

# POST-COMMUNIST LEGACIES AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

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**Abstract:** This article lays out a methodology for studying the nature of communist legacies and their impact on current political behavior and attitudes. It identifies four possible linkages between the communist past and the present: early socialization, socio-demographic landscapes, and political and economic institutions.

## Explaining Post-Communist Differences

In the world outside of the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, younger, more educated, and more democratically inclined citizens tend to have a left-wing bias in terms of their self-placement on a standard left-right scale. In post-communist countries, however, it is the opposite: younger, more educated, and more democratically inclined citizens all tend to have a right-wing bias.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker. 2010. "After the Party: Legacies and Left-Right Distinctions in Post-Communist Countries." Juan March Foundation, Center for Advanced Study in the Social Science, Fundacion Juan March, Madrid, Spain, Working Paper Series, Estudio/Working Paper 2010/250.

Why might this be the case? One could point to the fact that older citizens in these countries had largely been socialized under communist—and hence leftwing—regimes. Or one could point to the fact that communism—a non-democratic regime—had a leftist orientation, and thus democratic opposition and a propensity to self-identify on the right hand side of the political spectrum could seem like natural bedfellows. Alternatively, it is conceivable that those who are less educated might still expect the state to provide for all their basic social welfare needs, precisely as the communist state had done previously, while at the same time criticizing the new democratic state for failing to provide these benefits. We have actually tested these different explanations against each other, and find stronger support for the second and third hypotheses than for the early socialization explanation, but for now, the key point is that it is difficult to imagine an answer to that question that did not somehow invoke the specter of the communist past shared by these countries.

In order to answer the above question, and a range of other similar questions about the underlying causes of post-communist political attitudes and behavior, we really have to tackle three main analytical tasks. First, we have to establish the key features that distinguished the communist experience from the social, political, and economic experiences of other countries in the world. Second, we need to formulate a set of theoretical arguments that link these distinctive features of communist regimes and societies to the political attitudes and behavior of the citizens who now live in these “post-communist” societies. Finally, we need a rigorous, falsifiable method for ascertaining whether or not our assertions about the effects of the communist past on political attitudes and behavior in post-communist countries are supported by empirical evidence.

We are currently at work on a book manuscript, tentatively titled *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies, and Political Values and Behavior* that addresses all three of these tasks, and then tests these competing theoretical explanations on a wide range of political attitudes and behaviors.<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of this article, however, we briefly present our general thoughts in terms of the second of these tasks: introducing a set of rigorous theoretical arguments about the manner in which the communist era past could affect political attitudes and behavior in the post-communist present. While this is not an empirical article, the eventual empirical analysis we have conducted<sup>3</sup> and plan to conduct in the future

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<sup>2</sup> Drafts of Chapters 1-3 and 6 can be found on Tucker's website: <https://files.nyu.edu/jat7/public/>. See as well Pop-Eleches and Tucker. 2010. “After the Party...”; Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker. 2011. “Communism's Shadow: Postcommunist Legacies, Values, and Behavior,” *Comparative Politics* 43 (4): 379-408 for article length research from the project.

<sup>3</sup> Pop-Eleches and Tucker. 2010. “After the Party...”; Pop-Eleches and Tucker. 2011. “Communism's Shadow...”

strongly motivates our overriding argument: if we want to claim that the past matters, then we need to have *a priori* theories about how the past matters, and these theories need to have observable implications that can be tested empirically.

We identify four potential pathways by which communist-era legacies could affect political attitudes and behavior in the post-communist present. First, it is possible that *living through communism*, and in particular being “*politically socialized*” under communism results in different attitudes about politics and/or different forms of political behavior. Conversely, it is possible that people who lived through communism do not approach politics any differently than those who did not, but that communism left behind a *different socio-demographic landscape*, which in the aggregate leads to different patterns of political attitudes and behavior. Alternatively, it may be the case that neither of these communist era legacies affect political attitudes and behavior in the post-communist era, but instead that any distinctions in the political attitudes or behavior of citizens currently living in post-communist countries may simply be due to the different economic and political institutions that shape their lives or to the different political and—especially—economic outcomes they have been exposed to over the last two decades compared to the rest of the world. To the extent that these different institutions or outcomes are a legacy of communism—e.g., dramatic declines in GDP in the early to mid-1990s are obviously related to economic legacies of communism—then we can still call these two final explanations a “legacy” of communism as well. Other readers, however, may be more comfortable thinking of these institutional and outcome differences as a null alternative, i.e., that there is no communist-era legacy effect on political behavior and attitudes. Either way, all four of these explanations can generate observable implications that, crucially, can be tested empirically. In the remainder of the article, we expand on each of the four in turn.

### **Socialization**

The concept of socialization into a particular world view and corresponding set of political preferences points us in two particularly interesting directions in the post-communist context. First, it may be the case that being educated under communist rule leads—on average—to individuals developing a different set of political preferences from people who are not educated under communist rule. If we then subscribe to the idea that political preferences—and especially big picture political preferences, such as the state’s role in running the economy, or preferences for income redistribution—take hold during one’s adolescent or early adult years and then rarely waver from that starting point, then we might expect to

see a very different set of attitudes from citizens who came of age (i.e., were educated) under communist rule than those who did not. We call this conceptualization of the socialization effect the “early socialization theory.”

Of course, “communism” was not a monolithic experience across countries and over time. To put this most starkly, we might expect that someone who came of political age in Moscow under Stalinism in the early 1950s to have been socialized into somewhat different political preferences than someone who came of age under Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. With this in mind, Table 1 breaks down the communist experience into five subcategories that represent different “types” of communist experiences that we might expect—if the socialization model holds—to people being socialized into different types of preferences. As with any attempt at classification, we face a trade-off between level of detail, comparability, and parsimony. Thus, we do not mean to claim that Stalinism in Albania in the 1980s was exactly the same thing as Stalinism in Romania in the early 1950s, but at the same time, we hope that the classification scheme represents a useful first step in identifying different types of communist-era experiences.

**Table 1. Communist Experience by Year and Country**

	Transition to Communism	Stalinist	Post-Stalinist Hard-line	Post-Totalitarian (Linz and Stepan)	Reformist
<b>Albania</b>	1944	1945-90			
<b>Bulgaria</b>	1945	1946-53	1954-89		1990
<b>Czechoslovakia</b>	1945-7	1948-53	1953-67, 1969-89		1968
<b>East Germany</b>	1945-8	1949-62	1971-89		1963-70
<b>Hungary</b>	1945-7	1948-53	1957-60	1961-89	1954-6
<b>Poland</b>	1945	1946-56	1980-3	1963-80, 1983-87	1956-62, 1988-89
<b>Romania</b>	1945-7	1948-64	1971-89		1965-70
<b>USSR</b>	1918-20	1928-53	1953-5, 1965-9	1970-84	1921-7, 1956-64, 1985-91
<b>Yugoslavia</b>	1945	1946-8			1949-90

Our five-fold classification scheme works as follows.<sup>4</sup> First, we consider the initial years in which countries were in the process of installing communist systems of government. The next category is the Stalinist period, essentially the high-water mark of communist orthodoxy and repression. With the exception of Albania, the communist countries then all moved beyond Stalinism, and we break down these “post-Stalinist experiences” into three categories. “Post-Stalinist Hardline” refers to regimes that moved beyond Stalinism, but essentially still pursued hardline policies (e.g., low tolerance for dissent and ideological deviations, an active repressive state apparatus but without widespread terror etc.). “Post-Totalitarianism” is taken from Linz and Stepan<sup>5</sup>, and refers to communist regimes where the communist monopoly on power was still in place, but true believers in the ideology were few and far between, with most party members now associating with the party for careerist as opposed to ideological reasons. Post-Totalitarian regimes are also known for the tacit trade-off of political power for economic security; that being said, limited pluralism was tolerated so long as the state was not directly targeted. Finally, Reformist communism refers to periods like the Prague Spring, Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, Poland’s various flirtations with greater political openness and independent trade unions like Solidarity, etc.

An early socialization approach would therefore suggest that we identify the year(s) in which different citizens came of age, and then see the extent to which being socialized in these different periods led to different types of political preferences, much as posited above. However, there is a second way to think about socialization building on Converse’s seminal comparative study of partisanship by age bracket across five countries.<sup>6</sup> Converse suggested that socialization was more of a cumulative process, increasing over time as long as one continued to have the opportunity to be attached to the same political party. Transplanted to our framework, this would suggest that socialization effects would depend not so much on exactly what type of communism one was exposed to in early adolescence and adulthood, but rather the amount of time spent living under (different forms of) communist rule. We call this second type of argument about socialization processes, the “cumulative socialization theory.” One of the nice features of Table 1, therefore, is that because these different periods of communism took hold in different countries at different times, we should

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<sup>4</sup> We thank Andrew Janos and Maria Popova for comments and suggestions regarding this classification scheme.

<sup>5</sup> Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition And Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America And Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Philip E. Converse. 1969. “Of Time and Partisan Stability.” *Comparative Political Studies* 2 (2):139-71.

in many cases be able to disentangle the effects of initial socialization from cumulative socialization, and both in turn from simply being of a certain age.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, though, both versions of the socialization theory are consistent with the idea that citizens who lived through communism will approach politics in a different way from those who did not. This will either be due to the period of time in which citizens came of age politically—and the nature of the communist regime in their country at that point in time—or to the cumulative amount of time that citizens spent living under a communist regime.

### **Socio-Demographic Landscapes**

Alternatively, it may be the case that living through communism has no effect on how an individual approaches politics. Even if this is the case, we could still find different aggregate level patterns of political attitudes and behaviors in post-communist countries if people's preferences, evaluations, and political behavior were all a function of their socio-demographic characteristics *and* if post-communist countries had different socio-demographic make-ups than other countries. To the extent that this different socio-demographic make-up was a direct result of communist era policies, then this would clearly be an example of a communist legacy effect on citizen politics.

Consider the following highly stylized example. Imagine a world with three income categories (high, medium, and low) and three education categories (post-secondary, secondary, and less than secondary). If all political preferences were a direct function of income and education, then we would expect societies with similar distributions of education and income to have similar distributions of political preferences. Now imagine that preferences for extreme forms of redistribution were largely concentrated among those with high levels of education and low incomes. If in Country A there are very few highly educated poor people (either because there are few poor people, or few highly educated people or because income is very highly correlated with education), then that country would have a very small proportion of the population supporting extreme forms of income redistribution. In contrast, if in Country B, income was unrelated to education or if both poverty and higher education were very prevalent, then we might find a much larger proportion of the population supporting extreme forms of income redistribution. This would hold despite the fact

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<sup>7</sup> In contrast, a single country study at a single point in time would be unable to do so. Consider a 2005 study in Russia that found 65-70 year-olds expressing less support for democracy than younger Russians do. This could be because the 65-70 year-olds in Russia were educated under Stalinism, because they lived for 40 years under communism, or because it simply had to do with being old in Russia in 2005.

that in both countries, *individual preferences were generated in exactly the same manner*: as a function of income and education. Thus, despite identical processes of individual preference formation the aggregate nature of preferences across the whole society would be different. To the extent that one of the effects of communism was to create societies with very different socio-demographic characteristics than those found in other, non-communist countries, this type of theoretical approach could explain distinctive patterns of political attitudes and behavior in post-communist countries.<sup>8</sup>

### **Different Economic and Political Institutions**

There is a second way in which citizens in post-communist countries could approach politics in the same manner as citizens of other countries and yet still results in aggregate level differences between political attitudes and behaviors in post-communist countries and in other countries. This could occur if post-communist citizens interact with economic and political institutions that function differently than those in non-communist countries. For example, it would be conceivable that higher vote shares for radical political parties in post-communist elections are due to features of the electoral system (e.g., lower electoral thresholds or easier registration procedures) rather than to inherent differences in ideological preferences at the individual level. Similarly, political preferences for redistributive policies could be shaped by systematic differences in welfare states or the prevalence of public employment rather than an ingrained communist-era desire for paternalist economic policies.

While such an explanation downplays the importance of individual attitudinal and behavioral legacies, they may nevertheless capture important *institutional* legacies. To establish the extent to which this is the case, we need to establish not only the impact of such institutional differences on political attitudes and behavior but also an assessment of the degree to which these differences can be causally traced to particular features of past communist institutions. Thus, some institutions, such as the presence of large communist successor parties in many transition countries, represent very clear institutional legacies of the communist one-party regimes, whereas other institutional peculiarities, such as the proliferation of personalistic parties,<sup>9</sup> may be a broader phenomenon that characterizes political transitions to competitive party politics in many countries.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> We expand upon these socio-demographic differences in Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2010 and 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Hale. 2012. *Great Expectations*. Manuscript in progress.

<sup>10</sup> The extent to which this would still be considered a communist legacy is a question of semantics, since the absence of democracy in Eastern Europe was obviously largely due to communism but, on the other hand, other long-standing authoritarian regimes could produce very similar outcomes (e.g., in Latin America).

Finally, of course, it is conceivable that some institutional differences are either rooted in pre-communist legacies (e.g., the relationship between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the state) or the results of more or less random shock during the post-communist period, in which case we need to control for them as alternative non-legacy explanations.

### **Different Economic and Political Outcomes**

Finally—and following a very similar logic to the one put forward in the previous section—it is conceivable that differences in political attitudes and behavior are primarily driven by the economic and political outputs which citizens of different countries get to observe. Let us consider a world in which evaluations are simply a function of economic conditions. In this hypothetical world, as long as one's real disposable income has gone up in the past 12 months, one evaluates the government positively and then votes for the government to be re-elected; conversely, if real disposable income has declined in the past 12 months, one evaluates the government negatively and votes for an opposition party.

Now let us assume that in the rest of the world, at any given time 50% of citizens have incomes that are going up, and 50% of citizens have incomes that are going down. However, let us assume—not completely unrealistically—that in post-communist countries in the 1990s, due to the economic nature of the transition from central planning to market based economies,<sup>11</sup> only 20% of the population enjoyed rising incomes and 80% saw their incomes falling in any given year. Were we then to observe evaluations of incumbent governments and voting patterns, we would conclude that citizens in post-communist countries were much more likely to have negative evaluations of their government and much more likely to vote incumbent governments out of office<sup>12</sup> and endorse unorthodox alternatives.<sup>13</sup> However, these patterns would *not* be present because the communist experience had somehow fundamentally changed citizens in post-communist countries to make them much more demanding of their governments (or much more inclined to switch parties across elections). Instead, in this world, post-communist citizens are no different from citizens anywhere else in terms of how they react to political and economic stimuli; it is instead the stimuli themselves that differ.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Adam Przeworski. 1991. *Democracy and the Market*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Roberts. 2008. "Hyperaccountability: Economic voting in Central and Eastern Europe." *Electoral Studies* 27:533-46.

<sup>13</sup> Grigore Pop-Eleches. 2010. "Throwing out the Bums: Protest Voting and Anti-Establishment Parties after Communism" *World Politics* 62(2): 221-260.

<sup>14</sup> It is of course possible—and testable using interaction effects—that post-communist citizens react differently to certain economic conditions: for example, their voting behavior may



As in the institutional discussion above, interpreting the importance of communist legacies depends on the extent to which the differences in economic and political outcomes can be causally traced to the communist system. Therefore, we have to differentiate between outcomes that are directly linked to the economic and political “logic” of communism, such as the weakness of the private sector or the prevalence of polluting industrial enterprises, and others that are rooted either in pre-communist developmental differences (such as the relative backwardness of Eastern Europe<sup>15</sup>) or post-communist shocks (such as the contagion effects from the current financial crisis of the EU).

### Conclusion

We hope that the theoretical framework laid out in this essay is both comprehensive and flexible enough to analyze the effects of communism on a broad range of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. More broadly, the framework and the four mechanisms could be adapted to study the legacy effects of other types of political and economic regimes. Of course, the generality of the framework also means that for any specific empirical question it represents only a foundation upon we need to build more specific theoretical arguments and eventually derive testable empirical hypotheses. To return to the example from the introduction, the right-wing bias among educated people in post-communist countries would require us to think more carefully about the nature of communist education and its role in political socialization, about the economic and political experiences of educated people both before and after the collapse of communism, and about the institutions that could be responsible for shaping the ideological and democratic attitudes of post-communist citizens in ways that differ from other regimes. The factors likely to emerge as important for this specific issue—such as the use of ideological indoctrination in schools or the post-communist electoral adaptation of the Communist parties—may not be as relevant for other types of attitudes or behavior. However, the overall analytical approach would be the same, which will facilitate a cumulative approach to analyzing the attitudinal and behavioral legacies of communism.

Once this framework is applied to a sufficiently wide range of political attitudes and behavior we expect to gain not only a clearer picture of the nature of communist legacies but arguably a better general understanding of how individual perceptions of and interactions with the political sphere are shaped by both their personal histories and by the historical

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only differ from their non-communist counterparts in cases of high unemployment.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew C. Janos. 2000. *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Post-communism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

evolution of the political universe in which they live. Furthermore, even though predictions are notoriously risky in the social sciences, a better understanding of the nature of communist legacies may offer important insights into their likely durability. Thus, if the key legacy mechanisms are through economic conditions or certain demographic particularities (such as low inequality or the emphasis on technical/vocational training), then we may well expect the half-life of legacies to be short as the communist particularities are over-ridden by transitional developments. If early or cumulative socialization in the public sphere is crucial, then convergence will be gradual and driven primarily by generational change. However, in areas where the key transmission mechanisms are rooted either within families (e.g., religiosity) or shaped by resilient formal or informal institutions, we may well observe a communist legacy well after the last generation to have lived through communism will be gone.