

What Is the State of Democracy in the Post-Communist Countries?

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If we were to issue a report card on the state of democracy in the world today, how would the twenty or so post-Communist states rate? And, while we are at it, how well do our professional efforts to understand the new states of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact (as well as other former authoritarian states) measure up? The two sets of questions are inevitably related, for reality is always in the eye of the beholder. But it is perhaps especially hard to see clearly when the past carries as much ideological and intellectual baggage as it does with the Western study of the former Soviet empire.

Why Did Communism Persist?

Before we get to the question of how healthy the new democracies are (or at least those of the post-Communist states that aspire to democratic status), it must be asked: Why did the old Communist order collapse so suddenly, and why were Western scholars caught so flat-footed by the changes? To pose the question differently: Why did communism last as long as it did? The fact that few analysts for most of the cold war period ever wondered why communism persisted is itself a puzzle because many colleagues from time to time pointed to a crisis of agriculture, the stirring of nationalities, the irrationalities of Gosplan, or to any number of other defects. The numerous failures and problems did not, however, seem to suggest a regime breakdown. The occasional outside kibbitzer, such as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, might declare that a system as rotten as the Soviet state could not possibly last, but the fraternity of experts who studied the Soviet system became committed to an orthodoxy that said otherwise. From early in the cold war, the consensus held that there was no society that ever turned back from communism. The reason was that terror lay at the heart of the totalitarian system and destroyed any vestiges of or opportunities for dissent and political opposition. One could not expect rapid change, especially as totalitarian rule was consolidated and new generations were raised on the centralist rule. Uprisings in the Soviet satellite states would require some special explanation, but usually the grip of Moscow's rule was deemed so implacable as to defy significant resistance.

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The theory of totalitarianism had both intellectual and political appeal. That is, it appeared to explain the phenomenon in question, namely, the persistence of Communist rule, but it also appealed to widespread political predispositions of both the Left and the Right in the West. The Left in Western Europe, and to some degree also in the United States, saw in terror the reason why the noble experiment of communism had gone off track. The “bad Communist” Stalin had hijacked the movement of the “good Communist” Lenin and corrupted the effort to achieve social justice and equality. For many in the West, communism minus the element of Stalinist terror was a chip off the socialist movement and as such part of the desirable (or at least inevitable) drift toward greater government control over private economic power. The tragedy of Stalinism to them was that it set back the truly noble ideals and utopian vision that had inspired the socialist founding fathers, Marx included. Even some on the political Right, in moments of doubt and despair, feared that socialism and collectivism were the wave of the future for most of the world, and that capitalism and democracy could survive only as a kind of anachronism in a few Western states.

The Right, though, was generally comfortable with the image of the totalitarian state. The enemy against which one had to mobilize was clear: the implacable, aggressive, totalitarian state ruling by terror and threatening our most basic values. Domestic foes also could be partially held at bay to the extent that they waffled, wavered, or weakened in their opposition to communism. The Right knew how to deal with the Communists: through strength and through the right kind of deals when deals could be struck. And, of course, over time the ideological battles became heavily overlaid with self-interest: the self-interest of scholars wanting to be proved right and of politicians and officials whose careers and agency fortunes were at stake.

The scholarly dialogue was curious: it reflected both a high degree of consensus around core propositions and ferocious debate on nuances. Unsurprisingly, the heat of political passions and policy debates spilled into scholarly disputations. With revisionist theorists, the West, and especially the United States, bore heavy responsibility for the cold war and for freezing Soviet society in a defensive, repressive mode. For the hard Right, the slackness and softness of the liberals perpetuated the iron grip of totalitarian rule and choked off reform and dissent within the Communist orbit. Yet the conclusion was the same: change within the Soviet system would be slow in coming, and mistakes in Western policy perpetuated hard-line Communist rule.

Early Interpretations of the Communist Collapse

The initial Western interpretations of communism’s demise resemble the events in question: simple and straightforward at one level but murky and confusing when one explores deeper. A democratic triumphalism was fashionable in the West that seemed at first glance to fit within the old totalitarian paradigm: once terror was removed from the equation, the return to democracy was all but inevitable. Democracy was the natural state of affairs for human societies, and for Russia seventy years of communism was simply a departure from the normal

order of thing. This aberrant condition and freakish twist of history also extended, for the postwar period, to the Warsaw Pact nations. But when exactly did terror disappear from the Soviet system? In the Andropov-Chernenko interregnum, with the Gorbachev accession to power, Sakharov's return from exile, or the June 1987 launching of *perestroika*? And in the case of Russia—still the most complex and elusive case among the post-Communist states—when did democracy triumph—with the failure of the August 1991 putsch, the bombardment of parliament, and the adoption of the constitution in December 1993? Or did the latter events represent the end of democracy in Russia?

The reasoning underlying the initial Western democratic triumphalism reflected some of the old ideological cleavages. To some, the Soviet system collapsed because the West held firm, outspent the Warsaw Pact on defense, supported internal dissents, and exposed the bankruptcy of exploitative, one-party rule. To others, the Gorbachev phenomenon was a wholly internal development that had been delayed by Western (and especially Reaganite) intransigence. Utopianism was evident in both camps. On the Left, Gorbachev was seen as the descendant of the good Communist Lenin who would at last fulfill the promise of an egalitarian society without the evils of terror and repression. The Right celebrated the inherent impulse toward freedom and hailed the culmination of the democratic and capitalist revolution that had swept the world. The older liberal idea of freedom as the end point of history came back into vogue. History in the sense of a battle between ideologies of the Left and Right was over with the final defeat of the Left.

But utopianism, as always, turned into despair and disillusion, and the democratic triumphalism vanished almost as soon as it had arrived. All too soon, the good Communist Gorbachev was gone, and the promise of reform snatched away. The reforms in Russia and elsewhere were never quite pure enough for Western utopians, and organized criminals, nationalists, unvanquished and unregenerate Communists, red-brown coalitions, generals, ethnic separatists—one could pick from a broad menu—were the new villains who had crushed democracy. Freedom House, in its annual surveys of the state of freedom in the world, saw an unprecedented burst of freedom in 1989–91, but reversed itself and detected dramatic backsliding in the following year.

A Metric for Democracy

The focus of attention gradually shifted from the establishment to the consolidation of democracy. Democracy was going to be an evolutionary process, fraught with setbacks, obstacles, zigs and zags, and difficult demands of institution building. In brief, utopianism and democratic triumphalism faded, the transition process began to be seen in a more sophisticated light that drew on the comparative experiences of other regions and on a richer understanding of the West's own past. The transition to a post-Communist order spurred, in particular, thinking on the prerequisites for democracy, the nature of the state, constitutionalism, and the rule-of-law.

Some research had been devoted to transitions from authoritarian rule during the Communist era, primarily with respect to the Latin American experience, and

a literature had begun to examine pluralism in Communist societies. Economic analysis in the early 1980s began to challenge conventional views on the size of the Soviet economy, revising drastically the GDP estimates stemming from Western intelligence sources. Now the various strands of democratic transitions, from the traditional Soviet area specialists and from many others drawn to the subject, came together to explore the state of democracy. A kind of broad matrix incorporating core elements of classical democratic theory began to take shape in terms of which one could assess the progress of democracy in the post-Communist states: (1) *civil society*, the associational life undergirding democratic politics; (2) *electoral systems*, the fairness, regularity, and mechanics of voting; (3) *political vitality*, the maturity of the political party system and how well they served the function of linking ruling elites to the wider society; (4) the *rule-of-law*, the functioning of judicial institutions in enforcing rights, resolving disputes, and setting a framework of procedural regularity; (5) *statecraft*, the machinery of government, the civil service able to collect taxes, issue regulations, and administer programs, and the embedded traditions of a modern state; and 6) an *autonomous economic order*, the existence of a system of market incentives and property rights sufficient to ignite economic growth and create a middle class with a stake in society.

A. D. Lindsay, in *The Modern Democratic State*, the classic study published during World War II—and the text for my first political science course forty-four years ago—defined the modern democratic state as the product of a historical process which first saw the replacement of medieval authority structures mixing religious and secular elements by an absolutist secular state. The doctrine of sovereignty justified and explained the emergence of absolutism; it was, after all, first necessary to have a state before it could be brought under popular control. The eighteenth-century democratic revolutions in France and America then started the process of democratizing the state. Finally, modern democracy emerged in more fully fledged form in the twentieth century with the extension of suffrage to all adults. Seen in this broad light, some of the new sovereignties developing from the former Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact are weak or incomplete states. They may have little tradition, and communism may not have penetrated fully in an institutional sense. Some might be described as oriental despotisms, sultanates, or throwbacks of some kind to the earlier predemocratic absolutisms of Europe. They do not even aspire to democratic status in the near term but rather seek to maintain order as their stated goal. Belarus, almost a caricature of itself as a Communist state, is a political museum piece showing how an inept stagnation-era Communist system functioned (or failed to function).

Poland, on the other hand, is the most stable of the new democracies. Not surprisingly, it meets the matrix criteria more fully than the other post-Communist states: a rich associational life with the Catholic Church, escaping subordination or destruction communism, universities retaining substantial independence, labor unions in existence; the tradition of statehood or “stateness” as Juan Lanz and Alfred Stepan have described the complex of government machinery, traditions, and authority structures that constitute effective sovereignty—along with political parties with effective links to a mass base; a freer economy; a number of elec-

tions at various levels and peaceful transfers of power; and functioning courts that can resolve commercial and other disputes.

Varieties of Post-Communist States

The post-Communist states seem to fit, in a recent assessment by Sherman Garnett, into four broad categories: First, there is a group of clear winners and relatively stable democracies led by Poland but including also the Czech Republic and Hungary, with the Baltic states not far behind. These countries have strong state institutions, free elections, civilian control of the military, flourishing civil societies, multiparty political systems, a free press, and relatively open and market-oriented economies—the ingredients, in short, that make for a complete break with communism.

Second, there is a diverse cluster of states, including Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, that have in varying degrees and each in its own way made significant progress toward democracy but continue to have serious shortcomings. Each has become pluralist and has made a transition away from communism, liberalized its economy to a greater or lesser degree, held elections, and permitted free expression. They have started from different positions, and the trajectories of change may be different. Slovakia, a Central European nation (or fragment of a nation), started with certain advantages over the others but has slipped back into a strident nationalism and pursued wrong-headed economic policies. Romania, starting from a disadvantageous position, has made dramatic strides toward stable democratic status. Bulgaria has pursued disastrous economic policies and teeters on the brink of falling into the basket-case category. Ukraine has had weak institutions and volatile and disorganized politics carried on by a narrow political class largely unconnected to the citizenry, but has nonetheless adopted a constitution, forged a strong sense of statehood, to some extent liberalized its economy and reformed the financial system, and generally made significant progress toward democracy. Russia, of course, is the largest, most complex, and to the West the most important of the new democracies, and one strongly suspects that developments in Russia will ramify widely in the whole region. Russia has a weak civil society but strong traditions and state institutions. One important need is to forge closer ties between the political class and society so that a genuinely accountable party system develops. Russian political parties might be considered at the stage of the groups of notables only loosely connected to broader constituencies that Ostrogorski and other early observers of Western party development analyzed. Another critical need is to

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strengthen the civil service and the machinery of government. Paradoxically, the governments of the former totalitarian states have often been weak and unable to collect taxes, or plan and administer programs efficiently when the glue that held the system together—the Communist Party—disappeared.

The third category of post-Communist states includes those that are in some sense at an earlier stage in the evolutionary ladder, possibly akin to the pre-democratic absolutist states of the West or to non-Western despotisms. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and possibly Kazakstan do not pretend to be democracies as yet or even to consider democracy a realistic near-term goal, but are stable states evolving toward some form of legitimacy and popular acceptance or at least acquiescence. They are, however, no longer Communist states in the traditional sense and do not take direction from Russia. They are independent states even though they belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Their independence from Moscow may reflect in part the weakness of Communist rule at the periphery, even at the time when many Western observers talked about monolithic world communism.

The fourth category is made up of those states that are clearly weak and unstable and that could collapse into chaos or evolve in an unpredictable fashion. These include at the moment Belarus, Tajikistan, and possibly Albania and Bulgaria. Albania made rapid initial strides then fell back into disorder after rigged elections and after economic policies built on a pyramid scheme and financial scams produced an economic collapse.

Conclusions

The post-Communist states at their best represent a remarkable success story. In a very short timespan the world has seen a number of former Communist states in Eastern Europe become fully fledged democracies virtually indistinguishable from their Western European counterparts in civil liberties, electoral stability, and widespread political participation. Other post-Communist states have done moderately well, representing a substantial achievement as well, but the transition to democracy is perhaps less secure. Still others languish in the past or even regress toward some unknown destination. The differences among the post-Communist states seem bound to grow, creating instabilities in the region as gaps in living standards and stability widen between the more successful and the less successful new states. There is no guarantee that gains once achieved will persist, but for most of the countries in question the movement away from totalitarianism seems irreversible, even if the speed and timing of the transition to democracy is less clear-cut.

The post-Communist states represent a democratic transition that is different from Latin America or Asia or even the path trod earlier by the North American and West European “mature” democracies. But increasingly the ability to see developments in a wider comparative framework will enrich our scholarship and understanding. History is open-ended; there is no goal toward which all societies must evolve. The new post-Communist states could retrogress, or they could pioneer new practices and approaches that can enrich the mature democracies. The

mature democracies suffer from their own sclerotic tendencies—from democratic deficits in Western Europe to campaign fraud and corruption in America.

The post-Communist states have multiparty competition but party systems with very shallow roots and state machinery that is top-heavy but uncoordinated and inefficient. The Latin American democracies are at a new “second stage” in their democratic development bent on strengthening weak governmental institutions and promoting greater equality. The East Asian democracies still suffer from vestiges of one-party authoritarianism but have achieved (in many cases partly because they started from) conditions of greater social equality that have assisted their rapid economic growth. The fear that elections will be bought and not won and that corrupt practices may undermine democratic traditions has been a concern nearly everywhere.

The social laboratory of the post-Communist states, with its great variety, presents both an extraordinary challenge and an opportunity for the scribblers and social scientists of the world, as well as for the activists and politicians who toil in the vineyards of democracy building. The traditional area specialists will have to transcend their past ideological perspectives to grasp the variety and nuances of developments in the former Soviet empire. Now they have a new caution: the emotional loyalties and stakes developed from close involvement with the processes of reform and the personalities of the new states. The careful scholars with long expertise in the field will be helped by the kibbitzers and Johnny-come-latelies as well as by the vast interest stirred across the whole forefront of social science scholarship by the collapse of communism. The jury is still out on the experiment of democratic consolidation and on the liberation of scholarship and commentary from stifling orthodoxies and dogmas.