

Can the Memory of a Historical Uprising Reduce Transitional Uncertainty? A Comparative Study of Hungary and the Former Soviet Union

GERGANA YANKOVA

Abstract: The author explores how incumbents form their preferences when regime types change. The author juxtaposes the perceptions of the Hungarian and the Soviet Communist Party hard-liners during the transition from Communism in 1989–91. During this time, the memory of a historical uprising reduced the incumbents' misperceptions about their popular legitimacy via two mechanisms. First, historical memory functioned as a "public tolerance indicator" because it brought the opposition together and demonstrated the true distribution of political support. Second, the memory of a past uprising served as a "conservative reformer" when it opened up internal party debate about the legitimacy of the regime. The author's argument contributes to the scarce literature on actors' preferences formation under conditions of transitional uncertainty. It also provides a useful analytical bridge between actor-oriented and system-centered approaches to democratization.

Keywords: historical memory, Hungary, political legitimacy, post-Communist transition, public opinion, Russia

Political actors form their preferences on the basis of their perceptions about their public support. As the Soviet Union began to dissolve in 1989, however, the true extent of the public support for the Communist incumbents in satellite states such as Hungary was unknown because Communist regimes did not hold contested elections. Transitional uncertainty also arose from the undefined institutional rules, the fluid party structure and the unknown reaction of the Soviet Union.

Incumbents dealt with uncertainty in different ways. Some party members underestimated the importance and extent of their political legitimacy. These hard-liners stubbornly clung to the old order. Other Communist leaders appreciated the true scale of societal changes, along with the limitations of their power, early on. These politicians took timely steps to democratize and compromise with the opposition. The variance of the incumbents' preferences constitutes a puzzle. Earlier scholarship on democratic transitions has

Gergana Yankova is a PhD candidate in the government department at Harvard University. Copyright © 2008 Heldref Publications

generally treated perceptions as exogenous, leaving the reasons for the disaccord largely unexamined. This study elucidates the development of actors' preferences during transitional periods.

The historical memory of a failed antiregime uprising can reduce the incumbents' uncertainty about their political legitimacy by providing those in power with a barometer of public dissatisfaction. Two mechanisms are at work. First, the historical memory of a popular insurrection opens up a debate about the party's legitimacy. During the debate, the more progressive party members criticize the conservative members for their role in defeating the popular uprising. The conservative members then resign, and the party reforms and democratizes. Second, commemorations of past uprisings reveal the strength of the opposition and show the regime's limited public support. The rulers realize that the likelihood of preserving the status quo has decreased and that the only way to preserve power is to associate with the popular historical symbols. As the demonstrations commemorating historical heroes increase, the hard-liners who hoped to embrace the progressive ideas only in words discover they need to back their new image with reforms and compromises.

In this article, I revisit the theoretical discussion about the nature of transitional uncertainty and the process of preference formation. I then specify how historical memory can impact the incumbents' perceptions about their legitimacy under conditions of uncertainty. Next, I position the argument within the scholarship of democratic transition and suggest that the proposition connects structural and actor-oriented explanations of regime change. In the first empirical part, I distinguish five episodes in which the memory of the 1956 uprising informed and moderated the incumbents' perceptions in Hungary: the fall of Janos Kádár, the rise of Károly Grósz, the interview of Imre Poszgay, the demonstrations of March 15, and the reburial of Imre Nagy. The second empirical part examines the factors that motivated the Soviet hard-liners to stage the 1991 coup. I hypothesize that the incumbents' misperception in the Soviet Union can partly be attributed to the lack of a memory of a popular antiregime uprising.

The Argument: The Memory of a Popular Uprising Can Reduce the Incumbents' Misperception of Their Legitimacy

What was the incumbents' decision calculus during the period of transition from Communism? With hindsight, it is clear many signs predicted the regime's demise in 1989. At the time of the transition, however, these were open to various interpretations.

The surprised included the leaders of the incumbent communist regimes. . . . What is it that can keep even the most astute and best informed members of a society unaware of imminent political changes of epochal significance? . . . If signs of change are now so clear, why were they not noticed prior to late 1989? Why has our hindsight with respect to the collapse of East European communism proved vastly superior to our foresight?¹

Transitions are uncertain because they are "unusually full of information, and confusing information at that, given the deregulation of politics and economics . . . and the absence of such filters as class, institutions, roles, and interests to sort out environmental clues. . . . The environment, in short, lacks correctives and makes clear judgments impossible and this encourages quite idiosyncratic interpretations."² Of all the uncertainties during transition, the most important unknown variable is public support for the regime. The early transitional democracies, however, did not have precise indicators of public support. Some

surveys were conducted, but their accuracy was marred by the complex relations between opinion polling and political circumstances under Communism.³ In addition, political parties were in flux and citizens were often unaware of their existence. Therefore, transitional actors have to accept proxies for public support.

Kernell suggests there are three methods of estimating public opinion in the absence of accurate polling techniques: extrapolation from the results of previous elections, reading newspaper endorsements, or considering the “prognostications of intelligent men acquainted with the politics of the district.”⁴ All three indicators were very imprecise instruments for deciphering public support in the post-Communist countries in 1989. Previous elections did not gauge political legitimacy—they were uncontested. Media endorsements were a bad proxy for the degree of public support because the Communist Party controlled most newspapers and television. Insightful and knowledgeable men were rarely given the floor if their predictions did not favor the regime.

The memory of a past uprising, however, can be a good approximation of public support, when the standard means of assessing political legitimacy are lacking. Historical memory can serve as a “public tolerance indicator” by bringing the oppositional forces together and professing their strength. According to Kuran, people express their private preferences publicly only when the cost of doing so is low:

[One] determinant of the person’s private preference is the set of benefits and costs associated with alternative public preference options. If the likely cost of joining the rally, and thus revealing a preference for political change, is a stint in jail or ostracism by one’s peers, the prudent course of action may be to remain on the sidelines. . . . The external benefits and costs associated with a public-preference choice generally depend on the choices of others. If only a few people are demonstrating against the regime, the possible external cost of participation is likely to be much higher, and the expected benefit much lower, than if the streets are packed with demonstrators.⁵

Historical memory lowers the cost of public expression of a political preference because its official focus is not to protest directly against the regime but to celebrate a past uprising. Because the demonstrations only indirectly subvert the incumbents’ authority, the likelihood of punishment is lower. Consequently, people are more daring in expressing their preferences. The idea that past historical repertoires can mobilize oppositional forces is not new, but these demonstrations can also serve to inform the incumbents of their limited public support and this information potentially changes their willingness to compromise.⁶

In its role as a “conservative reformer,” the interpretation of a failed antiregime uprising opens a debate about the legitimacy of the Communist regime. The party members are reminded that public opinion is important and that it does not favor them. The historical discussion sets the party reformists and conservatives apart and ultimately prompts the conservatives to soften their political stance. If they were involved in defeating the protesters, they may even leave the party. This process leads to the gradual reformation of the Communist Party.

The general argument is the likelihood of political outcomes depends on the distribution of political power. Actors will rationally calculate the likelihood of realizing their most preferred outcome, but transitions from Communism lack reliable “reference points,” such as elections and polls, to indicate the power distribution between the Communist hard-liners, the Communist reformists, and the opposition. In the absence of such data, actors will overestimate or underestimate popular sentiment.

Demonstrations related to the historical memory of popular uprisings, however, can be used to accurately determine the unpopularity of a regime because it allows the public to voice its opposition in a relatively low-risk environment. Such events can expose the strength of popular opposition and remind the incumbents that popular legitimacy is important and that they lack it.

Where in the Literature Is the Proposition Situated?

Theories of democratization can be roughly categorized as system-oriented or actor-oriented.⁷ Initial scholarship underscored structural factors, such as economic development, social class, education levels, property rights, cultural norms, or the timing of industrialization.⁸ The advent of the second and third waves of democratization questioned the centrality of the environment and bolstered actor-oriented theories that explained democratic outcomes with the strategic interactions of politicians.⁹ According to this second theory, political actors choose their strategy based on their perception of the utility of the transitional outcomes and the corresponding chances for realizing them.¹⁰

The proposed argument provides an analytical bridge between structural-historical and actor-centered approaches to democratization. The proposition is related to actor-oriented theories because only political actors can recollect a historical memory. The Polish transition is one case where a past antiregime uprising existed and yet the memory of it was unimportant because the actors did not take advantage of it. Kubik and Linch point out that “solidarity . . . seems to offer an abundant reservoir of ‘symbolic material’ out of which skillful political-cultural entrepreneurs should be able to fashion a compelling symbolic/mythical foundation for the new, post-Communist democratic Polish republic. This has not happened, however.”¹¹ The Polish political leaders deliberately avoided talking about historic memories at the roundtable. As one participant states, a major condition of the negotiations “was the principle of not discussing symbolic problems. We were to solve the future and avoid arguing about the past. We believed, and I think most of us agreed here, that if we started getting into discussions about the past wrongs, we wouldn’t accomplish anything.”¹² The memory of a past uprising in Poland was not important because the political actors chose not to refer to it.

The proposition is also related to system-oriented theories because historical memory affects the incumbents’ perceptions only in conjunction with other structural “reference points,” such as the fall of Communism in neighboring countries, economic liberalization, the federal structure of the state, and the development of civil society. The impact of historical memory varies with the importance and availability of these conditions. Some serve to reinforce it; others lessen it. The negotiators at the Hungarian roundtable in September 1989, for example, learned from the defeat of the Communist Party in the Polish elections in June 1989.¹³ This reinforced the impact of historical memory. In another example, the memory of a past uprising in Germany was less influential for the transition than the fact that the country was artificially divided after World War II and people who spoke the same language wanted to come together. The country’s structural division lessened the effect of historical memory.

The proposed argument about historical memory can easily be confused with path-dependent explanations. It differs, however, along five dimensions.¹⁴ First, the independent causal factor in path-dependent analysis is a popular uprising, while I focus on the memory of a popular uprising. Second, path-dependent analyses are interested in the impact of suc-

cessful uprisings, while I examine the consequences of unsuccessful revolutions. Third, path-dependent studies posit an uninterrupted course of events following an uprising, while the proposed analysis connects two distant points in time—that of the revolution and its interpretation during democratization. Fourth, path-dependent analyses are deterministic, whereas I suggest the impact of historical memory is a function of the agency of politicians. Finally, I suggest that history is an instrument rather than an independent causal factor.

This argument also challenges some aspects of rational choice theory. Rational choice approaches stipulate that political preferences are based on knowledge of one's political legitimacy. They fail to specify, however, how actors gauge their popular support. Most studies assume that preferences are exogenous. As Renwick points out, "Rational choice analyses . . . typically take the overall definition of choice situation and the options that actors perceive as given: they cannot account for the frames within which rational choices are made."¹⁵ Politicians are "cognitively rational in the sense that they change their beliefs about the world as a function of information they get."¹⁶ The question of how remains unanswered, however.

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Hungary: More Flexible Incumbents and the Memory of a Popular Antiregime Uprising

I propose two mechanisms, labeled here as “conservative reformer” and “public tolerance indicator,” that updated the preferences of some members of the Communist Party in Hungary. The gradual shift in the use of 1956-related rhetoric within the Communist Party—from the conservative leaders to the reformist leaders—acted as the “conservative reformer” in Hungary. Historical memory, acting as a “public tolerance indicator,” inspired two massive antiregime demonstrations and became a major indicator of the strength of the opposition.

The Memory of the 1956 Uprising as a “Conservative Reformer”

The memory of the 1956 uprising was closely related to the process of reforming the Hungarian Communist Party. Table 1 outlines the political developments and the role the historical memory of the uprising played in the events.

The memory of the 1956 uprising facilitated the process of bringing down Hungarian Communist Party Secretary General Janos Kádár and increasing the popularity of Kárdy Grósz. Kádár realized his role in crushing the 1956 revolution constituted a major political liability for him. His decision to cede power was connected to the legacy of 1956. Although the deteriorating economy and his ill health were concomitant factors, Kádár's decision was mainly dictated by his “deep-seated fear for having to account for his personal record.”¹⁷ Tokés points out that: “Kádár could ill-afford the laying bare of his record. It is only in the last months of his life that he owed up to the crushing burden of his role in the deaths of Laszlo Rajk and Imre Nagy—he called it my personal tragedy—and of his error in

TABLE 1. The Impact of the Historical Uprisings and Corresponding Developments During the 1989 Transition in Hungary

Date	Political developments	Role of the 1956 events
May 22, 1988	General Secretary Janos Kádár is effectively removed from power. Kádár fears the legacy of his role in crushing the 1956 uprising.	Conservative reformer
January 1, 1988	Kádár's successor, Károly Grósz, publicly underscores his role as a Communist dissident in 1956.	Conservative reformer
February 10, 1989	Imre Pozsgay's interpretation that the 1956 revolt was a popular uprising leads to an extraordinary Central Committee meeting in which members agree to introduce a multi-party system.	Conservative reformer
March 15, 1989	The demonstration celebrating the anniversary of the 1848 revolution brings the opposition together.	Public tolerance indicator
June 16, 1989	The reburial of the 1956 revolutionary hero, Imre Nagy, demonstrates the opposition's strength. Many Communist Party members join the parade.	Public tolerance indicator and conservative reformer
June 23, 1989	The Central Committee Plenum topples Károly Grósz in the face of the massive turnout at the Nagy reburial.	Conservative reformer
June 13–September 19, 1989	As a result of the mass demonstrations commemorating the 1956 and 1848 revolutions, the Communist Party decides to make actual concessions to the opposition at the roundtable.	Conservative reformer
October 23, 1989	People turn up in great numbers to celebrate the thirty-third anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 revolution.	Public tolerance indicator
March 25, 1990	Hungary holds its first free election.	Public tolerance indicator

summarily labeling the events of October 1956 as a counter-revolution.”¹⁸ The *New York Times* reported that “the exhumation in March of the body of the leader of the 1956 rebellion, Imre Nagy, was a severe blow to Mr. Kádár” and implied that this event was responsible for the sudden deterioration of Kádár’s mental and physical state.¹⁹ Ironically, Kádár died on the day when the Hungarian Supreme Court announced Nagy’s full legal rehabilitation.

The political career of Grósz, Kádár’s successor, was also connected with the memory of 1956. Very early in the pretransition period, Grósz made an effort to associate himself with

the 1956 uprising. He used the occasion of a televised New Year's interview on January 1, 1988, to emphasize how he had been reprimanded for collaborating with radical university students in October 1956.²⁰ Grósz's association with 1956 seems out of character, because he later opposed the rehabilitation of Imre Nagy and refused to interpret the 1956 events as an uprising, but rather as a counterrevolution. It is reasonable to conclude that Grósz used the 1956 rhetoric to sell his image to the public. A perceptive politician with a substantial experience in the public relations sector, he must have realized that a favorable attitude toward the 1956 events would increase his popularity. Charles Gati observed: "The past may assist those who seek to escape from complex and often painful realities . . . the silent [people], haunted by the memory of their passivity during the Communist era, may try to blot out that experience by identifying with the best and the bravest their history can offer."²¹

The memory of the 1956 events also facilitated the reformation of the Communist Party because it unleashed a rigorous debate about the regime's legitimacy. This was the third important manifestation of historical memory as a "conservative reformer." Imre Pozsgay, who made a shocking revelation in his January 28, 1989, interview with the popular radio program *168 Hours*, started the discussion. Pozsgay reported on behalf of the Historical Subcommittee that the October 1956 rebellion was a popular uprising. The statement defied the official version, which held that the 1956 uprising had been a counterrevolution organized by a foreign country. According to the new interpretation, the 1956 protests expressed the Hungarian people's discontent with the system. The regime that forcefully crushed the uprising was therefore illegitimate. One Communist Party member observed: "The vast majority is dumbfounded, and not because they have heard the results of an academic research from the Historical Subcommittee, but because they feel that a pillar of the institutionalized political system is somehow based on 1956. And now they have the impression that this foundation is being removed from underneath."²²

Pozsgay's historical interpretation was an open challenge to the Communist Party. The old Communist elite were at pains to gauge the right response. Signs of popular support for Pozsgay were ambiguous. 3,000 people withdrew from the party immediately after the broadcast. At the same time, 470 local organizations of the Communist party wrote letters to support Grósz.²³ The conservative Communists did not want to expel a potentially popular politician, so they had to agree to Pozsgay's interpretation of the 1956 events. But an agreement that 1956 was a "popular uprising" meant the regime had crushed the will of its people. If it wanted to keep a popular politician in the party and preserve an air of legitimacy, the Communist Party had to compromise. The hard-liners took a middle-of-the-road view and stated that the events started as an uprising but ended as a counter-revolution. They decided not to punish Pozsgay and to introduce a multiparty system. A negotiating team was appointed to work with the opposition. These decisions indicated that the conservatives had made progress in "updating" their views.

Was historical memory coincidentally or causally related to the democratization of the Communist Party? Scholars agree that Pozsgay's interpretation facilitated the party's reformation because it amplified the gap between progressives and conservatives: "Some groups in the Party became more and more estranged from the core. A dividing issue was created during the reevaluation of 1956."²⁴ Several factors indicate the interview had an impact. First, the Central Committee session, where the decision to introduce a multiple-party system was made, was specifically convened to address Pozsgay's interview. Therefore, one can establish a causal connection insofar as the interpretation of the 1956

uprising opened a discussion forum. Second, Pozsgay explicitly associated the uprising with popular opinion. He stated that the committee's evaluation "approaches those of historians and *public opinion*, and expresses the feeling of *public opinion*."²⁵ Third, according to the minutes of the Central Committee meeting, all members dealt simultaneously with "1956" and the question of a multiparty system.²⁶

The Memory of the 1956 and 1848 Uprisings as a "Public Tolerance Indicator"

The extraordinary meeting convened to discuss Pozsgay's interview was a necessary but insufficient step toward updating the incumbents' perceptions. Although the Communist

"During the March 15 demonstration, people realized there were two different political alternatives and started asking: 'are you going to their demonstration or to ours?'"

members invited the opposition to roundtable negotiations, they were not planning to make meaningful concessions. A large segment of the Politburo believed the negotiations were a way to legitimize their decisions. Most Politburo members were still not aware of how limited their popular support was: "No one knew at that point what kind of change the masses would support. At that point, the three public power contests were still ahead. Perhaps, in those days, the possibility of a forceful reversal still existed and some day

we may learn whether secret plans were made to liquidate the opposition and pacify the opposition by force, if needed."²⁷

The memory of historical uprisings moderated the options of the Communist hard-liners by demonstrating the opposition's strength. Historical memory helped the opposition display its strength because it lowered the barriers to demonstrating. The cost of demonstrating at a historical rally was lower than the cost of demonstrating against the Communist government. People were less fearful of reprisal and turned up in greater numbers because of the demonstration's nature. In the face of the mass demonstrations, the Communists realized their most preferred outcome—preserving political power—was less probable than they had initially anticipated. The realization of the regime's limited support induced the hard-liners to make substantial political concessions.

The rally on March 15, 1989, was the first to impact the hard-liners' willingness to compromise with the opposition. It commemorated the failed 1848 revolution against Habsburg rule. Apprehending the opposition's strength, the government wanted to celebrate the occasion with a unified demonstration. The opposition, however, invited the population to their own demonstration. The results were both surprising and categorical. The government's rally summoned only 20,000 to 30,000 people, while the opposition convened about 100,000 demonstrators. The parallel and competing demonstrations became institutionalized as "tests of strength" and, lacking parliamentary representation, a public manifestation of the popular will.²⁸

Without official measurements of public support, such as elections, the historical rallies became the most accurate measurement. During the March 15 demonstration, people realized there were two different political alternatives and started asking, "Are you going

to their demonstration or to ours?" The opposition also realized it had many followers and became aware of its new identity. The memory of 1848 outlined a space for contestation where the opposition took precedence. "It is precisely in the ritual's ability to hold both sides with their irreducible tension together that a key to its legitimacy can be found. . . . It provided a space for contestation and contained the rivalry."²⁹

The rally to rebury Nagy was the second manifestation of historical memory in its role as a "public tolerance indicator." Nagy was the 1956 revolutionary hero. He was briefly a prime minister during the 1956 revolution and is credited for announcing Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. When Soviet troops crushed the revolution, Nagy was arrested. His trial was closed and he was hanged by the Kádár regime. The 1989 reburial was a public negation of the regime's negation of Nagy. By the time of the rally, the hard-liners had exhausted all means of marginalizing, criminalizing, or coopting the opposition. They had only one option left—to incorporate themselves in the political space defined by the opposition. Many of them placed wreaths in front of Nagy's coffin. Because it was clear this symbolic gesture did not suffice to gain credibility with the electorate, they also signed an agreement with the Opposition Roundtable (EKA), an umbrella of oppositional formations, to enter the trilateral negotiations. In this way, the public support that became clear through the demonstrations informed and updated the preferences of the incumbents.

For the party's reform Communist leaders it was now a race against time. . . . Hundreds of thousands were likely to be in Heroes' Square on June 16, and a national audience would watch the funeral on television. . . . So as to not blast the castle, they moved with uncharacteristic speed and solicitousness to reach agreement with the united opposition for direct and almost unconditional negotiations.³⁰

Most scholars agree the Nagy reburial affected the incumbents' preferences. Laszlo Kurti writes: "The funeral ritual at Heroes' Square brought about not only the significance of historical symbols and dead heroes, but, equally important, the state's admission of failure. . . . In the absence of a Hungarian Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel to lead the opposition, the Hungarian elite turned to its historical roots. These 'undead' culture heroes, in particular Imre Nagy, were set against the living Communist foes, namely Janos Kádár and his follower Károly Grósz."³¹ Timothy Garton Ash wrote that historical memory functioned as a substitute for elections: "In Poland it was an election. In Hungary, it was a funeral: the funeral of Imre Nagy."³²

A host of other interpretations underscore the importance of historical memory as a "public tolerance indicator." Mass-mobilization theories argue that past uprisings provide the repertoire for mass demonstrations: "Hungary has a well established tradition of street demonstrations and struggles (1956 in particular), which played a significant role during the power transfer of 1988–90."³³ An anthropological perspective connects the act of exhumation of revolutionary heroes with uncertainty and political power struggles: "I see dead bodies as one of the many vehicles through which people in post-socialist societies reconfigure their worlds of meaning, in the wake of . . . a profoundly disorienting change in their surroundings."³⁴ Karl Benzinger stated the Imre Nagy funeral "reaffirmed the strength and solidarity of the community itself."³⁵ Ash reported that some observers of the funeral thought the "longer term impact of the event, and above all the nationwide televising of the event, could not be overstated. . . . The most optimistic assessment came from the controversial Young Democrat Victor Orban. Imre Nagy's funeral would be to Hungary, he said, what the first visit of Pope John Paul II had been to Poland."³⁶

The only study that defies the utility of historical symbols is an analysis of the first post-Communist elections. "This study correctly points out that elections are a more reliable indicator of political legitimacy than historical memory: both the conservatives and the liberals failed to express the interests of the electorate, and instead played the game of politics of symbols that featured starkly drawn ideological contrasts."³⁷ However, it fails to consider that historical discourses were a necessary if imperfect substitute for electoral rhetoric during the transitional period.³⁸

The Soviet Union: Greater Uncertainty of Perceptions and More Resilient Hard-liners

While the Hungarian Communists continually readjusted their positions, some Soviet hard-liners failed to update their views. The conservatives' unwillingness to compromise was most evident in their decision to stage a coup d'état. On Sunday, August 19, 1991, eight high-ranking officials put General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev under house arrest in his summer home in Foros in Crimea. They demanded that he sign a decree turning power over to Vice President Gennady Yanayev. Gorbachev refused to cooperate. The hard-liners announced a six-month state-of-emergency rule by decree. They ordered about 750 armored vehicles on the streets of Moscow. The next day, Russian President Boris Yeltsin clambered atop an armored truck outside the Russian White House to announce he would assume command. Yeltsin's appearance inspired protests throughout the country. On Tuesday, thousands of people built barricades and urged the military commanders to turn back. Troops started defending the protesters. On Tuesday afternoon, Yeltsin announced to the Russian parliament that some of the conspirators were fleeing to Vnukovo Airport. The conspirators were arrested and imprisoned. The coup ended after two days.

Many explanations of why the coup failed exist. Some claim the conspirators underestimated the probability that Gorbachev would not cooperate.³⁹ A second possible cause is the conspirators underestimated Yeltsin as a foe: "Betting that Yeltsin's authoritarian leanings and the animosity he nursed toward Gorbachev would be enough to make him putty in their hands, Kryuchkov said approximately the following: 'we will reach an agreement with Yeltsin, we will fix this problem without any measures beforetime.'"⁴⁰ A third explanation is that the plotters were disturbed by imminent signing of the Union Treaty. Other factors for the failed coup are the limited popular acceptance for the Communist regime, critical economic conditions, a no longer submissive army, and the lack of a determined leadership.⁴¹

Given that the coup's success was unlikely, the real puzzle is not so much why the conspiracy floundered but why the Communist hard-liners believed it would succeed. I suggest the plotters failed to correctly read four major reference points. First, the plotters did not interpret the massive demonstrations as indications of limited popular legitimacy. They believed instead that people were either manipulated into protesting by cunning politicians or that the protesters constituted a nonrepresentative part of the population. Second, the conspirators failed to update their perceptions in light of the unfavorable outcomes of elections and opinion polls. They perceived all indicators of limited popular legitimacy as a conspiracy meant to discredit them. Third, despite their recognition of the economically destitute, the conspirators insisted the planned economy model was remediable. Finally, the conspirators ignored the lessons generated by the fall of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989. They chose to concentrate on distant historical episodes when

TABLE 2. Juxtaposition of the Communist Party Reformers' and Hard-liners' Perceptions of Various "Reference Points"

Reference points	Hard-liners' perception	Reformists' perception
Demonstrations	Manipulative politicians trick people into demonstrating. The protestors represent a minority of the population.	Demonstrations are an expression of the public will. The demonstrations were massive.
Elections	Yeltsin won two elections because they were rigged.	The election of Yeltsin and Gorbachev proved that people supported democratic changes.
Army	The Soviet army is historically the guardian of national values. It can decide better than the people what is best for the country.	The army is demoralized and unprofessional. It should serve the people, not vice versa.
Economy	The economy is floundering because Gorbachev is an unapt leader.	The economy is floundering because Communism failed.
History	The three uprisings in the ex-Communist block (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1981) show that people gradually learn to abide by the army. The October Revolution was glorious.	The fall of Communism in Central Europe showed that regimes that are not backed by the people are doomed. It is wrong to adhere to the ideology of Communism's founders, because the world has changed.

Communism thrived. Table 2 illustrates the differences between the reformists' and hard-liners' perceptions.

Among the misperceptions that led to the coup, the biggest was the overestimation of the regime's legitimacy.⁴² Gorbachev stated, "If the coup had happened a year and a half or two years earlier it might, presumably, have succeeded. But now society was completely changed. . . . This is the plotters' biggest mistake—they did not realize that society was no longer what it used to be a few years before. The new democratic achievements of perestroika . . . predetermined the plotters' defeat."⁴³ Gorbachev's advisor Anatoly Chernyayev similarly believed "a fundamental change has occurred in society's attitude, the people themselves have changed. And this was the putschists' main miscalculation."⁴⁴

It is puzzling why the incumbents overestimated their public support, given that there were many signs of public discontent. According to Mark Beissinger, there were 2,177 violent and 6,644 nonviolent protest demonstrations in the Soviet Union between 1987 and 1992. In the wake of the August coup, the warning signs were even more distinct as there was a quantum leap in protests.⁴⁵ The plotters had several misconceptions that helped them misinterpret the extent of public support for their regime. They believed a handful of self-interested populists initiated the demonstrations, the discontented protesters were not representative of the population as a whole, and elections and opinion polls that favored the opposition were rigged.

The Soviet hard-liners did not interpret the massive demonstrations as a “reference point”; they believed self-interested authorities inspired the protests. Valentin Pavlov wrote that “[central, republic, and local activists] took to isolation, separatism and nationalism as the main way to save themselves and their power.”⁴⁶ Vladimir Kryuchkov agreed with Pavlov: “The separatist moods did not originate from the masses, they were initiated by nationalist and for some reasons anti-Soviet groups. . . . Apart from the outbursts of nationalism and the fruitful ground for its manifestation created by the propagandistic efforts of antisocialist powers, the situation in the Baltics was relatively stable.”⁴⁷

The hard-liners also believed the protesters represented only a tiny minority of the population. Kryuchkov wrote in his memoirs that “there were three groups in the regions of political tension. First, a group of about 5–10 percent actively expressed its negative attitude to the Union and the socialist state. This part of the population . . . actively defended its positions, organized demonstrations. A second group of about 15–20 percent firmly defended the Union and the choice of socialism. . . . The third group of approximately 70 percent behaved passively. . . . A deeper analysis showed that this passive part of the population, without a doubt, in its bigger part tended to support the preservation of the Union.”⁴⁸

In other cases, hard-liners concentrated on the more favorable signals from the population. Dmitry Yazov, for example, believed Gorbachev’s reelection as Soviet president with 71 percent of an uncontested ballot proved that he was unpopular: “The people, tired of bickering and extremely disappointed with their leader, would never rise in his [Gorbachev’s] defense. The results of the first election of the Russian president spoke of the distrust in Gorbachev.”⁴⁹ Other conservative incumbents avoided drawing conclusions from unfavorable opinion polls by insisting that they were manipulated. Pavlov argued that Yeltsin won the Russian presidency because Gorbachev sabotaged the election.⁵⁰ Similarly, Pavlov believed Yeltsin’s election to the post of chairman of the Supreme Soviet at the congress of national deputies was rigged. He states in his memoirs that the support for Yeltsin’s opponent, Ivan Polozkov, was greater, but Gorbachev forced him to withdraw his candidacy at the last minute.⁵¹

Why did the hard-liners consistently disregard otherwise obvious signs of a lack of popular support? One hypothesis is the success of crushing previous uprisings instilled confidence in the coup plotters. Ted Gurr argues that the “successful use of coercion enhances leaders’ assessment of its future utility.”⁵² Another view purports that the conspirators were intrinsically immune to considerations of public opinion because they had the mentality of party bureaucrats:

[The Politburo members] did not listen to anything, did not understand. Just horrid. . . . Our Party leaders were absolutely innocent babies with respect to public opinion. They were brought up on propaganda. They read the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*. They believed that the entire Soviet people, as one people, support them and so on. This was deeply implanted. So, knowing what people think about you, as general secretary, and if you aren’t accepted by everyone—and moreover, sometimes it happens that more people don’t accept you than those who do—a first reaction is that everything is a lie, some underhand practices.⁵³

A further factor underlying the hard-liners’ misperceptions is that they have not experienced a local antiregime popular uprising. The author’s counterfactual hypothesis is the memory of a Soviet past antiregime uprising could have fulfilled the same functions it did in Hungary—demonstrating the power of the opposition and starting the process of

reforming the Communist Party. The Soviet hard-liners remembered the past uprisings in foreign countries, but rebellions in neighboring countries do not have the same effect as local rebellions. At the same time, very few local Soviet protests rebelled against Communism per se. The struggle against the Soviet regime was subordinate to the struggle for national independence: "In spite of the widespread belief that the breakup of the USSR would evoke a violent struggle between supporters and opponents of the Soviet regime, violence over the issue of secession from the USSR was minimal."⁵⁴ In the absence of clearer reference points, the conservative politicians had difficulties assessing the distribution of power. Historical memory of an antiregime uprising is not a necessary or sufficient condition of democratizing the regime's hard-liners. It can, however, underscore the impact of a debilitated army, nationalist sentiments, and other historical reference points.

Can the Memory of a Failed Uprising Affect the Perceptions of the Communist Incumbents during Transition?

The process of actors' preference formation during the transition from Communism has already been examined. Incumbents had difficulty estimating their popular legitimacy for two reasons. First, power holders in authoritarian regimes do not value public support, and second, the distribution of political power during transitions is uncertain. One factor that can increase the certainty of power distribution during transition is the memory of a past antiregime uprising through the observation of two mechanisms. Historical memory functions as a "public tolerance indicator" by increasing the visibility of the oppositional strength. It provides a low-cost opportunity to demonstrate against the regime because the protest is indirect and the punishment less likely. This aspect of historical memory is especially important in young democracies where the opposition has been relatively inactive. The second mechanism through which historical memory affects the hard-liners' preferences is the "conservative reformer." Here the evolving interpretation of the past event fosters a process of self-examination within the Communist Party. This context enables the advancement of progressive members.

Historical memory's potential to democratize the perceptions of the Communist incumbents connects structural and actor-centered theories of democratization. Historical memory is important only if political actors choose to reminisce about it. The impact of historical memory varies according to the relative significance and availability of various structural reference points, however. Such reference points are the economic situation, the situation in neighboring countries, the nature of civil protests, or the federal and ethnic composition of the state. In this sense, historical memory is a facilitating factor that, in conjunction with other conditions, can have important implications for updating and moderating the incumbents' stance.

NOTES

1. Timur Kuran, "The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises," *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 6 (1995): 1528–32.

2. Valerie Bunce and Mária Csanádi, "Uncertainty in the Transition: Post-Communism in Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 240–75. It is important to distinguish between uncertainty in established and transitional democracies. In countries with democratic traditions, politicians easily recognize possible and probable choices. Actors do not know whether they will lose or win because final outcomes depend on the actions of the others. In transitional democracies, political actors are not only unsure what will happen but also which developments are

possible and probable. In this sense, democracy is a system of organized uncertainty while transitions are periods of disorganized uncertainty. In a system of organized uncertainty the likelihood of misperceiving one's chances for success is much higher than in a disorganized system. See Adam Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts," in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad, 59–78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

3. Piotr Kwiatkowski, "Opinion Research and the Fall of Communism: Poland 1981–1990," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 4, no. 4 (1992): 358.

4. Samuel Kernell, "Life before Polls: Ohio Politicians Predict the 1828 Presidential Vote," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 3 (2000): 569–74.

5. Kuran, "Revolutionary Surprises," 1532.

6. Valerie Bunce, "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience," *World Politics* 55, no. 2 (2003): 79. Bunce comes closest to perceiving mobilizations as a "public tolerance indicator." "Mass mobilization can reduce uncertainty, thereby influencing the preferences of the Communists, and the division of power between them and the opposition."

7. Wolfgang Merkel, *Systemtransformation: Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung* (Opladen, Germany: Leske und Budrich, 1999); Herbert Kitschelt, "Accounting for Postcommunism Regime Diversity: What Counts as a Good Cause?" in *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen Hanson, 413 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Helga Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 4 (1994): 379.

8. See Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Basis of Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

9. See Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Herbert Kitschelt, "Comparative Historical Research and Rational Choice Theory: The Case of Transitions to Democracy," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 3 (1993): 413–27.

10. Josep Colomar, "Strategies and Outcomes in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 2 (1995): 74.

11. Jan Kubik and Amy Linch, "The Original Sin of Poland's Third Republic: Discounting 'Solidarity' and its Consequences for Political Reconciliation," *Polish Sociological Review* 1, no. 153 (2006): 11–12.

12. *Ibid.*, 17. Scholars note that it was only after the first elections when "everybody realized that the negotiations at the roundtable were misinformed about the real bargaining power of each party and accepted agreements that overestimated the strength and popular support of the communists. When the public was allowed to express its preferences . . . the established lie which underpinned communist-dominated official life quickly disappeared. The actors changed their priorities." See Josep Colomar and Margot Pascual, "The Polish Games of Transition," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 27, no. 3 (1994): 290.

13. Harvey Starr, "Democratic Dominoes: Diffusion Approaches to the Spread of Democracy in the International System," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (1991): 356–81.

14. James Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 4 (2000): 507–48.

15. Alan Renwick, "Why Hungary and Poland Differed in 1989: The Role of Medium-Term Frames in Explaining the Outcomes of Democratic Transition," *Democratization* 13, no. 1 (2006): 52.

16. Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent," 44.

17. Rudolf Tokés, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution: Economic Reform, Social Change, and Political Succession* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 304.

18. *Ibid.*, 303.

19. Henry Kamm, "Hungarian Party Replaces Kadar with His Premier," *New York Times*, May 9, 1989.

20. His narrative was correct but incomplete. While Grósz portrayed himself as a victim, he failed to acknowledge that his involvement with the insurgents was accidental at best. At the time

of the uprising, he was an emissary of Rudolf Földvari, the first secretary of the Borsod County party committee. Földvari, not Grósz, authorized the printing of a radical manifesto supporting the insurgents in the county's newspaper. When the revolution was crushed, Földvari used Grósz as a scapegoat to avoid a life sentence in prison and accused him of publishing the manifesto. Having accidentally become an antiregime activist, Grósz was expelled from the party. His alleged repression was short-lived as his party membership was subsequently restored and he was appointed a political supervisor of the Hungarian radio and TV programming.

21. Charles Gati, "East-Central Europe: The Morning After," *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 5 (1990–91): 69–91. Grósz's subsequent career downfall demonstrates that association with historical symbols brings popularity only when it is accompanied by actual commitments. Once Grósz started acting at variance with his pro-1956 rhetoric, he lost favor with the public. His resignation as prime minister in November 1988 was caused by the revelation that he wanted to introduce martial law in Hungary. Istvan Horvath, a distinct party reformist, revealed to his fellow Central Committee members that Grósz had asked him whether he would authorize the use of firearms by the police against environmental demonstrators in front of the parliamentary building (Tokés, *Negotiated Revolution*, 296). When it became clear that Grósz preached peace but ordered violence and when his deeds started defying his interpretation of the 1956 uprising, Grósz lost his post.

22. Mihály Jassó cited in Karl P. Benzinger, "Imre Nagy and the Unsettled Past: The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Hungary," <http://www.newschool.edu/gf/historymatters/papers/Karl-Benzinger.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2008).

23. Joshua Dienstag, "'The Pozsgay Affair': Historical Memory and Political Legitimacy," *History and Memory* 8, no. 1 (1996): 57.

24. Andras Sajo, "The Roundtable Talks in Hungary," in *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, ed. Jon Elster, 70 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

25. "Hungary, in Turnabout, Declares '56 Rebellion a Popular Uprising," Reuters, January 29, 1989, 14. Emphasis added.

26. Heino Nyysönen, *The Presence of the Past in Politics: '1956' after 1956 in Hungary* (Laukaa, Finland: Sophi Press, 1999), 163.

27. Laszlo Bruszt and George Horvath, "1989: The Negotiated Revolution in Hungary," *Social Research* 57, no. 2 (1990): 368.

28. Tamas Hofer, "The Demonstration of March 15, 1989, in Budapest: A Struggle for Public Memory," *Program on Central and East European Working Paper Series*, no. 16, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1991, 7.

29. Gábor Iltzész, "Ritual and National Self-Interpretation: The Nagy Imre Funeral," *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 1 (November 2005): 1.

30. Laszlo Bruszt and David Stark, "Remaking the Political Field in Hungary: From the Politics of Confrontation to the Politics of Competition," in *Eastern Europe in Revolution*, ed. Ivo Banac, 38–39 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

31. Laszlo Kurti, "People vs the State: Political Rituals in Contemporary Hungary," *Anthropology Today* 6, no. 2 (1990): 8.

32. Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (Cambridge, MA: Penguin Books, 1990): 47.

33. Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubrik, "Contentious Politics in New Democracies: East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989–93," *World Politics* 50, no. 4 (1998): 575.

34. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

35. Benzinger, "Imre Nagy," 144.

36. Ash, *We the People*, 55.

37. Szonja Szelenyi, Ivan Szelenyi, and Winfred Poster. "Interests and Symbols in Post-Communist Political Culture: The Case of Hungary," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 3 (1996): 466–77.

38. Historical memory continues to play an important role in electoral campaigns in Hungary. The fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 revolution coincided with the 2006 parliamentary elections and the meaning of uprising once again became a primary campaign issue. All major political contenders,

including the Hungarian Civic Union and the Hungarian Socialist Party, claimed to be heirs to the 1956 spirit.

39. Amy Knight, "The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003): 67–93; Brian Taylor, "The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003): 17–66.

40. Timothy Colton, *Biography of Yeltsin*, forthcoming: 46.

41. Mark Kramer, "Special Issue: The Collapse of the Soviet Union (Part 1)—Introduction," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003): 6; "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (2003): 178–256; "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 4 (2004): 3–64; "The Reform of the Soviet System and the Demise of the Soviet State," *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (2004): 505–12; "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 3–96.

42. Harley Balzer, "Ordinary Russians? Rethinking August 1991," *Demokratizatsiya* 13, no. 2 (2005): 193.

43. Mikhail Gorbachev, *The August Coup: The Truth and the Lessons* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 19–20.

44. Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2000), 385.

45. Mark Beissinger, "Nationalist Violence and the State: Political Authority and Contentious Repertoires in the Former USSR," *Comparative Politics* 30, no. 4 (1998): 403. Here are a few pointers that, theoretically, should have made the plotters beware of the public discontent: The Soviet army cracked down on Azeri protesters in Baku on January 20, 1990, leaving sixty casualties. In April 1989 Soviet troops killed nineteen pro-independence demonstrators in Tbilisi, Georgia. In March 1990, the Lithuanian parliament passed unilaterally a declaration of independence. Ten months later, Soviet troops broke through a human cordon of about 1,000 protesters protecting the Lithuanian television center and killed fourteen people. Similar events occurred in Latvia, where the military took five casualties after usurping the Interior Ministry.

46. Valentin Pavlov, *Avgust Iznutri: Gorbachevputch* (Moscow: Delovoi mir, 1993), 23.

47. Vladimir Kryuchkov, *Lichnoe Delo* (Moscow: Olymp, 1996), 6.

48. Ibid.

49. Leonid Ivashov, *Marshal Yazov Rokovoi Avgust 1991* (Moscow: Mujestvo, 1992), 69.

50. Pavlov, *Avgust Iznutri*, 27.

51. Ibid., 25–26.

52. Ted Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State," *Comparative Political Studies* 21, no. 1 (1988): 49.

53. Fredo Arias-King, "The Correlation between Healthy and Ill Forces Is Not in Our Favor. Interview with Tatyana Zaslavskaya," *Demokratizatsiya* 13, no. 2 (2005): 309.

54. Beissinger, "National Violence," 406.

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