

Modes of Extrication from Communism

Post-Communist Politics POLb1141

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Why Study the Ways Communism Collapsed

- the past always impacts subsequent development, the question is how?
- what past? → post-communist countries have several pasts
- **the pre-communist period:** had shaped the extent to which their political and legal traditions were compatible with the model of “really-existing socialism”
- **the communist period:** shaped the configurations of the communist incumbents and the forms (or absence) of anti-communist opposition, including the level of repressions, the character of economic relations, etc.
- **transition from communism:** what decisions were made during the breakdown of communism and what legacies they produced for the subsequent period

Structure vs Agency

- pre-communist times shaped the type of communism and its characteristics, which in turn shaped the ways communism ended
- none of it was pre-determined: a considerable importance of individual decisions of political leaders
- structure vs agency: people make decisions under conditions that they do not fully control
- critical juncture and path dependence?
- there may be moments/time points when decisions made by political elites have far-reaching consequences regardless of the context in which they take place (times of a greater autonomy of the elites)

Similarities and Differences across the Region

- on the one hand, a large degree of diversity in terms of the degree of industrialization, urbanization, social distance from Russia/Soviet Union, or legal traditions at the time of the rise of communism
- on the other hand, it is no coincidence that the communist regimes ended around the same time
- the sharing of institutional, ideological economic and social elements (the 'legacy of communism')

Similarities and Differences across the Region

- 1) huge economic inefficiency
- 2) collapse of ideological legitimacy (regime legitimacy)
- 3) inability to adapt to changing conditions (lack of a mechanism to gather information about the moods and preferences)
- the manifestations of these crises and the regime's response to them differed in each communist country

Collapse of Communism in Comparative Perspective

- 1) there was no counter-elite facing the communist governments that would act as a representative of the transitional interests (unlike many previous instances of regime change, across time and space)
- 2) agreements and decisions made in a short historical moment (when the regime change took place) may have a causal influence on the speed and direction of later policy choices
- 3) a unique consequence of transition was the breakup of several states (GDR, Czechoslovakia)

Variety of Post-Totalitarian Regimes

- all communist regimes shared the common experience of totalitarianism, but entered the pre-transitional period already in the **post-totalitarian** phase
- not a separate type of authoritarian regime, but derived from the previous existence of a totalitarian regime and representing its **downgraded** phase
- in none of the basic dimensions (pluralism, ideology, mobilisation and leadership) did the regime meet the characteristics of totalitarianism

The Ends of Communism: Negotiation, Collapse and Control

- similarities of the transition pathways:
- **negotiation between the regime and the opposition:** Poland and Hungary
- **collapse of the regime:** Czechoslovakia and East Germany
- **incumbent control over the regime demise:** Romania and Bulgaria (Albania)

Negotiation: Poland and Hungary

- All key conditions were met for a negotiated transition to begin:
 1. Soft-liners within both the opposition and regime held significant influence.
 2. Both groups of soft-liners believed that compromise was the most desirable outcome.
 3. Soft-liners successfully dominated over hard-liners.
- Unlike in Poland, the Hungarian roundtable talks directly led to free and fair parliamentary elections

Polish Communist Regime, 1947-1989

- Linz and Stepan argue that the regime in Poland never met all the defining characteristics of totalitarianism
- 1. limited social pluralism
- 2. agriculture
- 3. fundamental transformation of the party leadership

Pacted Transition in Poland

- 1988: Mass protests against the regime were organized by the underground Solidarity movement.
- Jaruzelski feared that Solidarity would boycott the elections planned for 1989.
- He sought Solidarity's support for urgently needed economic reforms.
- Solidarity aimed to legalize its activities and end the regime's repression of its activists.
- Informal talks, mediated by the Catholic Church, began in the summer of 1988.

Results of the Roundtable Negotiations

- Solidarity was legalized and allowed to participate in the 1989 elections, with 35% of parliamentary seats open for contestation.
- A new presidential post, endowed with considerable powers, was created (to be elected by the parliament).
- A second chamber, the Senate, was established, with all 100 seats open for free contestation.
- The Communists believed they would control a parliamentary majority and the presidency; however, they lost nearly all contested seats and their majority in parliament.
- In 1989, the first non-Communist administration in Central and Eastern Europe since 1945 was sworn in, led by Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki.
- The first fully free elections were held only in 1991.

Hungary under the Communist Rule

- After the suppression of the 1956 uprising, a period of "goulash communism" followed.
- The Communist Party became increasingly heterogeneous, leading to the emergence of an intra-party alternative:
- Moderate communist leaders with weaker ties to strict communist ideology (reformists, moderates, etc.).
- A typical example was Miklós Németh, a trained economist who spent a year at Harvard in the 1980s and became Prime Minister of Hungary in 1988.
- He resigned from the party in 1989, and after the free elections of 1990, he became a vice president at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Hungarian Roundtable Talks

- Unlike its Polish counterpart, the Hungarian opposition was divided into several factions and proto-parties:
- The Hungarian Democratic Forum: a moderate populist initiative by the rural intelligentsia with ties to reformist Communists.
- Emerging traditional non-Communist parties, such as the Smallholders and Christian Democrats.
- The Union of Free Democrats: an urban-based liberal party, and Fidesz: a radical liberal party of young students.
- Together, these groups formed an opposition roundtable and accepted an invitation to join talks with the Communist Party in March 1989.

Hungarian Roundtable Talks

- Motivated by a desire to avoid the bloodshed of 1956, there was a tacit agreement to transition to multiparty competition.
- The Communists favored a directly elected, powerful presidency and a majoritarian electoral system, while the opposition preferred a weak president elected by parliament after the parliamentary elections and a proportional electoral system.
- The outcome was a compromise: a mixed electoral system, a weak presidency, and a powerful constitutional court.
- The liberal opposition rejected the agreement and initiated a referendum, which narrowly decided that the presidential election would take place only after the parliamentary elections.

Collapse: Czechoslovakia and East Germany

- 1989: The ruling elite was unable to negotiate the terms of its exit from power.
- This was due to the rigidity and paralysis of the Communist Party, which was unable to make decisions or respond to rapidly evolving events.
- Mid-level cadres in the coercive apparatus (militias, police, army) abandoned the regime, having lost belief in its legitimacy.
- Czechoslovakia: A "frozen" post-totalitarian regime.
- The regime collapsed after ten days of mass protests and negotiations between the newly emerging opposition initiatives and the Prime Minister (rather than the party leadership).
- The Communist Party was paralyzed and unable to respond; no liberal wing existed due to the orthodoxy and party purges that followed 1968.

Czechoslovakia under Ice

- Czechoslovakia: A "frozen" post-totalitarian regime.
- Unlike Hungary, there was no negotiated transition in Czechoslovakia.
- The regime collapsed after ten days of mass demonstrations.
- State of the opposition: Following the 1968 invasion, many potential opponents chose an exit strategy through emigration.
- A limited number of initiatives gradually emerged (e.g., VONS, Charter 77).
- The main ethos of the opposition was “to live in truth” and exist in a parallel culture, without the capacity to negotiate with the regime.



Collapse: East Germany

- East Germany: in-built defect: a regime in a territory rather than an established nation-state
- extreme dependence on external players (USSR, FRG)
- after the regime abandoned the violent crackdown on the peaceful mass protests, political regime collapsed
- the question of *stateness* became an immediate priority
- dealing with the past and new political institutions supplied by the FRG
- a key role of great powers, US/USSR, but also France

Control: Bulgaria

- the Soviet leadership immediately installed a Communist government, which quickly liquidated the existing non-communist forces
- after gaining power, the Stalinist leadership consolidated its position by purges in the party
- Bulgaria was an agrarian country in which industrialisation and urbanisation came only after the Communists came to power
- the few liberal bourgeois intellectuals were eliminated or persecuted after the communist takeover

Control: Bulgaria

- Linz a Stepan: Bulgaria as an early post-totalitarian regime (from the mid-1980s)
- the regime never lost control over the transition process
- independent opposition groups (Ekoglasnost, Podkrepa) only emerged in the course of 1989
- the broad party leadership forced its long-standing leader Zhivkov to resign, Petar Mladenov took over
- roundtable talks initiated and controlled by the outgoing elites
- the party rebranded itself as the Socialist party, convincingly won the first fully free elections of 1990



**Zhivkov and
Mladenov**

Control: Romania

- the most complicated transition path in the region (violence)
- Romania was a latecomer to democratic transition
- spontaneous demonstrations against the regime/Ceausescu initiated by students and emerging urban-based opposition
- clashes between Ceausescu-loyal secret service and the police/army
- party leadership transformed itself into the National Salvation Front led by I. Iliescu
- post-communist victory in the 1990 elections, Iliescu elected the president, Romanians accepted the change because the situation led to decline in terror

Posttotalitarian and Sultanistic Regime

- Linz and Stepan describe the Romanian communist regime as a mixture of early post-totalitarian and sultanistic regimes
- prior to 1989, Romania had the lowest level of organised anti-communist opposition activity among the CEE countries
- N. Ceausescu was the supreme leader of the regime from 1965 until its end in December 1989
- he came to power as an advocate of collective leadership, replacing the Stalinist Secretary-General Gheorghiu-Deu

Personalism and Nationalism

- within a short period he became the de facto unlimited ruler of the country
- appointments to positions of influence depended solely on his will
- he placed his family members - his wife and brothers - in key positions in the state, counting his son as his successor
- personalism and the manipulation of nationalism were key aspects of the communist regime in Romania
- the role of ideology gradually declined, the enrichment of communist thought by the works of N. Ceausescu ('the genius of the Carpathians') was emphasised



Ceausescu and his successor
Iliescu

Pre-emptive Democratization

- a coup within the Communist Party, bloody clash between the secret service and the police/army
- the arrest and swift execution of Ceausescu and his wife without due process
- the transformation of the Communists into the National Salvation Front led by Ion Iliescu
- public acceptance of the changes, the new regime meant a real improvement - the elimination of terror
- in the May 1990 elections, the NSF won 66% of the vote and its presidential candidate Iliescu won 85% of the vote to become president