

# Revolutions of 1989 in Central Europe

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# 1989 revolutions in Central Europe

- 1980 Solidarity movement
- 1981-1983 Martial Law in Poland
- 1988 Easing of travel restriction in Hungary
- 1988 (December) Hungarian PM declares market economy the only way forward
- 1989 (May) destruction of wired border fence in Hungary
- 1989 (June 4) First semi-democratic elections in Poland
- 1989 (October) Hungarian Communist party renamed and reformed itself, allowed for multi-party system
- 1989 (November 9) Fall of Berlin Wall
- 1989 (November 17) Beginning of Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia
  - Nov 24: Leadership stepped down
  - Nov 27: General strike for two hours
  - Nov 28: dismantle of one-party state
  - Dec 29: Havel elected the president by the parliament
- 1990 (May) Elections in Hungary
- 1990 (June) Elections in Czechoslovakia
- 1991 Elections in Poland

# Communism in crisis

- Longstanding crisis in Communist block.
- General dissatisfaction with the living conditions.
- Rotten political system; corruption; gray and black economy.
- Withdraw of Soviet support from local communist parties (Gorbachev's change of foreign policy) and policies of Glasnost and Perestroika.
- Rise of nationalism
- Reform was discussed inside the communist parties but not the change of the regime as a whole
- Dissidents and opposition groups criticized mainly the communist monopoly; liberal democracy was not the first choice; third way – best features of capitalist and socialist economies
- **HOWEVER**, the fall of communism was totally unexpected → most actors unprepared!

# Communism in crisis

- Poland – massive dissatisfaction with economic conditions, bottom up social movements (Solidarity)
- Hungary – easing of the regime in 1980s (Gulash communism), developing contacts with the West, experimenting, organization of political opposition
- Czechoslovakia – general antipathy but no massive movements, only intellectual and cultural elites organized as (peaceful) apolitical dissent

# Collapse of Communism

- As a reaction to reform 'initiatives' in Soviet Union, similar efforts occurred at the end of 1980s in Poland and Hungary.
  - Solidarity movement in Poland survived the military suppression from 1981 and started to demand basic political and civil rights (again).
  - Followers of reform-oriented Hungarian communist Janos Kadar called for genuine transformation and political liberalization.
- The rest of the region stood more or less still (Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, East Germany).
- The process surprisingly peaceful (exceptions of Romania and then Yugoslavia)

# Poland I.

- A wave of strikes hit Poland in April, May and August 1988.
- Workers demanded the re-legalisation of Solidarity.
- Number of factories and mines went on strike. The country was paralyzed.
- Communist leaders finally agreed to meet Lech Walesa and Solidarity to ease the situation.
- Major breakthrough in January 1989: Communist party supported formal negotiations with Solidarity leading to its future legalisation.

# Poland II.

- April 1989: signing of Round Table Agreement – legalisation of Solidarity and plans for partly free parliamentary election later that year.
- June 1989: Solidarity sensationally won the election. Its candidates got all the allocated seats in Sejm (lower house) and 99 out of 100 seats in Senate (upper house).
- Many communist candidates failed to pass the minimum votes threshold required to take the reserved seats.
- August 1989: Long time coalition partners (United People's Party and Democratic Party), broke their ties with Communists and announced their support for Solidarity.



# Hungary I.

- Hungary had achieved some lasting economic reforms and limited political liberalization during the 1980s.
- Following the changes, the process was further accelerated in the 1988 and 1989.
- January 1989: so-called "democracy package" was adopted (e.g. freedom of association, assembly, and press; trade union pluralism; new electoral law).
- Reinterpretation of history: 1956 rebellion was a popular uprising not a foreign-initiated counterrevolution.

# Hungary II.

- March 1989: demonstrations during the National Day pushed the regimes to negotiations with non-Communist parties.
- April 1989: Round Table talks.
- May 1989: Hungary began dismantling its 150 mile long border fence with Austria.
- June 1989: rehabilitation of Prime Minister Imre Nagy (hanged for treason; revolution in 1956).
- September 1989: New constitution; call for free election.

# Czechoslovakia: Velvet Revolution I.

- Opposition was not organized; however, galvanized by the events in the neighbourhood (Poland; Hungary; GDR) and worldwide (Tiananmen Square, China).
- un-readiness of all actors and strategies
- Change: features of *pact* and *reform*
- ***liberalization*** and ***democratization*** was parallel

# Czechoslovakia: Velvet Revolution II.

- The trigger was the student demonstration on November 17, 1989; police violently struck against the peaceful protesters (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of a student, Jan Opletal, at the hands of the Nazis).
- Rumour: death of student
- Students initiated protest strike (later joined by actors and artists)
- November 19, 1989 – founded *Civic forum* (broad civic movement); Slovakia: *Public against violence*.
- Demonstrations and protests in Prague and other cities all around the country.

# Czechoslovakia: Velvet Revolution III.

- Call for the step down of communist leaders.
- Civic Forum did not envision taking power.
- However, no partner for the dialogue; CP was paralyzed (no leadership at all).
- CP lost support of its militia; media; satellite parties.
- Army was subordinated to CP; did not initiate move on its own (Minister of defense advised to use army in a *Chinese Scenario*).



# Czechoslovakia: Velvet Revolution IV.

- First step made by PM of federal government – beginning of talks with CF
- CF did not want to govern rather wished legal and constitutional continuity – oversaw the process of change (committees; cancellation of the leading role of CP in the society).
- New (transitional) government of 'National understanding' (formerly 15+5; then CP did not have majority and CF nominated its own executives). The main goal: leadership for the country until the first democratic election in 1990.
- New president: Vaclav Havel (elected by acclamation)

# Important Patterns

- Transformation in the CEE belongs to the same historical democratization wave as Latin America and South Europe – the main contextual features were however different.
  - Most of the regimes belonged to (post)totalitarian branch of non-democratic regimes (LA and Iberia – mostly authoritative regimes).
  - Economies were predominantly state-controlled (contrast: economic freedoms in Latin America and Iberia).
  - Ethnic division and multi-national states.

# Post-1989 development

- 1991: Visegrad Group first meeting
- 1992-1993: Dissolution of Czechoslovakia – Velvet Divorce
- 1994-1998: Slovakia under Meciar (semi-authoritarian period)
- 1995: Czech Republic joins OECD as the first V4 country (Hungary and Poland 1996, Slovakia 2000)
- 1997: Czech Republic experiences a financial crisis
- 1999: Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary enter NATO
- 2004: V4 enters the EU, Slovakia joins NATO
- 2007: Slovak GDP grows 10 % annually → „Tatra Tiger“
- 2009: Slovakia adopts EUR
- 2012: Robert Fico (Smer) Primer Minister of Slovakia (2nd term)
- 2010: Viktor Orban Prime Minister of Hungary (2nd term)
- 2015: Law and Justice wins Polish elections

# Questions

- Similarities and differences between Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia?
- Role of Pope in Poland and elsewhere?
- Was 1989 a revolution?
- What to do with former communists?
- Major issues after 1989?

# Current issues in the region

- Economy
  - Growth slowed down after 2008
  - Investments from the Western Europe and the US were withdrawn
- Politics
  - Rise of populism
  - Corruption
- Security
  - Ukraine crisis and relations with Russia
  - Energy security