is, if it can be stored in the minds of the citizens as a coherent story, or a “folk tale.” Although none of the four countries was in a bad economic state, the political actors and observers sensed that there was a crisis in leadership. They felt that leadership was in a way absent, because governance took an *ad hoc* character and political decisions did not constitute any part of a more or less coherent narrative. No one knew what was happening for what reasons. Political strategy was replaced by a merely reactive type of communication. Many felt that these governments would not be able to articulate why they were governing, in other words, what ideas and principles motivated their ambition. As long as the political right was mobilizing crowds on the streets, a message of social peace sufficed. As soon as the opposition calmed down, however, the slogans of peace and normalcy proved to be lacking for the platform of the political left. Many had the impression, therefore, that following a promising start, matters had taken a turn for the worse.

Why is it that a “turn for the worse” happened to coincide with one of the most significant, historically important political steps that these Central European countries had ever taken? This was the step that these nations had wanted for so long: the true chance to catch up, accession to the richer and more fortunate half of Europe, and membership in the “European club” from which they had been excluded for decades, due to the Iron Curtain and the Soviet rule. National consensus supported European accession almost everywhere. It appeared that further arguments for accession were not needed, and it seemed logical that joining with Western Europe was for the common good. History has but few examples of such a rapid breakthrough of countries from the periphery to the center of power.<sup>39</sup> Not all nations receive such an opportunity as did these countries of Central Europe. Was it by accident that all three prime ministers were replaced by younger successors, who all had a different outlook from their predecessors? Or, can we find some regularity behind these changes of premiers that pointed beyond the personal character of these individuals?

The peoples of Central Europe expected the following achievements by the new political elite and those in charge of the regime change: first, they wanted democracy, second, they wanted a market economy, third, they wanted a clearly demarcated political community and national identity, and fourth, they wanted their countries to “join Europe.” Each wish contained one implicit desire: the desire for prosperity. These societies viewed being locked behind

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<sup>39</sup> Such examples include Spain, South Korea, Portugal, Finland, and Ireland.

the Iron Curtain against their will as the utmost injustice that history had done to them—as indeed was the case. Hungarians found it “natural” to demand that their living standards were on a level with those of Austrians. The Polish and the Czechs believed the same with regard to the Germans.

At the time of changing regimes, Hungarians already associated democracy with prosperity in their minds. The people wanted democracy simply because they saw the wealth of democratic countries. It seemed logical that those who have democracy prosper. The term “capitalism” was viewed with disdain, but the phrase “well-functioning market economy” sounded convincing. It was generally perceived that a working market economy was needed in order to usher in prosperity. Redefining one’s national identity and one’s political community was important—especially, in the newly emerged post-communist nation states—because it had to be clearly defined who could take part in the new prosperity as a legitimate member of the “sovereign people.”

As long as the expectations of the society were matched with international expectations from the outside, and as long as these expectations could be answered by formal, institutional arrangements, the technocratic and pragmatic elite of the Polish and Hungarian communist successor parties struck a note of accomplishment with their manager-style modernization. Political scientists observed and acknowledged the proficiency with which the Polish and Hungarian successor parties completed the democratic turnover after 1989, demonstrated a readiness to reform, and handled the crisis of the 1990s. It was no wonder: the leaders of these parties—those politicians who were socialized in the post-Marxist, anti-ideological reform period—preferred to see themselves as “neutral experts,” standing against all ideologies. These pragmatic reformers abhorred political ideas, as people recalled the bitter taste of Marxism-Leninism. Moreover, wherever they looked, they saw chaos and political crisis. First and foremost, they had to prove that they were able to think independently from the ideological outlook of the previous communist generation. They had to prove that they were able to identify a problem for what it was, without all the ideological dressing, and that they were able to solve, or at least to handle, emerging issues. The challenge of this generation was to do “crisis management” in the narrow space between confined political opportunities and “economic rationality.” While their predecessors were bound by their ideological thinking, the reformers were able to shed this yoke. Their mission was to see the light at the end of the tunnel at a time when the great majority was still stumbling in darkness. They were to be the light to their nations by guiding the people, like Moses, to the promised land of economic rationality.

There was not one member in the party who still believed in communism. Marxism was but an empty theoretical skeleton. It was an unclear concept of progress with a fuzzy, linear understanding of history, with no world-shaking contents attached to it. The general opinion following the years of the political transitions was that only the specific analysis of a specific situation, only

conscientious management and the handling of the various crises, mattered, nothing else. So, the flower of modernization was placed into an empty vase. The post-communist political elite wanted a normal, consensual world, free of ideologies. Since the desired consensus happened to be called the “Washington consensus” at the time, it was natural for these political managers to accept the international line of neoliberal discourse. They strove to attract capital, thinking that it would bring about a working society. As far as a working democracy was concerned, it would be available to those who bothered to vote. The chronic patients of the transformation were injected with capital, while the labor force was tempered to be competitive by a crash diet and low wages.

Such politics could continue as long as only external obstacles had to be eluded in the democratization. It could continue as long as one was not required to articulate the identity of the political left. While for almost a decade the political right was occupied with rebuilding its base, it was the task of “the Left” to manage the crises, to conduct the politics of privatization so far left unfinished by the rightist governments, and to show a friendly face toward the West.

### **A New Wave of Populism?**

While in power between 1998 and 2002, the Hungarian New Right stepped on stage, testing its newly gained strength by a provocative and confrontational behavior. It yearned impatiently to legitimize its new, proud, and very distinct identity by any means. In its adolescent eagerness, however, it went too far. The fervor of its apostles divided the country into the decadent powers of the failed communist past and the bulging forces of the rising national future. No wonder that the society turned back to the well-known “old timers,” the political left—first in Poland in 2001, then in Hungary in the following year. The fright of the masses was resolved by the leftist electoral victory. The ruling sentiment was that the time of symbolic politics was over, and that it was a laughable residue of the past. To gain success, one simply had to achieve trustworthy accomplishments.

The historical overview of Central European politics in the past years shows, however, that for the political left to be successful, more was needed than remaining a simple “party of peace.” The coalition of the center-left needed more than empty-vessel parties, which could be filled with hot or cold liquid at a whim. The political right had recreated its identity; it was the turn of the other side to do the same, although after a long delay.

The concept of “welfare regime change,” introduced by then Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy of Hungary, was, for a while, appropriate for the purposes of identifying a very serious social problem and confronting the greatest political debt of the new system. Democracy has no value for the people as long as a general poverty prevails over them. There is no value in the nation if—as the Hungarian writer Dezső Szabó wrote ninety years ago—“the

national anthem is sung on empty stomachs”; there is no value in the European Union if it is a club only for the wealthy. It was no accident that, for both the referendum held about the EU accession in 2003 and the European Parliament elections in 2004, the turnout was surprisingly low in Central Europe.<sup>40</sup> The people did not think that these issues concerned them, at least not yet. Not that they opposed them; they gave their passive support instead. Nationalist and communist organizations gained more places in the European elections, while the social-democratic parties of the new EU member countries suffered a defeat almost everywhere. Having put the unresolved welfare question into the spotlight, it became obvious that one government, or one parliamentary cycle, was not enough to complete a change in welfare politics. There was no nation or political force that could rationally expect for its fate to take a positive turn without making an effort to contribute. Much depended on how political elites and the citizens of Central European countries evaluated their strengths and weaknesses, and how they managed those.

The inability to solve the problem on a short term led to the crisis of the political forces so far labeled only as “the Left” by 2004. Although in the 1990s they were successful in crisis management, new issues emerged that could not be solved the same old way, by following the old schemes. Increasingly, the correct reaction required strategic thinking, ability for innovation, and commitment to political values. The new issues were not about resolving technical tasks, crisis management, or modernization problems, but about the political contents of social democracy. Such values were not to be articulated by experts instead of politicians anymore. “Expertise” was less relevant when it came to choosing political values. Value-less elitist politics could only provoke a new wave of populism.

What happened in Central Europe in 2004 and after was the connection of the region to the present concerns of the Western world. The long transition was over; the new problems of the region were not “transitional” matters anymore. Just as neither Germany nor Italy was called a post-fascist country in 1965, twenty years after the end of World War II, so Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have shed the title of a post-communist state by now, some twenty years after the regime change. As far as politics and the economy are concerned, these states are fully transformed, both structurally and institutionally. One should not overemphasize the differences between old and new democracies anymore, setting up a contrast between the two. True, Central European traditions have been different, but current problems are quite similar. These matters of concern can be approached with the tools of a “quality test” by examining the functioning of the democratic institutions, or with the tools

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<sup>40</sup> András Bozóki and Gergely Karácsony, “Membership without Belonging? Hungary into the European Union: A Historic Step Passively Approved,” *Central European Political Science Review* 4, no. 13 (Fall 2003): 21-41.

of democratic criticism, but no longer by means of the mainstream transition approach. The question is not whether “democratic transition” is at a halt in Russia, but what type of autocratic system is developing there. A study of the nature of democracy in Estonia, Italy, Malta, or the United States is just as legitimate as asking how democratization is coming about, say, in the Balkan states.

There are many types of capitalism, and several forms of democracy. It appears that the opportunities for the sort of externally driven, follower, or “catch up from behind” type of Central European technocratic politicking, which gains its identity solely from external sources and which denies the autonomy and the social context of politics, have been exhausted. The post-communist era has come to an end, but the potential for populist politics have survived. Currently, it features a form of “post-accession depression” due to societal divide.

## Appendix

**Table A1. Central European Democracies: Political, Social, Demographic, and Economic Conditions (2006-2008)**

	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia
Freedom House Index (political rights, civil liberties) (Scale: 1=most free; 7=least free).	Free (1, 2)	Free (1, 1)	Free (1, 1)	Free (1, 1)	Free (2, 2)	Free (1, 1)	Free (1, 1)
Democracy	Parliamentary	Pure parliamentary	Pure parliamentary	Parliamentary	Rather semi-presidential	Parliamentary	Parliamentary
President elected by	The people	Parliament	Parliament	The people	The people	The people	The people
Ex-communist party	Reformed	Fragmented	Reformed	Fragmented	Fragmented	Fragmented	Reformed
Population (millions)	7.3	10.2	9.9	38.5	22.5	5.5	2.0
Ethnic composition	Divided	Homogeneous	Homogeneous	Homogeneous	Divided	Divided	Homogeneous
Life expectancy (years)	72.83	76.62	73.18	75.41	72.18	75.17	76.73
Adult literacy rate (%; adult population)	98.2	99	99.4	98.2	97.3	99.6	99.7
Human Development Index	High (.827)	High (.891)	High (.874)	High (.870)	High (.813)	High (.863)	High (.917)
GDP per Capita (PPP) (USD)	10,000	20,300	15,700	13,300	11,100	17,000	22,000
In % of the average of EU countries (%)	38	83	63	54	41	69	89
Inflation (2007) (%)	7.6	2.8	7.9	7.6	4.8	2.8	3.6
Unemployment (%)	7.7	6.6	7.3	7.7	4.1	8.4	4.8
FDI (2005) (million USD)	2,967.0	10,131.4	5,113.7	6,578.0	6,512.3	N/A	88.3

Sources: "Comparative Scores for All Countries from 1973 to 2008," 2008, *Freedom House*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/FIWAIScores.xls> (accessed September 17, 2008); "Human Development Report, 2007/2008," 2007 (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan), *United Nations Development Program*, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_20072008\\_EN\\_Complete.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_EN_Complete.pdf) (accessed September 17, 2008); *The World Fact Book*, 2008, *Central Intelligence Agency*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html> (accessed September 17, 2008); and EuroStat, *World Development Indicators, 2007*, CD-Rom (Washington, DC: IBRD, World Bank, 2007).

Table A2. Inflation %

	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia
1990	23.8	N/A	29.0	555.4	N/A	N/A	N/A
1991	338.5	N/A	34.2	76.7	230.6	N/A	N/A
1992	91.3	N/A	23.0	45.3	211.2	N/A	N/A
1993	72.9	N/A	22.5	36.9	255.2	N/A	32.9
1994	96.1	10.0	18.9	33.3	136.8	13.4	32.9
1995	62.1	9.2	28.3	28.1	32.2	9.9	13.5
1996	121.6	8.8	23.6	19.8	38.8	5.8	9.8
1997	1,058.4	8.6	18.3	15.1	154.8	6.1	8.4
1998	18.7	10.6	14.2	11.7	59.1	6.7	7.9
1999	2.6	2.1	10	7.3	45.8	10.6	6.2
2000	10.3	3.9	9.8	10.1	45.7	12.0	8.9
2001	7.4	4.7	9.2	5.5	34.5	7.3	8.4
2002	5.8	1.8	5.3	1.9	22.5	3.3	7.5
2003	2.2	0.1	4.7	0.8	15.3	8.6	5.6
2004	6.4	2.8	6.8	3.6	11.9	7.6	3.6
2005	5.0	1.9	3.6	2.1	9.0	2.7	2.5

Table A3. Unemployment %

	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia
1990	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1991	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1992	N/A	N/A	9.9	13.3	N/A	N/A	N/A
1993	21.4	4.3	12.1	14.0	N/A	N/A	10.0
1994	20.0	4.3	10.8	14.4	8.2	13.7	9.1
1995	15.7	4.0	10.2	13.3	8.0	13.1	7.4
1996	13.5	3.9	9.9	12.4	6.7	11.3	7.3
1997	13.7	4.8	8.7	11.2	6.0	11.9	7.1
1998	12.2	6.5	7.8	10.7	6.3	12.6	7.6
1999	14.1	8.7	7.0	12.5	6.8	16.4	7.4
2000	16.3	8.8	6.4	16.1	7.1	18.8	7.2
2001	19.4	8.1	5.7	18.2	6.6	19.3	5.9
2002	17.6	7.3	5.8	19.9	8.4	18.6	5.9
2003	13.7	7.8	5.9	19.6	7.0	17.5	6.6
2004	12.1	8.3	6.1	19.0	8.0	18.1	6.1

Table A4. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Net Inflow (million USD)

	Bulgaria	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia
1990	4.0	N/A	N/A	89.0	18.0	N/A	N/A
1991	55.9	N/A	1,462.1	298.0	37.0	N/A	N/A
1992	41.5	N/A	1,479.0	665.0	73.0	N/A	112.8
1993	40.0	564.4	2,339.0	1,697.0	87.0	138.2	111.3
1994	105.4	761.9	1,095.1	1,846.0	341.0	256.0	129.5
1995	98.4	2,531.0	4,745.0	3,617.0	417.0	226.0	160.5
1996	137.5	1,280.6	3,292.8	4,445.0	263.0	303.2	166.5
1997	506.5	1,258.8	3,705.9	4,863.0	1,224.0	78.5	303.3
1998	537.2	3,574.8	3,065.2	6,049.0	2,040.0	417.3	221.0
1999	801.7	6,222.6	3,060.2	7,239.0	1,025.0	730.4	58.9
2000	998.2	4,944.4	2,181.8	9,327.0	1,048.0	2,031.0	70.6
2001	803.3	5,476.0	3,579.6	5,804.0	1,174.0	N/A	370.5
2002	876.3	8,285.2	2,730.7	3,901.0	1,128.0	4,101.0	1,508.0
2003	2,070.3	1,813.3	516.2	4,284.0	1,805.0	535.7	174.1
2004	2,870.3	3,940.3	3,547.0	12,097.0	6,373.0	N/A	281.1
2005	2,967.0	10,131.4	5,113.7	6,578.0	6,512.3	N/A	88.3

