

# Postcommunist Civil Society in Comparative Perspective

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Civil society continues to thrive as an object of study in postcommunist Europe, as in most other regions of the world. Much of the literature on postcommunist civil society, however, stresses its relative weakness, whether compared to other regions or to the high expectations of 1989–91.<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on weakness is especially notable given that so many observers at that time expected postcommunist civil society to become unusually strong and vibrant.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, although specialists of Latin America and Southern Europe were also beginning to take the concept seriously in the 1980s,<sup>3</sup> most scholars agree that the rapid emergence or resurgence of civil society as a major object of study in comparative politics resulted largely from developments surrounding the collapse of communism.

The finding that postcommunist civil society is unusually weak leads to a host of important questions. Yet before accepting this finding at face value, we should examine the extent to which it holds empirically. In other words, is it actually correct to assert that postcommunist civil society is particularly weak, either compared to the expectations of just over a decade ago or compared to other regions of the world? It seems clear that the current political, economic, and social reality has not lived up to the idealistic hopes of 1989–91. The conclusion that postcommunist civil society is distinctively weak compared to other regions, however, needs more specification to be convincing.

In this article, I consider the extent to which it is accurate to refer to postcommunist civil society as being relatively weak. I start by examining the variation within postcommunist Europe, in the context of larger survey results that generally show a stark difference—or a “thick line”—between the Central European countries and the countries of the former Soviet Union. I go on to introduce the results from the World Values Survey (WVS) on a battery of questions on membership in nine different types of organizations, which show that—when focusing exclusively on postcommunist countries—the “thick line” between Cen-

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tral Europe and the former Soviet Union does appear to apply, with some exceptions. Then I turn to a wider cross-regional perspective, showing that compared to older democracies and postauthoritarian countries postcommunist countries have relatively lower levels of organizational membership. This finding suggests that the variation within postcommunist Europe should more accurately be viewed as a “dotted line,” rather than a “thick line,” since the postcommunist countries on the whole still appear to form a coherent group when compared with other types of countries.

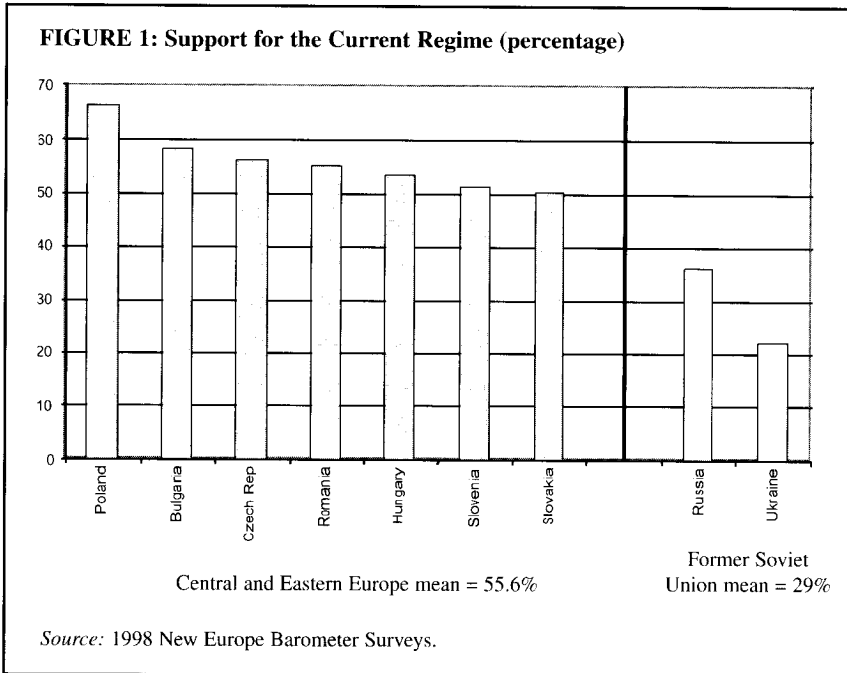
After presenting these empirical findings, I discuss their relevance in terms of the prospects for democracy and democratic stability in the region, addressing both positive and negative interpretations. I argue that although the weakness of civil society does not necessarily mean that postcommunist democracy is necessarily in danger of collapse or breakdown it does prevent the development of the “civic skills” that are important for supporting and consolidating a democratic system, and it also ensures that many postcommunist citizens lack the institutional representation and “leverage” that could otherwise be provided by active voluntary organizations.

Finally, I speculate about the extent to which the empirical findings and trends might change in the future. Although I argue that change is unlikely to occur rapidly or decisively, given the powerful and lasting legacy of the communist experience, as well as the relative failure of neoliberal institutional “crafting,” I discuss two possible mechanisms for change, and I suggest how these might occur or be encouraged to develop. Generational change presents a very gradual means for replacing older people in society with their descendants, who will have had less exposure to the original communist institutions that shaped most living adults today. Another mechanism for change can be the state’s taking a more active role in supporting and working with voluntary organizations and relating them to people’s personal life histories so that organizations become viewed as less alienating and imposing. Overall, however, barring unforeseen improvements in the way new institutions and policies are implemented, I argue that we are unlikely to see dramatic changes in the pattern of nonparticipation throughout postcommunist Europe.

### **Variation within Postcommunist Europe**

The scholarship on postcommunist Europe has increasingly come to the conclusion that there are wide differences among the countries in the region. Jacques Rupnik has even claimed that “the word ‘postcommunism’ has lost its relevance,” and he adds that “it is striking how vastly different the outcomes of the democratic transitions have been in Central and Eastern Europe.”<sup>4</sup> In terms of empirical data, the most authoritative comparative studies have been conducted by the New Europe Barometer Surveys (NEBS), and they tend to confirm that there is wide variation among the countries of the postcommunist region.<sup>5</sup>

A few examples may help to illustrate this variation.<sup>6</sup> One of the key objects of study in the NEBS is the extent to which respondents support the current regime. Figure 1 shows the levels of support for the current regime according to

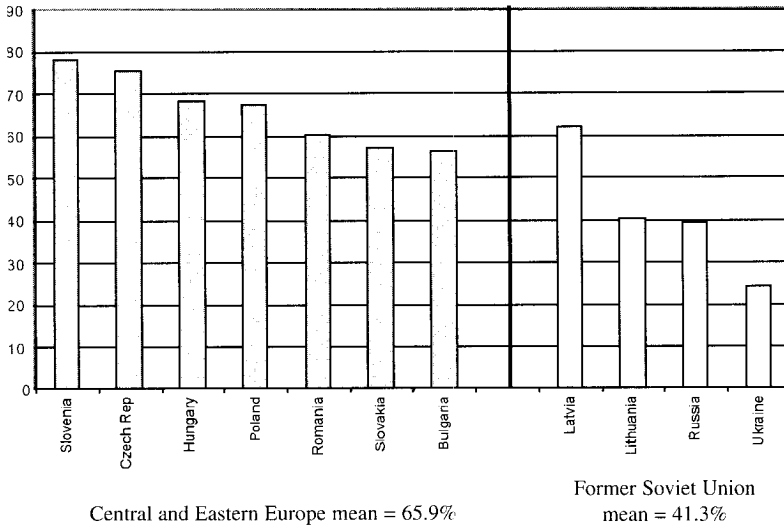


the 1998 NEBS, distinguishing between Central and East European (CEE) countries on the left, and the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) on the right (in this case only Russia and Ukraine). The figure shows clearly that the levels of support for the current regime are much higher in CEE than they are in the FSU, suggesting that the thick line separating the two groups of countries is well supported empirically. Indeed, the CEE mean of almost 56 percent support for the current regime is almost double the 29 percent support in the FSU countries.

Another important question in the NEBS is the extent to which respondents reject three specific authoritarian alternatives: "return to communist rule," "military rule," or "rule by a dictator." Figure 2 again distinguishes between CEE and FSU, and the latter group now includes available data from two of the Baltic countries. The figure shows that nearly 66 percent of CEE respondents reject all three authoritarian alternatives, a proportion much greater than the FSU mean of 41 percent. As for the particular countries, with the exception of Latvia, in which responses approach the CEE mean, it appears once again to support a thick line dividing CEE from the FSU.

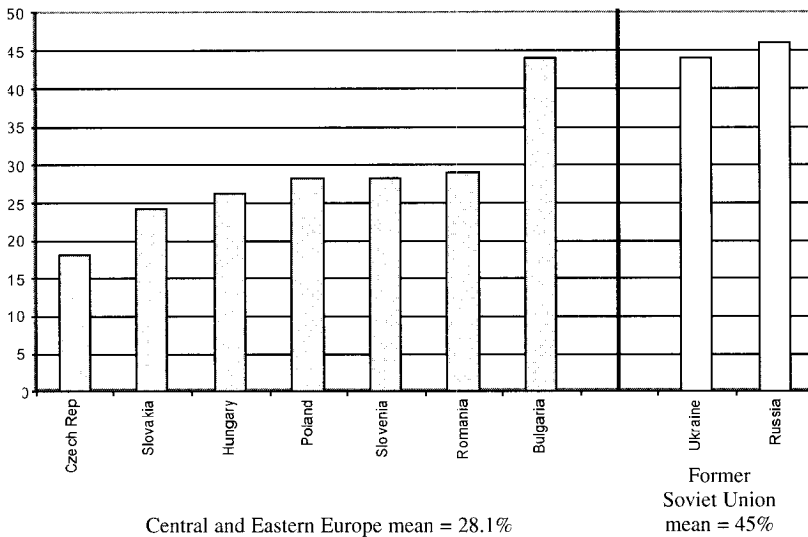
Unfortunately the NEBS does not include any questions on membership in the organizations of civil society, thus ruling out a comparison of the levels of participation across the countries of postcommunist Europe. The NEBS questionnaire did, however, ask respondents to describe their levels of trust in fifteen different civil and political institutions.<sup>7</sup> The results, shown in figure 3, demonstrate that the thick line dividing CEE and the FSU appears to apply to trust in civil society as well. With the exception of Bulgaria, the countries of CEE have con-

**FIGURE 2: Rejection of all Authoritarian Alternatives (percentages)**



Source: 1998 New Europe Barometer Surveys.

**FIGURE 3: Average Distrust in 15 Civil and Political Institutions (percentages)**



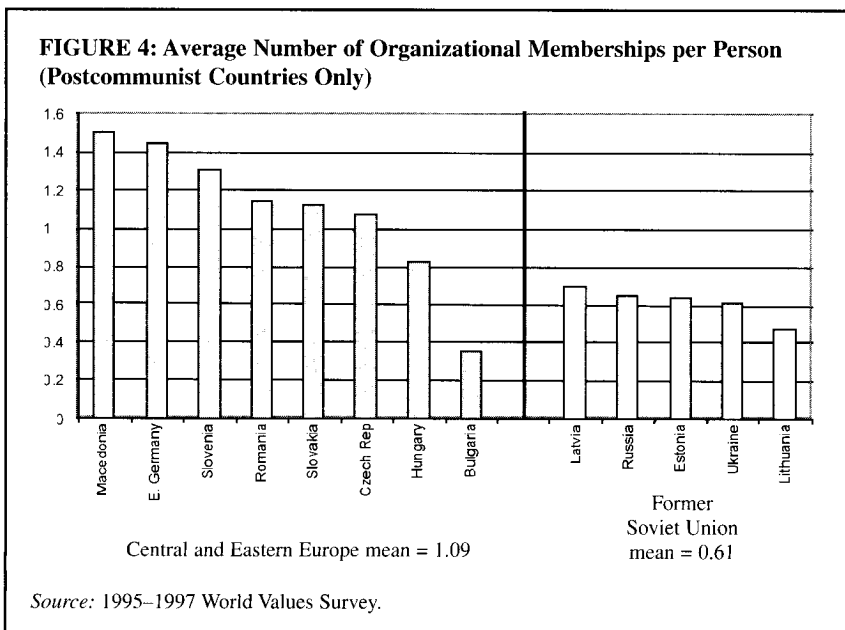
Source: 1998 New Europe Barometer Surveys.

siderably lower levels of distrust in civil and political institutions, with a mean of 28 percent, than do those of the FSU, with a mean of 45 percent.

The NEBS question on trust in civil society has its limitations, since it refers to the attitudes, rather than the actual behavior, of respondents. In general, despite the proliferation of studies on civil society in countries and regions around the world, there is still a dearth of methodologically comparable, cross-regional comparative analysis on civil society. The World Values Survey, however, is another large-scale comparative survey project that includes a wide range of countries, as well as a battery of questions on membership in voluntary organizations. Moreover, the fact that the WVS was conducted in over fifty different societies in 1995–97 makes it a remarkable, and still largely untapped, resource with which to compare levels of participation across countries and regions.

The question on membership in voluntary organizations in the WVS questionnaire asks respondents whether or not they are members of nine different types of groups: (a) church or religious organizations, (b) sports or recreational clubs, (c) educational, cultural, or artistic organizations, (d) labor unions, (e) political parties or movements, (f) environmental organizations, (g) professional associations, (h) charitable organizations, and (i) any other voluntary organization. Although this list is by no means exhaustive—and one could certainly argue that other types of organizations, such as those for women, students, veterans, or animal rights activists, should have been included—it does capture a wide enough range of organizations, both traditional and contemporary, that are central to civil society to allow us to compare participation in them across countries.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 4 focuses on the thirteen valid postcommunist countries from the WVS



survey, and it presents the average number of organizational memberships per person in each country, out of a total of nine possible memberships per person.<sup>9</sup> The figure follows the same basic pattern seen in figures 1, 2, and 3, with a thick line separating citizens from the CEE countries—who average 1.09 organizational memberships per person—and those from the FSU—with an average of 0.61 memberships per person. Just as in figure 3, Bulgaria is the only exception, with an average level of organizational membership that is even lower than that of the countries of the FSU. At this point in the analysis, therefore, the empirical results seem to confirm a clear differentiation between the countries within the postcommunist region.

### **How Does Postcommunist Europe Compare with Other Regions?**

Although the literature that specifies the stark differences between the two groups of postcommunist countries is convincing, it does not include non-postcommunist countries and regions in its comparative analysis. In this section, I introduce a wider cross-regional perspective with respect to organizational membership, showing the levels of membership in the thirty-one valid democratic and democratizing countries from the World Values Survey, divided into three groups based on their prior regime type.

Before turning to the empirical results, I want to explain and justify the groupings, which are adapted from the work of Juan Linz.<sup>10</sup> The starting point of Linz's typology of regime types is the fundamental difference between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, but the more interesting and important distinctions are among the nondemocratic regime types, which can be classified as "authoritarian," "totalitarian," "post-totalitarian," or "sultanistic." Given that every country from the WVS that fell into any of the last three categories in the post-World War II period was also a member of the communist bloc, for the sake of clarity I reorganize the typology into "democratic," "authoritarian," and "communist" regime types.<sup>11</sup> When discussing the current, democratic-type period, I refer to a country's prior regime type and its lasting effect on present developments. As a result, I divide the countries in this analysis into the following three groups: (a) Australia, Finland, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, and Western Germany, which I classify as the "older democracies"; (b) Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, the Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela, which I label the "postauthoritarian" countries; and (c) Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Eastern Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine, which constitute the "postcommunist" category.

One of the defining features of Linz's regime type distinction is the extent to which regimes allow and accommodate pluralism. Whereas democratic regimes encourage and even support organizational activity among the population, and authoritarian regimes tolerate most forms of activity, provided they are not deemed threatening to the state or to the military, communist regimes not only sought to repress all forms of autonomous, nonstate activity, but they supplanted and subverted such activity by forcing their citizens to join and participate in

mandatory, state-controlled organizations. The difference between authoritarian and communist regimes also has a lasting effect in the postauthoritarian and postcommunist time period, as communist countries have “legacies to overcome that are not found in an authoritarian regime.”<sup>12</sup> In the current time period, the expectation of this prior regime type argument is that the older democracies will have the highest levels of organizational activity, followed relatively closely by the postauthoritarian countries, and the postcommunist countries will lag behind the other two groups considerably.

Figure 5 presents the average levels of organizational membership in each of the thirty-one valid countries from the 1995–97 World Values Survey; the older democracies are grouped to the left, the postauthoritarian countries in the center, and the postcommunist countries on the right, with the individual countries arranged in decreasing order of organizational membership within each prior regime type category. The results show that, when compared to older democracies and postauthoritarian countries in this larger cross-regional perspective, postcommunist countries have relatively and consistently lower levels of organizational membership. The postcommunist mean of 0.91 organizational memberships per person is exactly half of the postauthoritarian average of 1.82, and well under the older democracies mean of 2.39. Moreover, even when controlling for a series of country-level and individual-level factors in a multiple regression analysis, the prior regime type variable is by far the most powerful and statistically significant factor.<sup>13</sup>

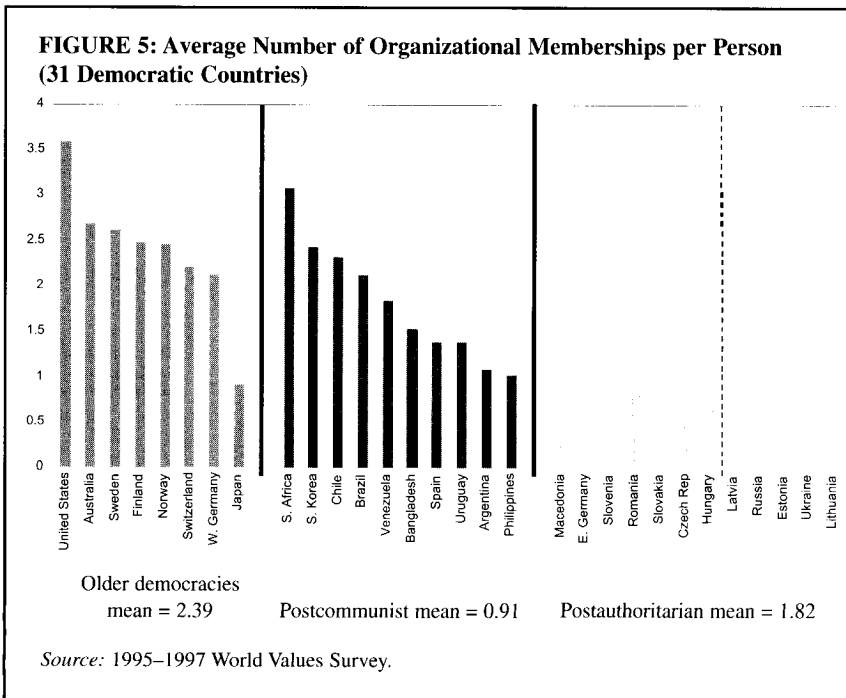
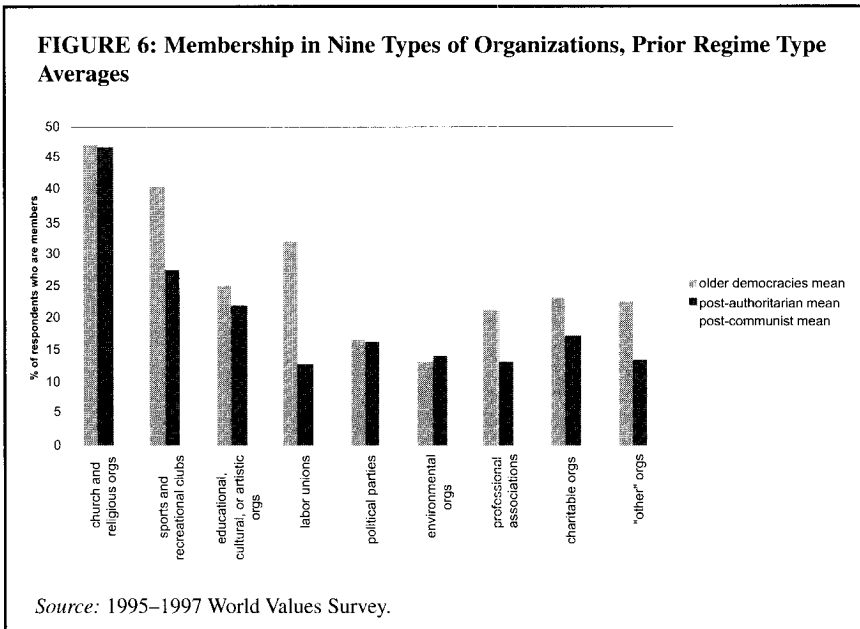


Figure 6 displays, for each regime type, the average level of membership in the nine categories of voluntary organizations. The results show very clearly that for all types of organizations except labor unions, the postcommunist mean is much lower than the means of the other two groups, and the difference between the older democracy and postauthoritarian averages is relatively small when compared to the large gap between the postauthoritarian and postcommunist categories.

The prior regime type differences shown in figures 5 and 6 suggest a revision, or at least a refinement, of the thick line distinction between CEE and FSU countries that was well supported by figures 1–4. In the wide cross-regional perspective of figure 5 and 6, it appears that the thick lines really belong between the groupings by prior regime type. The division within the postcommunist group, which seemed so striking from the perspective of figure 4, while still real, now appears much more attenuated in figure 5. Indeed, within this larger comparative perspective—particularly given the similar pattern across eight of the nine types of organizations shown in figure 6—it would be more accurate to describe the difference between CEE and FSU countries within the postcommunist group as a dotted line.

Overall, the category of postcommunism, far from having lost its relevance, seems to remain a crucial factor for explaining cross-regional variation in participation in the organizations of civil society, even when accounting for a host of other important factors. In other words, there is something about the prior communist experience that, over a decade since communism's collapse, makes its citizens—from Sofia to Berlin, from Prague to Moscow—much less likely to join organizations than citizens of other countries with different prior regime type experiences. The next task, of course, is to specify some of the key elements of





that communist experience and to show how and why they have such a lasting effect on an otherwise increasingly differentiated group of societies.

### **What Explains the Pattern of Weak Postcommunist Civil Society?**

In this section, I argue that the similarly low levels of participation in the organizations of civil society in contemporary postcommunist Europe can best be understood by taking into account the common elements of the communist experience, as well as the recent postcommunist experience. I briefly introduce three important factors that characterize the wide array of societies in postcommunist Europe, which together help to explain the lasting weakness of civil society in the region: the legacy of mistrust of communist organizations, the persistence of friendship networks, and postcommunist disappointment.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Mistrust of Communist Organizations**

One of the central features that distinguished communism from authoritarianism was the former's extensive repression of autonomous pluralism. Unlike authoritarian regimes, which tolerated nonstate activities as long as they did not threaten the existence of the state, communist regimes not only attempted to eliminate any form of independent group activity, but supplanted it with an intricately organized series of state-controlled organizations, in which participation was often mandatory. As a result of an essentially negative experience with the state-run organizations during the communist period, large majorities of communist citizens throughout postcommunist Europe have a common sense of mistrust of organizations that persists today.

Two comments from interview respondents help to illustrate how this legacy of mistrust discourages participation today. The first comes from a forty-six-year-old, female, East German secretary:

Well, I have a really hard time explaining it. If I say I have no time, then it sounds like a banal excuse. I have to say that in GDR times, we were forced to join many of these kinds of organizations. And after the *Wende* [the "turn," or unification], I said to myself, I'm not joining anything ever again. I'm somehow frightened about joining, or I simply have no more desire for it. At least that's what's happened to me, and also in my family, I have to say, many others feel that way too. Very simply, because there was a certain pressure back then, and people had to do a lot of things that they didn't want to do, and now it's swung in the opposite direction, and they say, No, not again.

The second quote comes from a forty-five-year-old Russian man who works for a company that provides cultural publications about the city of St. Petersburg:

Well, really, I don't have time, and I'm not interested. But the most important is that, well, the Soviet system, it instilled an antipathy or aversion, because any experience with organizations was unpleasant. That is, an organization is seen as that which imposes an obligation. And obligations under socialism were so rigid that now I just don't want to participate. Maybe organizations are completely different now, but I just don't want to.

Although these are just two examples, the similarity between them—from citizens in two otherwise very different countries—indicates the deep, lasting, and

negative effect of people's mistrust of communist organizations on their organizational membership today.

### **The Persistence of Friendship Networks**

A second reason that helps to explain the societal similarities within postcommunist Europe has to do with the vibrant private networks that developed under communism. As a result of the high politicization of the public sphere, many people could or would only express themselves openly within close circles of trusted friends and family. Moreover, in a shortage economy, with few available goods to buy, connections played an essential role in communist societies, whether it was to acquire spare parts for fixing a car or to find products that were rarely available in stores.

Today, more than a decade after the collapse of the system that created and sustained this vibrant private sphere, networks of close friends and family remain extremely prominent and important throughout the postcommunist region.<sup>15</sup> The networks of instrumental connections, however, have changed to varying degrees across postcommunist countries, since the market economy can eliminate the need to acquire goods and services through informal channels. In many Western societies, voluntary organizations have become central to the social and political culture, and people join them to meet new people and to expand their horizons through public activities. In postcommunist societies, however, many people are still extremely invested in their own private circles and simply feel no need, much less desire, to join and participate in organizations when they feel that, socially, they already have everything that they could need or want.

### **Postcommunist Disappointment**

The third factor that helps to explain the particularly low levels of public participation in postcommunist Europe is the widespread disappointment, and for some even disillusionment, with political and economic developments since the collapse of the state-socialist system. Although it is most pronounced among the activists who were personally involved in the movements leading to the creation of the new institutional order, this third factor applies to the wider population as well. For most people throughout the former Soviet bloc, the years 1989–91 were a unique, momentous, and fascinating time in their lives, when their world was changing rapidly and dramatically. Although they had many fears and uncertainties about where the changes would lead them, most people experienced at least a brief moment of genuine excitement, hope, and idealism during those times of rapid transformation. Moreover, they shared the belief that the end of Communist Party rule, the emergence of new democratic and market institutions, and at long last the freedom and right to speak freely, to associate openly with others, and to travel beyond the “iron curtain” would change their lives for the better.

In the years since those dramatic times, however, many postcommunist citizens feel that they have been let down, even cheated, by the new system that quickly replaced the old one. Even though a vast majority in every postcommunist country does not want to go back in time, the political and economic systems

that have since taken root seem to have disappointed most people who had believed and hoped that a new political and economic system would live up to their ideals. This disappointment has only increased people's demobilization and withdrawal from public activities since the collapse of communism.

Although these three factors are not meant to be definitive, and they certainly do not apply to each country in the same way, they do suggest common historical reasons that can help to explain the common weakness of civil society in the otherwise institutionally diverse countries of postcommunist Europe, especially when compared to the older democracies and the postauthoritarian countries.

### **What Does This Mean for Democracy in Postcommunist Europe?**

The finding of low levels of participation in the organizations of civil society throughout postcommunist Europe can lead to a host of different—and often emotionally charged—interpretations about the prospects for democracy in the region. On the one hand, a negative and pessimistic version emphasizes that the low level of engagement and participation by ordinary citizens is indicative of the hollow, procedural, and formalistic character of postcommunist democracy. According to this view, does democracy still mean “rule by the people” if the people choose not to participate in ruling? More forebodingly, one could argue that such a hollow democracy will remain unstable, since civic organizations lack the active support of the population, leaving democracy at risk of being toppled by hostile forces, whether based on nondemocratic historical traditions or a new, antidemocratic ideology.

On the other hand, a more positive and optimistic interpretation would suggest that the absence of a vibrant civil society poses no obstacle to democracy and democratic stability. Indeed, political participation and trust in government are supposedly in decline throughout much of the world, as people withdraw from public activities in increasingly large numbers. Perhaps the postcommunist present, having skipped or bypassed the “stage” of an active participatory democracy, actually resembles the democratic future in the rest of the world. Moreover, in terms of democratic stability, some argue that a strong and vibrant civil society can actually contribute to the breakdown of democracy, and in this sense—paradoxically—democracy in postcommunist Europe may be enhanced by the absence of citizen participation in voluntary organizations.<sup>16</sup>

My own view of postcommunist democracy differs from both the positive and negative scenarios. Even if participation in voluntary organizations is declining in the older democracies,<sup>17</sup> this does not mean that levels of organizational membership around the world are converging.<sup>18</sup> More important, in terms of the breakdown or survival of democracy, I do not view postcommunist democracy as being doomed to collapse or fail, nor do I believe that the weakness of civil society is a good sign for a healthy democracy. In contrast, my basic, and less contentious, interpretation stresses the characterization of the weakness of civil society as a distinctive element of postcommunist democracy, a pattern that may well persist throughout the region for at least several decades. The finding that postcommunist civil society is distinctively weak does not necessarily indicate that post-

communist democracy is less stable or more precarious, but it does point to a qualitatively different relationship between citizens and the state, one based on very little active engagement by ordinary people in voluntary organizations in the public sphere.

Does this mean that democracy cannot collapse, that the region is safe from authoritarian rule? Certainly not. As has already happened in Belarus, and could happen in Russia or elsewhere in the next decade, antidemocratic leaders and forces may well succeed in connecting with voters' frustrations—particularly in the countries that experienced seventy years of Soviet rule, and where economic difficulties are most extreme today—and usher in a new authoritarian regime, even by demo-

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cratic means. Such a development would depend largely on the individual leaders, their personalities and ideologies, and their political strategies.<sup>19</sup> Although the behavior of the leaders is impossible to predict, my findings suggest that any potential followers will be difficult to activate and engage. Indeed, the reluctance of so many postcommunist citizens

to participate in voluntary organizations today means that antidemocratic organizations and movements, just like their democratic counterparts, will also have problems organizing and mobilizing, and their efforts will be hindered by the same legacy of mistrust of organizations.<sup>20</sup> In other words, although postcommunist democracy may remain relatively hollow or stagnant, with a disconnect between rulers and ruled, the overthrow of existing democratic regimes by movements with broad-based and active popular support seems very unlikely.

Although the weakness of civil society may not be a harbinger of democracy’s demise in postcommunist Europe, it should certainly not be viewed in positive terms either. Even with the historical precedent of Weimar Germany—where high levels of organizational membership may have supported and facilitated the emergence of an antidemocratic Nazi regime—it would be unreasonable to argue that the low levels of public participation are actually beneficial for democracy in postcommunist Europe.

There are two important reasons why the weakness of civil society impinges on the quality of postcommunist democracy, and these come from the very heart of the debates about the importance of civil society and its effect on democracy. The first reason is derived from the arguments of Robert Putnam and other “social capitalists,” who demonstrate the ways in which voluntary organizations “instill in their members habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life.”<sup>21</sup> By choosing not to join or participate in voluntary organizations, postcommunist citizens have forsaken the opportunity to develop those democratic habits and skills. Although this decision

is completely understandable in the context of communist and postcommunist experiences, the larger consequence is that the new democratic institutions are neither rooted in, nor actively supported by, the larger population.<sup>22</sup>

Most scholars would agree that citizen involvement is a fundamental aspect of any democratic system. In that sense, the postcommunist situation stands in sharp contrast to postauthoritarian countries, where groups and organizations—which in many cases already existed under authoritarian rule—have been able to play a leading role in democratization. In postcommunist countries, however—where people's organizational experiences originated predominantly in the forced mobilization of the communist regime—the negative memory of mandatory participation leads most people to eschew organizational activity today. Political institutions and elite commitments may be most crucial for sustaining the continued existence of democracy, but the passivity of postcommunist citizens, and their alienation and removal from the democratic process, can only be a troubling sign for postcommunist democracy.

The second reason why civil society is important for democracy has to do with the direct influence of voluntary organizations to serve as what Theda Skocpol calls “a source of considerable popular leverage” to influence the political process.<sup>23</sup> According to this historical institutional argument, the organizations of civil society, which represent the aggregate opinions, interests, and preferences of their members, can protect citizens from potentially unjust laws and policies, as well as exert a positive influence on legislation that concerns them. In the postcommunist context, the low levels of organizational membership considerably reduce the political leverage and influence of voluntary organizations. As a result, not only are postcommunist citizens bereft of the opportunities for developing greater “civic skills” through participation in organizations, but their voices and views are hardly represented in the political decision-making process.

In short, negative and positive interpretations of the relative weakness of postcommunist civil society and its impact on democracy in postcommunist Europe are both overstated. Postcommunist democracy is neither thriving nor on the verge of collapse. Instead, it is likely to continue to muddle through, with elites and institutions that vary widely in their style and performance, but a citizenry that remains disengaged from the public sphere. The distinguishing element of postcommunist democracy is—and probably will be for several more decades and generations—the troubling, but not fatal, characteristic of its weak civil society.

### **How Might This Pattern Change over Time?**

What should we expect to find in ten years' time? Will levels of membership and participation gradually increase, at least in some countries, and if so, how? Any attempt to answer these questions is purely speculative, a risky venture for a social scientist, but especially for one within the field of “post-Sovietology,” given the extended debates in Sovietology about the problems and failures of prediction.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the findings of this article warrant some cautious speculation about the conditions for, and the likelihood of, change in the patterns of nonparticipation in the organizations of civil society.

For the countries with the lowest levels of participation—such as Bulgaria, Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine—which generally have weak and unsupportive states and unstable economies, it is unlikely that citizen participation in voluntary organizations will increase significantly. Barring any miraculous turn-arounds, those structural impediments will keep organizational membership very low, and the specifically postcommunist factors that I have identified will not change substantially either.

However, for the countries on the higher end of the postcommunist spectrum of participation in voluntary organizations—such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Eastern Germany, Slovakia, and Romania—it is quite possible, and in some cases even quite likely, that the state and economy will become stronger over the next decade. The question remains: Will this lead to an increase in organizational membership and participation? If so, will participation increase to the extent that those countries will eventually start to resemble countries in the postauthoritarian and older democracies groupings, rather than remaining similar to other postcommunist countries? In my view, although perhaps it could happen in one or two individual countries, such a development is unlikely to occur unless there are drastic improvements in the way in which domestic states and foreign funders approach postcommunist citizens and their prior experiences living in communist regimes.

The phenomenon of nonparticipation that has emerged in the postcommunist period is not accidental or temporary. Rather, it represents the continuation of a pattern of social relations and behavior that developed over several decades under the very distinct conditions of the communist system. Ironically, this pattern seems in many ways to have been reinforced in the very different institutional environment of the postcommunist period. In short, although the pattern of nonparticipation could certainly change over time, leading to a resurgence in participation and a lasting change in social patterns, it is doubtful that this change will be rapid or that it will happen in the near future.

Despite this bleak assessment about the persisting weakness of postcommunist civil society, it is worth considering how, if at all, an increase in organizational membership and participation could come about in the future, and in particular how states and international organizations might be able to contribute to it. Although there are certainly no miraculous formulas or quick solutions, there are, broadly speaking, two ways in which such a trend could develop.

The first and most obvious potential mechanism of change is through generational change, as new generations of postcommunist citizens, who were less influenced by the experience of life in a communist system, come of age. As originally articulated by Karl Mannheim, the logic of the generational argument is that a coherent group of people, roughly aged between seventeen and twenty-five, can be shaped not only by their common age or geography but also by “significant social events” such as war or economic depression.<sup>25</sup> In the postcommunist context, the expectation of generational change presupposes, as Piotr Sztompka argues, that “as long as the majority of the population consists of the people whose young, formative years, and therefore crucial socializing experi-

ences fall under the rule of the communist regime—one can expect the continuing vitality of the bloc culture.” However, he adds that this will change over time, as “new demographic cohorts replace the older generations at the central positions in a society.”<sup>26</sup> In terms of membership in organizations, the expectation therefore is that those people who dislike and avoid voluntary organizations will eventually die off, replaced by a younger generation that might be more sympathetic to such activities.

On the one hand, the expectation that generational change will bring about a steady increase in organizational membership is certainly plausible—although not particularly encouraging, since even under the best conditions it will take many decades for such generational replacement to run its course—and it fits with my argument about the importance of the communist experience in explaining the low levels of postcommunist organizational membership. On the other hand, however, such a development may be more painstaking than it is automatic, and it is difficult to predict whether or not generational change will contribute to an increase in participation in civil society, even in the long run. After all, a major element of socialization comes not only from the current institutional setting but also from one’s parents, teachers, and peers, all of whom can contribute to reproducing a continuation of the same patterns of orientations and behavior, even if the original institutional environment is long gone.<sup>27</sup>

If the process of societal change may take generations, not years, a logical object of study would be today’s youth, or the youngest adult generation, which had the least exposure to communism and should therefore be less marked by its experience than older generations.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, however, one should be careful not to place too much importance on this youth generation, for three main reasons. First, since young people in all societies tend to be unsettled and changing, the establishment of certain patterns today does not necessarily mean that differences between them and other generations will last as the youth grow older. Second, young people are notoriously uninterested in politics, and it is generally in a period of “late youth” that political interest, preferences, and patterns of behavior become more fully developed. Third, and perhaps most important in the context of this article, although the youngest adult generation today did not experience the communist system as adults, they did have a great deal of exposure to it through the communist youth organizations, which began recruitment when children first entered elementary school. Since these children were still actively socialized in a communist system, it would be inaccurate to say that they constitute a genuinely postcommunist generation—a label that would apply only to those who were too young to join the youth organizations at the time of the collapse of communism.

It is still far too early to make firm predictions about changes in aggregate levels of participation based on this youth generation. To measure and test generational change, many more studies should be conducted across different countries over the next decades, particularly as the first genuinely postcommunist generation reaches adulthood. Until then, we are likely to see a continuation of existing postcommunist patterns in the low levels of organizational membership, as well

as in the common reasons and causes that best explain it. Over the long run, however, generational change remains one of the main prospects for gradually achieving lasting societal change in the region.

The second mechanism by which postcommunist citizens could conceivably become more active participants in civil society is more difficult, but also more heartening—because it allows for the possibility of new policies influencing current and future developments in a positive way. The most fundamental requirement for postcommunist citizens to change their participatory habits involves their acquiring familiarity, comfort, and a new positive association with voluntary organizations. But this cannot occur easily or automatically, even with the passing of time, given the daunting obstacles to participation described above. Many of the existing organizations, which have been steadily increasing in numbers since the collapse of communism, have been created by Western organizations. Most are to varying degrees dependent on Western funding and conditions. As a result, much of the organizational initiative comes from “above,” namely, from outside or foreign sources with little understanding of communism and postcommunism. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in trying to convince people to join, many appeals come across as empty or unfamiliar at best, or foolish and misguided at worst. Moreover, the realities of fundraising in conditions of economic uncertainty are such that the local leaders and activists in organizations are often more beholden to their funders than to the people they are trying to engage and inspire.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps even more important, many of the new organizations that are supported by Western sources contain an underlying anticommunist theme, one that implies that the way people lived under communism was wrong, unethical, or unsuitable for a democratic and capitalist society. Such a message might seem justified by the finding that the persistence of communist-era private networks serves as a disincentive for joining public organizations—in other words, since they are an impediment, perhaps they should simply be wiped away. However, although the denunciation of the communist system may be necessary for convincing people to start anew and to change their outlooks and social patterns, the explicit or implicit condemnation of people’s lifestyles and personal histories has the opposite effect, leading to even more misunderstanding, resignation, and disengagement. Unfortunately, the message of many organizations does not make clear the distinction between evaluating the communist system and criticizing people’s own lives. Until that distinction becomes clear, and until the leaders of organizations learn to value and appreciate what so many postcommunist citizens view as the positive aspects of life in a communist system, as well as those citizens’ personal resourcefulness and ingenuity, attempts to mobilize people to participate in voluntary organizations will continue to backfire, or at least to fall on deaf or skeptical ears.

### Conclusion

This discussion begs the crucial, yet frustrating, question of what can be done to help encourage more postcommunist citizens to take part in public organization-



al activities. Although this represents a daunting task that is unlikely to produce rapid changes, there are some steps that can be taken. One obvious requirement is the importance of improving economic conditions, particularly in those countries in which many citizens face near-catastrophic economic obstacles. This means not simply developing a wealthy business elite or an aggregate measure of national productivity or growth, but improving the actual standards of living of most ordinary people, so that they might have the economic means to devote time and energy to voluntary organizations and possibly to contribute a donation or membership fee that could pay off for them in the longer run.

In addition to broad improvements in the overall economy, a second step for strengthening postcommunist civil society involves a reappraisal of the role of the state and its relation to the organizations of civil society. Indeed, contrary to the simplistic views of many conservative commentators or politicians,<sup>30</sup> a convincing body of research that incorporates a larger historical and comparative perspective has demonstrated that the state has played a crucial role in enabling, facilitating, and encouraging the existence and flourishing of voluntary organizations.<sup>31</sup> Although obviously it cannot force its citizens to join organizations, the state can, among other things, pass legislation that protects the rights of organizations, as well as provide tax or other institutional incentives that encourage them to organize and recruit members.

By no means, therefore, would I suggest that, since many attempts at strengthening civil society have not worked, these efforts should be stopped and the funds should be cut. On the contrary, both domestic governments and international donors should intensify their efforts to strengthen local groups and organizations, but they need to refocus their energies in a way that would encourage and reward groups for expanding their activities, membership, and constituencies, rather than simply providing a well-written mission statement and a nicely designed Internet site. Such a strategy would certainly require more complicated (and costly) techniques for evaluating organizations and how they make use of their funds, but the payoff in terms of stronger connections with local populations—both improving people's relationships with organizations and representing their interests socially or politically—would be well worth the investment.

For this type of change to take place, it is critical for analysts and policymakers alike to recognize that it cannot happen without the active support of the state. The state is neither the opponent nor the antithesis of civil society, but its cooperative partner. In the current political climate in postcommunist Europe, however, a neoliberal dogmatism continues to predominate, in which the dominant assumption is that the "crafting" of new institutions based on foreign models will suffice to change long-lasting societal patterns. Even in Eastern Germany, where East Germans live as citizens of one of the most supportive states and vibrant economies in Europe and the world, the approach to institutional change has been one of imposition by outside (i.e., West German) "experts" on East German society, without the intermediary of local organizations who could have helped to influence those changes by making them come across as less alien and distasteful for most citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Until there is more consideration of the specific personal and societal experiences of postcommunist citizens and how those experiences have shaped citizens' approach to society and politics today, institutional and policy changes will have only marginal effects on people's social patterns, and they may actually reinforce previous attitudes and habits developed during the communist era. For these reasons, although change is certainly possible according to the two mechanisms I have outlined, the pattern of a weak postcommunist civil society is likely to persist long into the future.

### NOTES

A version of this article was presented at the Democratization Seminar at Stanford University in May 2001, and the author is especially grateful to Larry Diamond and Terry Karl for their helpful feedback at the seminar. A different version was published as "The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 157–69.

1. See, for example, Bronislaw Geremek, "Problems of Postcommunism: Civil Society Then and Now," *Journal of Democracy* 3, no. 2 (1992): 3–12; Aleksander Smolar, "Civil Society after Communism: From Opposition to Atomization," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 1 (1996): 24–38; M. Steven Fish, "Rethinking Civil Society: Russia's Fourth Transition," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 31–42; Bill Lomax, "The Strange Death of Civil Society in Postcommunist Hungary," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 13 (1997): 41–63. Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik have developed a very different perspective that emphasizes the strength of postcommunist civil society, but their analysis addresses the case of Poland—long considered to be "exceptional" within the postcommunist region—and they focus primarily on protest rather than more typical forms of participation. See Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

2. See, for example, Giuseppe Di Palma, "Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society: Politico-Cultural Change in Eastern Europe," *World Politics* 44, no. 3 (1991): 49–80; Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Zbigniew Rau, ed., *The Reemergence of Civil Society in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

3. See, for example, Alfred Stepan, *The State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Alfred Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Lawrence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

4. Jacques Rupnik, "The Postcommunist Divide," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 1 (1999): 57. Also see Charles King, "Post-Postcommunism: Transition, Comparison, and the End of 'Eastern Europe,'" *World Politics* 53, no. 1 (2000): 143–72.

5. These surveys consist of the "New Democracies Barometer," which focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, the "New Russia Barometer," as well as the "New Baltic Barometer," and they generally apply the same questionnaire to most of the countries within postcommunist Europe. For a more complete description of the surveys, see Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives: Understanding Postcommunist Societies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Richard Rose, "Where Are Postcommunist Countries Going?" *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 3 (1997): 92–108; Richard Rose, "A Diverging Europe," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 1 (2001): 93–106.

6. Note that since I am focusing on civil society in the context of democracy and democratization, I only include countries that have passed a minimum threshold of pro-

cedural democracy, measured by an average score of 3.5 or better on the Freedom House country scores in both 1995–96 and 1996–97. This distinction is necessary since membership in organizations in nondemocratic societies is rarely legal, autonomous, and voluntary, and it is often forced or coercive. To include such nondemocratic countries would thus distort the very essence of the concept of civil society. For the Freedom House scores, see “Annual Survey of Freedom House Country Scores 1972–73 to 1998–99,” <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/ratings.pdf>>.

7. These consist of the following: government, parliament, president, civil servants, courts, parties, army, police, media, church, patriotic societies, farm organizations, trade unions, private enterprise, and foreign experts. For a more complete description and analysis, see Richard Rose, “Rethinking Civil Society: Postcommunism and the Problem of Trust,” *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 19–22; William Mishler and Richard Rose, “Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Postcommunist Societies,” *Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997): 418–51.

8. Moreover, the final category of “other” organizations should capture, albeit less explicitly and directly, the remaining types of organizations that were not included in the question list.

9. Again, for reasons articulated above, this analysis only includes countries with scores of 3.5 or better on the Freedom House scales in 1995–96 and 1996–97. Unfortunately, Poland is missing from the WVS results on membership in voluntary organizations, due to incomplete data. This is notable and regrettable, since, as mentioned above, Poland has generally been viewed as the “exception” within postcommunist Europe, with a more active civil society as a result of the noncollectivization of agriculture, the influence of the Catholic church, as well as the mass mobilization of the Solidarity movement. However, it is worth pointing out that a cross-national study of several postcommunist countries conducted by Samuel Barnes and his colleagues in 1990–92 found that Poland actually had considerably *lower* levels of organizational membership than every other postcommunist country in the study (even in religious organizations), and Barnes actually uses the term “Polish exceptionalism” to refer to Poland’s unusually *weak* civil society. See Samuel H. Barnes, “The Mobilization of Political Identity in New Democracies,” in *The Postcommunist Citizen*, ed. Samuel H. Barnes and János Simon (Budapest: Erasmus Foundation, 1998), 127. Moreover, in the two categories of membership in voluntary organizations that the 1995–97 World Values Survey asked about in Poland—political parties and unions—the results confirmed Barnes’s findings, showing exceptionally low levels of membership. Unfortunately, due to the missing data on the other seven types of organizations, I will not be able to answer any questions about Poland definitively, although certainly the preliminary evidence suggests that Poland may fit in with other postcommunist countries more than has previously been acknowledged.

10. See Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000), which was originally published as “Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes,” in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 175–411. For a summary of the main argument, see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Postcommunist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 38–54.

11. This main distinction is also justified by Linz and Stepan, who write, “Empirically, of course, most of the Soviet-type systems in the 1980s were not totalitarian. However, the ‘Soviet type’ regimes, with the exception of Poland, could not be understood in their distinctiveness by including them in the category of an authoritarian regime.” Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 41.

12. Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 55–56 (italics in original).

13. Variables tested include country-level GDP per capita, political rights and civil liberties, and “civilization,” as well as individual-level income, education, age, gender, city

size, trust in others, television watching, and “postmaterialism.” See Marc Morjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Postcommunist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

14. I develop these three factors at much greater length, based on extensive analysis of in-depth interviews and a specially commissioned representative survey in Eastern Germany and Russia, in Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Postcommunist Europe*.

15. See also James L. Gibson, “Social Networks, Civil Society, and the Prospects for Consolidating Russia’s Democratic Transition,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 1 (2001): 51–68.

16. See, for example, Sheri Berman, “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic,” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 401–29; Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, “The Weimar/Russia Comparison,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 13, no. 3 (1997): 252–83.

17. This claim, made famous by Robert Putnam’s research on the United States, may not actually apply to other advanced industrialized countries. See, for example, Peter A. Hall, “Social Capital in Britain,” *British Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 3 (1999); and Bo Rothstein, “Social Capital in the Social Democratic State,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, 3–6 September 1998.

18. Putnam himself acknowledges the wide differences between countries, as well as the still relatively high levels of organizational membership in the United States. For example, he writes that “[t]oday, as 170 years ago, Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations.” See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 48.

19. On the role of political elites in the breakdown of democracy, see, for example, Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Nancy Bermeo, “Democracy in Europe,” *Daedalus* 123, no. 2 (1994): 159–78; Thomas Ertman, “Democracy and Dictatorship in Interwar Western Europe Revisited,” *World Politics* 50, no. 3 (1998): 475–505.

20. As Hanson and Kopstein point out, “[W]hile the legacy of totalitarianism indeed poses significant obstacles to the formation of a postcommunist ‘civil society,’ social atomization may also simultaneously pose obstacles to the creation of a workable authoritarianism.” See Hanson and Kopstein, “The Weimar/Russia Comparison,” 277.

21. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 338.

22. For an evocative description of this problem, see Richard Rose, “Russia as an Hour-Glass Society: A Constitution without Citizens,” *East European Constitutional Review* 4, no. 3 (1995): 34–42.

23. Theda Skocpol, “How Americans Became Civic,” in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 70.

24. For a recent analysis of the problem of prediction in both Sovietology and “post-Sovietology,” see Michael E. Urban and M. Steven Fish, “Does Post-Sovietology Have A Future?” in *Rethinking Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia*, ed. Michael Cox (London: Pinter, 1999), 164–80. For a balanced overview of the debates surrounding Sovietology, see George Breslauer, “In Defense of Sovietology,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 8, no. 3 (1992): 197–238.

25. Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952 [1928]). Also see, among others, M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *Generations and Politics: A Panel Study of Young Adults and Their Parents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Interestingly, many demographers have used the analogy of war or depression to characterize the devastating demographic effects of the collapse of communism and the difficulties of postcommunist transition. See

Nicholas Eberstadt, "Demographic Disaster: The Soviet Legacy," *National Interest* 36 (1994): 53–57; Nicholas Eberstadt, "Demographic Shocks after Communism: Eastern Germany, 1989–93," *Population and Development Review* 20, no. 1 (1994): 137–52.

26. Piotr Sztompka, "Looking Back: The Year 1989 as a Cultural and Civilizational Break," *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 29, no. 2 (1996): 126–27.

27. See, for example, Richard G. Braungart and Margaret M. Braungart, "Life-Course and Generational Politics," *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1986): 205–31; Stanley A. Renshon, ed. *Handbook of Political Socialization: Theory and Research* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Orit Ichilov, *Political Socialization, Citizenship Education, and Democracy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990).

28. See Richard Rose and Ellen Carnaghan, "Generational Effects on Attitudes to Communist Regimes: A Comparative Analysis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1995): 28–56.

29. See Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999); Janine R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe 1989–1998* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

30. For examples of the conservative approach in the American debate, see William A. Schambra, "All Community Is Local: The Key to America's Civic Renewal," and Dan Coats and Rick Santorum, "Civil Society and the Humble Role of Government," both in *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America*, ed. E. J. Dionne, Jr. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 44–49.

31. See, for example, Theda Skocpol, "How Americans Became Civic"; Jonah D. Levy, *Tocqueville's Revenge: State, Society, and Economy in Contemporary France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Stephen Padgett, *Organizing Democracy in Eastern Germany: Interest Groups in Postcommunist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Peter A. Hall, "Social Capital in Britain," *British Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 3 (1999): 417–61.

32. See Wade Jacoby, *Imitation and Politics: Redesigning Modern Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).