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Edited by Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott

Excerpt

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1 Perspectives on postcommunist democratization

Bruce Parrott

Of all the elements of the international wave of democratization that began some two decades ago, the transformation of communist political systems, once thought impervious to liberalization, is the most dramatic.¹ Since 1989, more than two dozen countries within the former Soviet bloc have officially disavowed Marxist–Leninist ideology and have dismantled, in varying degrees, the apparatus of communist dictatorship and socialist economic planning. In many cases this transformation has led to a reinvention of politics, in the sense of genuine public debate about the purposes of society and the state, and has produced significant progress toward the establishment of a liberal–democratic order.²

This extraordinary turn of events has evoked a surge of scholarly research and writing from specialists on the former communist countries and other social scientists. Analysts have probed the causes of the demise of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.³ They have examined the communist legacies inherited by the East European and Soviet successor states and have constructed parallel narratives of early postcommunist developments in regional groupings of these states.⁴ They also have produced detailed studies of recent trends in individual countries.⁵ Extensive analysis and debate have likewise been devoted to the political and institutional aspects of market reform.⁶

To date, however, scholars have devoted relatively little effort to systematic cross-country comparisons of political change in the postcommunist states. With some notable exceptions, Western thinking about attempts to democratize these polities has generally been based on the experience of the countries of North America, Western and Southern Europe, and Latin America.⁷ Among scholars and laypersons alike, there has been an unconscious tendency to view postcommunist political developments through interpretive lenses derived from the experiences of countries that have not undergone the historical transformations and traumas associated with

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communism. Yet the relevance of the paradigms of democratization (and failed democratization) derived from these countries is far from self-evident. Just as some economists have challenged the applicability of models drawn from noncommunist societies to the dilemmas of economic reform in postcommunist states, some political scientists have questioned whether paradigms of democratization drawn from noncommunist countries are relevant to the study of postcommunist political change.⁸ This is an issue of central importance both for social theory and for the day-to-day policies of Western governments and nongovernmental organizations.

An adequate understanding of this exceptionally complex theoretical issue, however, requires a better understanding of the nature of the political changes occurring inside the postcommunist countries themselves. Because the communist era saddled these countries with many similar political and socioeconomic dilemmas, it is logical to examine them for similar processes of political change. A strong case can be made that communist countries passed through a distinctive set of profound political and socioeconomic alterations that makes comparisons among postcommunist patterns of political development especially fruitful. On the other hand, these societies also have been shaped by dissimilar processes - witness the contrast between the Czech Republic and Turkmenistan, which today have little in common besides the fact that they were once called communist - and analysts cannot assume that they are destined to follow identical political trajectories. Controlled comparisons among postcommunist countries can help us identify the causes of the varying national outcomes that have begun to crystallize roughly a half-decade after the demise of communism.

Some valuable comparative work on postcommunist political development has already been done.⁹ But the immense forces that have been unleashed and the profound questions that they raise demand much fuller exploration. Only a sustained research effort by the broad community of scholars can provide a surer baseline for evaluating recent trends and the prospects for democracy in particular postcommunist states. This long-term effort must address many aspects of each country's political life - its constitutional arrangements, the objectives of its leaders, public attitudes toward politics, ethnonational sentiments, the interplay of politics and economics, and the effects of international influences, to name only a few - and juxtapose them with comparable phenomena in other postcommunist states.

Although the project that produced this book touches on a number of these themes, the central goal has been to trace changes and continuities in elite and mass political participation in each of the postcommunist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.¹⁰ By examining the major political actors and the means through which they exercise power, the project has sought to assess the extent of democratization in each country and the

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strength of countervailing authoritarian tendencies. In particular, we have examined the degree to which postcommunist political arrangements have fostered or inhibited an expansion of popular political participation through the introduction of competitive elections and the formation of competitive political parties. Where feasible, we also have offered preliminary assessments of the strength and orientation of the network of groups and institutions sometimes known as “civil society” – or, more generally, as political society.¹¹ The writers of the country-studies have necessarily approached these topics from various angles, depending on the particulars of the country being analyzed. In each instance, however, the writer has sought to clarify whether formative influences and political choices have propelled the country’s postcommunist politics in a democratic or an authoritarian direction, and how durable the new constellation of power appears to be.

This approach has both intellectual advantages and limitations. The contributors to the project have harbored no illusions that we could treat all the relevant issues in the necessary depth. Separate volumes could easily have been written on particular facets of the overall comparisons we have undertaken. The value of our enterprise is that it presents a comprehensive set of carefully researched case-studies based on a common research agenda and on close interaction among the country-study writers and editors. The project provides a useful picture of each country’s political development up to the mid-1990s, along with a sense of the national trends that may prevail during the next few years. In addition, it lays the groundwork for delineating and explaining alternative paths of democratic and nondemocratic change in postcommunist societies. Today, less than a decade since communist regimes began to fall, the challenge of charting these paths remains daunting. In the words of one scholar, “it is a peculiarity of political scientists that we spend much of our time explaining events that have not finished happening.”¹² Identifying and explaining patterns of postcommunist political development will become easier as additional events and a longer historical perspective make those patterns more distinct; but it is not too early to begin the task.

The remainder of this chapter situates the country-studies in a general intellectual framework and highlights some of the principal themes they address. First it examines the meaning of key concepts, such as democracy and democratic transition, and sketches the types of regimes that may emerge from the wreckage of communism. Next the chapter explores the impact of the international environment and of national historical legacies on the evolution of postcommunist regimes. It then turns to a discussion of elections, party systems, and their role in the success or failure of democratization. Finally, the chapter surveys the potential effects of political culture and the intermediate groups that constitute a country’s political society. In treating

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each theme, I draw on the chapters included in this book and the companion volumes.¹³

Democracy and the alternatives

Because the general notion of democracy has been interpreted in many different ways, it is essential to begin by discussing some of these variations and their implications for the study of postcommunist countries. After all, during their heyday Marxist–Leninist regimes claimed to be quintessentially democratic and ridiculed the “bourgeois” democracies found in other parts of the world. More to the point, proponents of liberal democracy have long disagreed among themselves about which institutional arrangements constitute the essence of a democratic system. Equally significant, some admirers of the advanced industrial democracies prefer to call such systems “polyarchies” and to treat democracy as a set of normative standards against which all political systems must be measured, in order not to gloss over the serious defects of contemporary liberal polities.¹⁴

For the purposes of this project, we have adopted a less stringent criterion for classifying a country as democratic. According to this standard, democracy is a political system in which the formal and actual leaders of the government are chosen within regular intervals through elections based on a comprehensive adult franchise with equally weighted voting, multiple candidacies, secret balloting, and other procedures, such as freedom of the press and assembly, that ensure real opportunities for electoral competition. Among the various attributes of democracy, competitive elections are the feature that is most easily identifiable and most widely recognized around the world. Competitive elections are arguably a precondition for the other political benefits that a democratic system may confer on its citizens, and they are a valuable yardstick for analyzing and distinguishing among postcommunist countries. One fundamental question is why some countries, such as Poland, have introduced fully competitive elections, while others, such as Uzbekistan, have not. Another question is why some postcommunist countries have continued to choose their governmental leaders through free elections, whereas other countries that initially introduced such elections, such as Armenia and Albania, have recently fallen victim to large-scale electoral fraud.

Although useful, our minimalist definition of democracy also involves potential pitfalls. Because it does not stipulate all the individual liberties that most Western observers consider an essential element of genuine democracy, it groups together the majoritarian and constitutionalist/libertarian traditions of democratic governance.¹⁵ Under certain conditions, a competitively elected government is capable of behaving in a despotic fashion toward large numbers of its citizens or inhabitants, especially when those persons belong

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to a distinct ethnic or religious minority.¹⁶ The behavior of the Croatian government toward many ethnic Serbian inhabitants of Croatia is a graphic example. Other postcommunist governments, such as those of Estonia and Latvia, have faced major dilemmas posed by the presence of sizable minorities, but they have dealt with these issues in a more humane though sometimes controversial manner. Confronted with ethnic mixes that pose less obvious risks to the state, still other governments have accorded full rights to citizens of minority extraction; Bulgaria is a case in point. In a fully functioning constitutional democracy, the rights of citizens and inhabitants are legally specified and protected by the government, no matter how sweeping a mandate it has received at the polls.

Another caveat concerns the application of the criterion of competitive elections. The project's case-studies show that in several countries postcommunist elections have been considerably more competitive than the typical stage-managed charades of the communist era, yet have not been entirely free by strict democratic standards. In the long run, however, this movement from communist-style to semidemocratic elections may constitute an important step in the process of liberalization and may lead, despite powerful resistance, to voting procedures that are fully democratic. One strand of the scholarly literature emphasizes that democracy is sometimes the unintended consequence of political struggles among antagonists who did not initially seek to create it. The political import of semi-competitive elections thus depends on whether they mark a national step forward from completely rigged elections or a regression from elections that were genuinely democratic. Semi-competitive elections in Turkmenistan would be a sign of dramatic democratic progress, whereas similar elections in the Czech Republic would not.

Care is also required in applying the notion of democratic transitions. Due to the astonishing cascade of events that brought about the collapse of communism and a Western victory in the Cold War, virtually all postcommunist leaders proclaimed their commitment to democratization – sometimes sincerely, sometimes not – and a considerable number of outside observers assumed that democracy would be the natural result of communism's demise. However, when thinking about the evolution of the postcommunist states it is important to maintain the distinction between transitions from communism and transitions to democracy. It may be true that liberal democracy has become the prevailing model of modern politics in much of the world.¹⁷ But both historical experience and a priori reasoning suggest that a spectrum of possible postcommunist outcomes still exists. This spectrum includes variants of democracy, variants of authoritarianism, and some hybrids in between.

The consolidation of democracy is another important idea that warrants careful handling. To say that democracy has been consolidated in a country suggests, at a minimum, that the introduction of fully competitive elections

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has been completed and that the new political system has become stable. In this discussion, consolidation denotes the condition of a political system in which all major political actors and social groups expect that government leaders will be chosen through competitive elections and regard representative institutions and procedures as their main channel for pressing claims on the state.¹⁸ A few scholarly critics have challenged the idea of consolidation, arguing that some democracies have demonstrated considerable staying-power without ever satisfying certain commonly accepted criteria of consolidation.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the concept remains useful for differentiating democratic systems that have achieved internal stability from systems that have not, and for making probabilistic assessments of a particular democracy's political prospects. It calls attention to internal factors, such as fundamental divisions over national identity, constitutional structure, and criteria of citizenship, that can destroy a democratic polity. Because all systems are subject to political decay, consolidation does not guarantee that a democracy will survive, but does improve its chances. Although democratic consolidation typically required a long time in earlier eras, the contemporary ascendancy of liberal-democratic norms in many parts of the globe may accelerate the process. Since the 1970s the consolidation of new democratic systems has occurred quite quickly in some noncommunist countries, though not in others.²⁰

Whether any of the postcommunist states have achieved democratic consolidation is a complex issue. A case can be made that the Czech Republic, Poland, and Lithuania have reached this political watershed, even though controversy persists over the shape of the Polish constitution. But most postcommunist states have not reached it. Some, such as Latvia and Estonia, have established representative institutions and political structures that work quite smoothly, but have not yet admitted large ethnic minorities to citizenship. Others, such as Russia, have made impressive progress in introducing competitive elections, but contain particular political parties and social groups whose loyalty to democratic principles remains highly questionable. Still others, such as Uzbekistan and Belarus, are plainly developing along authoritarian lines.

The spectrum of possible postcommunist outcomes includes such variants of democracy as parliamentary rule and presidential government. Each of these forms of government has been adopted by some postcommunist countries, and each has champions who argue that it is the least susceptible to political breakdown.²¹ In addition, the spectrum of potential outcomes includes hybrid systems similar to the "delegative democracy" identified by students of comparative politics.²² In a delegative democracy, the president is chosen through competitive elections. Once in office, however, he rules in the name of the whole nation, usually on the pretence that he transcends

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the petty concerns of particular parties and interest groups. Unconstrained by the legislature or the courts, the president governs without significant checks on his power, save for the constitutional requirement that regular presidential elections be held and the *de facto* power held by other officials, and he often seeks to change the constitution so as to prolong his time in power.²³ Several postcommunist countries, particularly some former Soviet republics, have concentrated governmental power in an executive president with the authority to issue decrees having the force of law. Depending on the future course of events, this hybrid arrangement has the potential to become either a constitutional democracy or a clear-cut form of authoritarianism.

The main potential forms of postcommunist authoritarianism are personal dictatorships, one-party states, and military regimes. The socioeconomic turmoil following the collapse of communism may make it hard to build stable versions of any of these types of authoritarianism, but oscillations among them may still preclude successful democratization. In countries where a substantial part of the population has already undergone sociopolitical mobilization, the lack of a well developed party structure makes a personal dictatorship vulnerable to sharp shifts in the public mood and to unbridled power-struggles when the dictator is incapacitated or dies.²⁴ Nonetheless, a few postcommunist countries are likely to come under the sway of such dictatorships. Contemporary Belarus fits this model, and Turkmenistan bears a significant resemblance to it.

Generally speaking, authoritarian states built around a single ruling party are more stable than personal dictatorships. A ramified party organization helps harness mass political participation to the leaders' objectives, reduces elite conflict, and smooths the process of succession. For postcommunist leaders set on following this path, the challenge is to create a party mechanism that can actually control mass participation and the behavior of any quasi-democratic governmental institutions that already have been set up. This stratagem is often more difficult to apply than it might seem. Once the old communist mechanisms of control have been weakened, building a stable new ruling party is a problematic undertaking, as developments in Kazakhstan indicate. Success depends both on the top leader's willingness to assign high priority to building such a party and on the party's capacity to contain new socioeconomic forces within its structure. Absent these two conditions, leaders with a dictatorial bent may move toward a system of personal rule, eliminating quasi-democratic institutions and processes, such as elections, that they cannot effectively control.

As of the mid-1990s, direct military rule seemed the least likely postcommunist authoritarian outcome. Historically, one-party states have proven less susceptible to military coups than have other forms of authoritarianism.²⁵ Ruling communist parties exercised especially close civilian control over their

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military professionals, and this heritage of subordination appears to have shaped military behavior in most postcommunist countries. The rare episodes in which the armed forces have intervened collectively to affect the selection of national leaders have usually been precipitated by “demand pull” from feuding politicians eager to defeat their rivals rather than by any military desire to rule.²⁶ That said, it should be noted that irregular military forces and militias have played a sizable role in the politics of some postcommunist countries, especially those parts of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia that have become embroiled in warfare. In a number of countries the parlous economic and social condition of the regular military has facilitated transfers of weapons and personnel to irregular military forces. Although irregular forces have caused a change of government leadership in only a few cases, such as Georgia and Azerbaijan, they frequently have had a strong effect on the political balance inside their “host” states, whether those states are nominally democratic or authoritarian in character.²⁷

The international environment and national historical legacies

The dynamics of postcommunist political change have been shaped by several major variables. One of the most important is the international environment, which includes geopolitical, institutional-normative, and cultural elements. Historically, the overall effect of the international environment on attempts to promote democratization has ranged from highly beneficial to extremely harmful.²⁸ By historical standards, the contemporary international setting has been relatively favorable to the creation and consolidation of new democracies, although there have been important regional variations in this respect. The generally propitious international environment has been shaped by a number of factors: the heightened Western commitment to human rights as a major aspect of interstate relations; the gradual absorption of liberal ideas into once-autarkic societies made increasingly permeable by competitive pressures from an open global economy; the decision of the Soviet leadership not to shore up communist regimes in Eastern Europe with military threats or intervention; the “gravitational pull” exerted by highly prosperous Western democracies and by multilateral institutions prepared to assist postcommunist liberalization; and the intensifying bandwagon effects exerted by leading exemplars of reform, such as Poland, on other former communist countries that initially dragged their feet.²⁹

International conditions have not favored all postcommunist efforts at democratization in equal measure. The effects of the international setting have varied sharply by region and by the form of outside influence in question. For the most part, the Western powers have refused to intervene with decisive military force to suppress the savage ethnic violence that has undermined

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the chances for democratization in parts of the former Yugoslavia and the Transcaucasus.³⁰ In contrast to the situation after World War II, when the geostrategic interests of the Western Allies required the imposition of democratic institutions on the defeated Axis powers, the West has had no compelling strategic reason to impose liberal-democratic arrangements on such countries as Serbia.³¹ Perhaps as significant, the West's political and economic impact on most European postcommunist states has exceeded its influence on the postcommunist states of the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. The scale of such influence is not determined solely by the receiving state's location or culture; witness the isolation of Belarus from the countries to its west. But the large cluster of established European democracies and the prospect of close political and economic ties with them have had a much stronger effect in Eastern Europe than in other postcommunist regions. In Eastern Europe, a desire to be admitted to NATO and the European Union has tempered the political conduct even of lagging states such as Romania.

Several factors account for this variation in Western influence: the greater physical and cultural distance between the West and most of the non-European postcommunist states; the lower level of Western strategic interest in these countries, coupled with a tendency to manifest less concern about their internal liberalization than about their potential as sources of energy and raw materials; the countries' greater vulnerability to pressures from a Russia preoccupied with ensuring the stability of its southern flank; and the substantial limits on the West's diplomatic leverage in Asia, where booming economies have emboldened some authoritarian regimes, such as China, to defy Western human-rights standards.³²

In addition to being influenced by the international environment, the direction of postcommunist political development has been shaped by whether struggles over political change have taken place within the arena of a firmly established nation-state. In a handful of postcommunist countries, politics has unfolded within the boundaries and administrative framework of the old communist state. In most cases, however, the struggle over democratization has coincided with efforts to create the political scaffolding of a new state on a portion of the territory of the old communist regime. Due to the breakup of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, twenty-two of the twenty-seven postcommunist states are new sovereign entities. This is one of the main features that distinguishes postcommunist efforts to build democracy from comparable processes in Latin America and Southern Europe.³³

The break-up of states severely complicates efforts to achieve democratization. The process frequently triggers incendiary controversies over the national identity of the new states, contested borders, and rival groups' competing claims to be the only indigenous inhabitants of their new country. In cases as diverse as Croatia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and

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Russia, national declarations of independence from a larger communist regime have coincided with simultaneous attempts by local minorities to declare their own independence from the newly established states. Such centrifugal processes, which cannot be resolved by appealing to the principle of national self-determination, increase the probability of violent communal conflict and the emergence of ultranationalist sentiments harmful to democratization.³⁴ The conflicts between Serbia and Croatia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan provide examples. The collapse of an established state also accelerates the disintegration of the government bureaucracies that must function smoothly to ensure the administrative effectiveness of democratic institutions. This, in turn, may undermine the popular appeal of democracy as a political system.³⁵

The creation of new states from old does not always preclude democratic development, however. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, Russia and the Baltic states, and the former Yugoslav republic of Slovenia are cases in point. Democratization is liable to fail when efforts to dismantle the old state interact with the mobilization of large internal ethnic “diasporas” and the emergence of ultranationalism in internal ethnic “homelands” to ignite large-scale violence. Democratization stands a greater chance of success when internal ethnic diasporas are small or are willing to be incorporated into successor states outside their “homeland,” and when nationalist movements in the ethnic homelands are moderate rather than extremist.³⁶ In new, ethnically divided states, the political impact of ethnic differences depends on the actions both of the dominant group and of ethnic minorities and outside parties, as the contrasting internal political dynamics of Croatia and Estonia demonstrate.

Whether linked to the collapse of an established state or not, manifestations of nationalism and efforts to democratize can affect each other in very different ways. Careful observers have distinguished between two types of nationalism: inclusionary “civic” nationalism, which is compatible with the observance of individual rights, and exclusionary ethnic nationalism, which tends to subordinate such rights to the collectivist claims of the nation.³⁷ Rarely if ever do these two types of nationalism exist in pure form, but the weighting of the two tendencies in citizens’ attitudes varies enormously from one country to another.³⁸ For example, Ukraine might be placed close to the “civic” end of the spectrum, Latvia nearer the middle, and Serbia near the “ethnic” end.³⁹ Before the final third of the nineteenth century, when nationhood in Europe became closely linked to ethnicity, nationalism was commonly understood to be a concomitant of democracy, and in postcommunist cases such as Poland, this connection can still be seen.⁴⁰ A modicum of nationalism is indispensable for the creation and cohesion of a modern state; without it many citizens will lack an incentive to participate actively in