After democratic transition

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12 December 2013

Democratic transition in post-Communist east-central Europe was primarily facilitated by external developments including the fall of the Soviet Union and European integration. Today, in the absence of any such favourable exogenous factors, it remains to be seen whether democratic institutions have grown strong enough in the region to withstand undemocratic and illiberal currents induced by the economic crisis.

For the past fifty years, the correlation of economic productivity and the strength of democratic institutions has been one of the most important topical issues in political science. According to Seymour Martin Lipset’s seminal works on modernization, economic prosperity is a prerequisite of democracy. [1] In Lipset’s view, economic development triggers social progress and through this, prepares the grounds for democratization. Sustained economic growth and innovation requires an increased level of mobility, a highly qualified workforce, quality education, communication networks and urbanization. All this is possible only under decentralized regimes where individuals play an active role in economic and other initiatives and, consequently, begin to engage proactively in political life. In centralized planned economies innovation is slow, and demand and supply are not closely connected. All this, Lipset points out, allows complex market economies with strong economic output and stable middle classes to be governed through democratic institutions.

Lipset’s groundbreaking modernization theory has received criticism from several angles. The conservative political scientist Samuel Huntington offered a more sceptical take on the relation between economic progress and democratic stability. [2] In a polemic against Lipset’s rather optimistic (and somewhat deterministic) modernization thesis, Huntington pointed out that a swift increase in economic productivity can unleash uncontrollable social changes that do not necessarily end in a democratic regime. Democratic transition entails increased mobility and competition (both political and economic), which may undermine the kind of stability often prevalent in authoritarian regimes. Moreover, as the number of citizens with a higher level of education grows, expectations regarding welfare rise. Revolt may easily break out if democratic governments are not able to deliver and meet the expectations of a more highly educated public. The lessons of the Arab Spring and the growing middle class discontent in Turkey and Brazil seem to be very much in-
line with Huntington’s thesis. Interestingly, pondering the increasingly revolutionary middle classes throughout developing economies, both the conservative liberal political scientist Francis Fukuyama and the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek claimed that better educated and more prosperous middle-classes with higher expectations of welfare were turning against their governments in the absence of meaningful job opportunities. [3] And, as the Arab Spring has shown, it is far from obvious that democratic transition will follow successful middle-class revolutions. On the contrary, the anti-authoritarian revolutions in the Middle East seem to have strengthened the influence of Islamist parties and movements. As Fareed Zakaria already warned in an earlier essay, transition in societies with no democratic traditions can easily play into the hands of illiberal elites. [4]

Democratization may also unleash violent ethnic tension. Where authoritarian rule coincides with the domination of a particular ethnic group, the transition to democracy may also involve the rebalancing of interethic relations. As Donald Horowitz notes, “when democratic elections produce ethnic exclusion, undemocratic reactions to it can be expected.” [5] Moreover, democratization provides an opportunity for ethnic entrepreneurs interested in strengthening their legitimation through nationalist rhetoric. The competition for economic resources during the course of transition creates fertile ground for ethnically exclusive movements intent on securing benefits for specific ethnic groups. Decentralization in ethnically diverse federations often culminates in secessionist movements. Modernization in the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav context resulted in violent ethnic conflicts. [6]

While it is still generally assumed that growth is higher under democratic rule, [7] some countries have experienced unprecedented economic growth under an authoritarian regime. The example of China clearly shows that in some cases, a higher level of productivity and even market-friendly reforms do not necessarily prompt democratic change. So far, the Chinese government has successfully integrated the young and ambitious upwardly mobile, thus precluding the emergence of an anti-Communist public sphere, whether formal or informal.

The transition of the post-Communist countries does not fit Lipset’s classical modernization theory either. One-party rule throughout the region began to become somewhat less oppressive from the late 1970s onward, but there was no significant increase in productivity to spark large scale social and political transformation processes. Democratization cannot in these countries be explained purely on the basis of endogenous factors. By the end of the 1980s, east-central European countries were on the brink of insolvency; but even this would not have been enough on its own to incite democratic changes. Without the simultaneous decline of the power of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev’s refusal to maintain Soviet hegemony through military invention in the satellite countries, no transition would have been possible. The willingness of Communist elites to hand over power and of democratic opposition leaders to refrain from punishing Communist cadres was important in facilitating the mostly peaceful transition process. But again, these factors had nothing to do with the level of economic development. Moreover, the peaceful transition to democracy was also facilitated by other exogenous factors including the European Union and NATO.

Despite all the problems and the current authoritarian backlash experienced in several east-central European countries, the institutional transition has been successful. Despite
the economic shock following the pro-market reforms in the early 1990s, there were no serious efforts to restore authoritarian rule and the one-party system. In a 1997 paper testing Lipset’s hypotheses, Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi found no correlation between the level of economic development and democratic transition. [8] However, according to their data set, the success of democratic transition is conditional on whether the new democratic regime can increase economic output. This suggests that the legitimation and success of democratization depends primarily on economic growth, and, of course, improved levels of welfare. One could speculate that in the early 1990s, recession ignited by shock therapy measures did not reverse democratic processes since external contingencies safeguarded the new institutional set up. First and foremost, European integration and the prospect of increased welfare associated with the criteria for joining the EU helped to sustain largely pro-democracy sentiments throughout east-central Europe.

After the economic shocks of the early transition years, east-central European economies were growing. Since 2008, however, economic growth has again slowed down. Welfare cuts and austerity packages have been introduced throughout Europe. Unemployment rates are growing. As for the economic malaise, the current economic crisis may not have as big an impact on welfare as the transition to the market economy in the early 1990s. The context in east-central Europe is, however, different from that of two decades ago. In the early 1990s, the prospect of joining the prosperous club of western Europe counterbalanced the decline in welfare. Today the context is far less favourable for democracy, since there are no similar external factors which could strengthen the legitimacy of fragile democratic institutions. On the contrary, euroscepticism is on the rise throughout the continent. Countries less affected by the economic crisis accuse the EU of trying to redistribute their wealth (or even keeping their job markets open) to “lazy” and “irresponsible” southern and eastern EU member states. In the South and East, the restrictions proposed by the EU (and the IMF) are seen as restrictions on national sovereignty and, consequently, the EU is often compared to imperialist colonial powers exploiting underdeveloped peripheries.

Before the financial crisis and the subsequent eurosceptic currents, scholars argued that the institutional modernization facilitated by EU accession rendered democratic rule in east-central Europe “practically irreversible”. [9] With the benefit of hindsight, such views seem far too optimistic. According to several sociological surveys, solidarity and social cohesion throughout central and eastern European societies have been in decline ever since the democratic changes of 1989 and 1990. Post-Communist societies are pervaded by apathy and distrust. The 2010 European Social Survey shows that trust among individuals as well as individuals’ trust in institutions is significantly lower in the former Communist bloc than in western Europe. Central and eastern Europeans have less confidence in democracy, the separation of powers and the rule of law. The World Values Survey data also suggest that the populations of post-Communist states are far less resistant to authoritarian leadership and army rule than western Europeans. According to a poll from 2006, Poles, Romanians, Russians and Georgians seem supportive of the idea of religious authorities interpreting the law. A Bertelsmann Stiftung survey published in July 2013 found that solidarity (defined as helpfulness and responsibility towards others) in the former Communist bloc countries was the lowest on the continent. [10] Central and eastern Europeans in general have a high level of distrust towards collective action. They are less likely to be members of civil organizations or to vote in elections. The post-
Communist region is marked by socially fragmented societies and high levels of distrust. All of which suggests that social transition still lags behind institutional transition. While institutions, thanks to EU accession, have been democratized, democratic values are still not entrenched in the political culture of east-central European populations. [11]

As Jacques Rupnik predicted in 2007, in the absence of a strong civil society and independent media, east-central European new democracies may backslide into authoritarian rule and national populism once EU admission is completed. [12] Will democracy in east-central Europe survive the economic crisis? Have democratic institutions and the middle classes become strong enough to counter the challenges posed by the authoritarian Left and Right? The real test for democratic theory – and east-central European democracies – is yet to come.

Footnotes


**Published 12 December 2013**

Original in **English**
First published in **Res Publica Nowa 23 (2013) (Polish version); Eurozine (English version)**
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