

# Comparing Transitions: Challenges and Lessons for Civic Education

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Looking at the bumpy transitions of the post-communist countries in this publication, it is easy to see that each case is unique. There was the reunification of Germany, a war in Croatia, uncertainty in Bulgaria, a transformation reset in Ukraine, a long communist shadow in Romania, and an authoritarian setback in Russia. However, there are parallels as well, particularly when it comes to the societal experience of change, memory and, recently, nostalgia. A lot has been said and written on the big picture, both in regards to the region and each country, but what, for us, practitioners of civic education, can be revealed in personal stories and personal experiences of transition? What is the added value of zooming in on people's life as opposed to, studying policies or institutions? What do the personal stories of transition tell us about the post-communist civic culture of today and what can we do to empower disenfranchised citizens who are susceptible to populism, to become active architects of their civic lives again?

## **Common Challenges**

Post-communist countries and societies are unique in their political, economic and social development. But the similarities are striking enough to make a comparison possible and to be able to work out a set of common challenges.

## ***Reading history***

The oppressive nature of the communist regimes has left a deep scar in Eastern Europe. Countries in the region still struggle to overcome the legacy of the past and to agree on a coherent narrative that unequivocally condemns communism, both as a political system and an ideology. The lack of consensus when evaluating the communist period is often quoted as a source of confusion, frustration and division in our societies. On the other hand, many of the key participants of the events before 1989/1991 are still active members of political life, which hinders coming to terms with the past.

## ***Public institutions as a communist legacy***

Communist legacies remaining unchallenged are, therefore, a key factor, which stifles the success of transition. They are especially durable in public institutions, where certain patterns of behaviour have proved to be resistant to change. Attitudes instilled by communism are being passed on to a new generation of public officials and bureaucrats, by virtue of socialisation within unreformed administrative frameworks. The newly democratised institutions, apart from Germany's, are often ineffective in tackling large-scale corruption and create the perception of a façade democracy, where transparency is lacking<sup>3</sup>. These institutional inadequacies create an atmosphere of uncertainty, unpredictability and have adverse effects on the economic situation and investment climate of Eastern Europe.

Open borders allow people to leave their home countries and to pursue a higher standard of living elsewhere. Thus, unsurprisingly, the slow progress and insufficient reforms have resulted in a brain drain (see Croatia: How to keep Talent at Home). The long-term consequences of this can be severe for Eastern European countries.

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<sup>3</sup> Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, <http://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/>, (retrieved 2017)

## ***The fallacy of perception***

An alarming side-effect of the difficulties of transition is that democracy, rather than communism, is blamed for people's hardships. This is especially true among people who suffered the social and economic consequences of the end of communism. Job security, which existed before, disappeared when factories shut down and unemployment rose. With proactivity being largely suppressed under communism, many found themselves unprepared for the rapid change. Hence, they bear fewer positive personal memories connected to the beginning of the democratic transition. These consequences unavoidably lead many to blame the transition to democracy for their hardship, as opposed to communism, and to remember "the good old days" with nostalgia. Myths and misconceptions about communist times have been propagated as a consequence of this.

These sentiments are also fuelled by the unrealistically high expectations that many had about the democratisation process. Democracy was regarded as an ideal, in the name of which people were prepared to endure hardship and painful reforms. However, this conviction lasted only for a limited amount of time. After the initial enthusiasm was gone, disillusionment set in.

## ***In no one we trust***

The totalitarian nature of communism damaged trust in the elites and among people. The steps to restore that trust using traditional or transitional justice in many places were hesitant at best. As mentioned above, institutions are perceived as ineffective and corrupt, serving the interests of power groups, instead of serving the public interest. Even though many human rights and individual freedoms were regained after 1989/1991, and despite progress being made towards economic growth, distrust towards political elites persists.

Eastern European anti-establishment sentiments might seem similar to those in parts of Western Europe and the US. However, it is important to note that in many places in Eastern Europe the elites today are at least partly related to the previous nomenclature.

There were communists who turned into democrats overnight. The blatant hypocrisy of this act further eroded people's trust in politics and convinced many citizens that elites never change and that democracy was rigged before it even took root.

“ A failure to invest in a political culture at large, not dealing with the legacies of a communist past, and rising economic inequality in the newly established market economies are some of the key reasons for the rise of illiberalism today. Notably populist parties, with extreme views, are gaining ground in Eastern Europe and are happily reaping the “benefits” of the failures of transition.

## The Transition Continuum

It is nonetheless important to note, that albeit common, these problems and challenges exist in the different countries to varying degrees. In this sense, the success of transition, if the end goal is a consolidated democracy (which is, in itself a never-ending process), can be seen as a continuum in which the different countries score differently.

In many ways, Russia and Germany can be placed at the opposite ends of this continuum. On the one hand, Russia was the centre of the Soviet Union that fell apart in 1991, triggering the dissolution of the bipolar world order. Twenty-six years later, Russia is becoming increasingly authoritarian and conservative. Russians distrust of liberal values and are disillusioned with democracy. Notions like democracy, liberalism and free market economy are not associated with rights and freedoms. Instead, they have become synonyms for the powerlessness and poverty of the majority, as opposed to the omnipotence and excessive wealth of a small minority. Elites have become completely detached from the public good (see Russia: Authoritarian Resurgence).

On the other end of the spectrum is Germany, which is a unique case because of the reunification of two German states after the end of the Cold War and its very short 11-month transition. For many years, united Germany was considered to be a textbook example of transformation and consolidation of democracy. However, recent events like the rise of extreme political views and attitudes, especially in the former German Democratic Republic, ring alarm bells.

The transition process occurred too quickly for Eastern German citizens to be able to actively shape it, adjust to it and internalise it. What mattered was not people's life before 1989, but rather how quickly they were able to adapt (see Germany: A Tale of Two Generations). East Germans felt they were deprived of their agency in transition, while West Germans complained about paying the bill for the adjustments. Both have built up frustrations as a result.

Croatia's transition was marked by its War of Independence, which for many was the key formative experience of breaking away from former Yugoslavia. Today, apart from the trauma of war, the country is troubled by unprecedented levels of perceived corruption, making it, alongside Hungary, "the new face of corruption in Europe"<sup>4</sup>. For many, the political transition has ended, but the economic is far from over. A mixture of an ageing population, early retirement, inadequate educations and an ineffective public sector has become a key motivation for young and well-educated Croatians to leave the country. Even though the state provides social benefits, many young people prefer to look for a different, albeit more competitive environment, where their skills are what matters most (Croatia: How to keep Talent at Home).

Ukraine is, in many senses, an unexpected case of a transition being reset a quarter of a century after Independence and a decade after the Orange revolution. It is improbable for strong waves of civic protests to occur over and over again, but Ukraine, in the presence of a potent external threat and war, has demonstrated extraordinary civic energy. After the annexation of Crimea and with the ongoing

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<sup>4</sup> N. Nielsen, Croatia and Hungary are 'new face of corruption', EU Observer, <http://euobserver.com/political/136664>, (retrieved January 2017)

war in the East, Ukrainians have shown a strong sense of solidarity, voluntary engagement and civic determination, especially among civil society (see Ukraine: Transition Reset). Despite the hardship, there is a widespread understanding among citizens that corruption, the Soviet style of doing 'business as usual' and the ongoing conflict with Russia are impeding the country's reforms.

In Bulgaria, people found themselves longing for the communist past in the volatility of transition. Before 1989, Bulgarians managed to reach a certain level of predictability in their life, despite the repressive nature of the communist regime. This was in stark contrast with the uncertainty and unpredictability of transition. Because transition fell short in fulfilling the high hopes of Bulgarians, many people tend to underrate democracy and overrate the communist era. Nevertheless, these subjective experiences need to be placed in the context of objective indicators, which show that life in Eastern Europe has significantly improved in many aspects after 1989 (see Bulgaria: Nostalgia on the Rise).

Romania's transition took a toll on all of its citizens, but it disproportionately disadvantaged the already vulnerable social groups including women, minorities, the Roma and the LGBTQI community. While its political system and institutions were being rearranged at the beginning of the transitional period, the voices of minorities were underrepresented in the decision-making processes, making their interests easy to overlook or discard entirely. While there has been some progress in recent years, there is still a long way to go before achieving a truly inclusive and diverse society (see Romania: A Missed Opportunity for Minorities).

## **Theory vs. Experience of Democracy**

The work of democracy scholars of the 1980s, such as O'Donnell and Schmitter, and early 1990s, such as Claus Offe, shaped, to a large extent, the assumptions and approaches of classical "transitology" in Central and Eastern Europe. Leading academics in the fields of political science and economics offered frameworks, focusing on

“triple transition”<sup>5</sup>, and looking to reform the political system, the economy and the civil society with “shock therapy”<sup>6</sup>. Today we know that the significance of social, cultural, or historical contexts<sup>7</sup> remained largely neglected. We also know that the knowledge foreign experts had of the regions, which had been closed for more than 40 years, was negligible. It was, therefore, often assumed that transition was “the same road, regardless of the starting point, whether that be Sao Paolo, Singapore, or Slovenia”<sup>8</sup>. This assumption was an oversimplification of the complex transition processes of the Eastern European countries, each of which took a unique path.

There is a basic understanding that a democracy cannot exist without democrats. In Eastern Europe, there are democratic institutions, regular elections, multi-party systems, and market economies. However, apart from installing formal democratic structures, there is also a need to cultivate a democratic political culture and a strong belief in, and commitment to, democratic values. Communist propaganda has worked tirelessly and, at times, aggressively, for more than five decades to convince Eastern Europeans that communism is superior. Obedience, rather than proactivity, was what mattered.

“ After the changes, no attention was paid to the simple fact that without an understanding of democracy and without a continuous positive experience of democracy as a way of living, it would be difficult to convince citizens that democracy, albeit imperfect, is the best form of “government of the people, by the people, for the people”<sup>9</sup>. In the absence of targeted efforts to make a strong case for democratic values and to educate citizens on how to contribute to and take advantage of a democratic society, a communist mindset, or one susceptible to authoritarianism and populism, will persist.

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<sup>5</sup> F. C. Offe, *Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe*, (2004), *Social Research*, Vol. 71, No. 3, p. 501-528

<sup>6</sup> J. Sachs, *Shock Therapy in Poland: Perspectives of Five Years*, (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1994)

<sup>7</sup> J. Kubik and A. Linch, *Post-Communism from Within*, *Social Justice, Mobilization and Hegemony*, (Social Science Research Council and New York University Press, 2013)

Our research demonstrates that continuous positive experiences with democratic practice are crucial for the consolidation of democracy.

Instead of this, what occurred almost everywhere in the years of change was that the three key benefits of democratisation were challenged by the transition process – these being the free market economy, the liberal state institutions and the establishment of an open civil society. The free market economy became associated with very few becoming very wealthy and the majority of people remaining poor and neglected. According to EBRD’s latest report, “73% of the population of post-communist countries have experienced income growth below the average for those countries”<sup>10</sup>. As mentioned above, apart from Germany, politics and institutions in Eastern European countries became associated with corruption and self-interested elites. Civil society is often mockingly referred to as the product of a failed ‘grants democracy’, meaning that grants for non-governmental organisations from large donor organisations or governmental development aid agencies have failed to solve many of the countries’ pressing societal problems.

“ Against this backdrop, it is important to convey a strong message that democracy is not the problem. The problem is the long shadow of communist legacies, in combination with the way transition was approached.

A large number of people perceive their country’s transition as a negative experience. It does not come as a surprise that democracy is associated with lack of rules and disorder, rather than with freedom<sup>11</sup>. This makes it difficult to convince them to uphold

<sup>8</sup> Stark and Bruszt, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

<sup>9</sup> A. Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, New Brunswick, (Rutgers UP, 1955).

<sup>10</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Transition for All: Equal Opportunities in an Unequal World*, (2016), <http://2016.tr-ebird.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> A. Besand, *Politische Kulturforschung und Politische Bildung an Europas Rändern*, (2015) <https://oezp.univie.ac.at/index.php/zfp/article/view/650/525>

democratic values – values related to transition. If their personal experience of democracy is of corrupt institutions, power-hungry elites and economic instability, it is understandable why they may see communist regimes as “not so bad” by comparison. Corruption was a wide-spread phenomenon under communism, but the lack of transparency then and its normalisation in the form of trading favours made it invisible to most. For this reason, corruption is seen as a new phenomenon and a result of transition.

One important aspect of life under communism, highlighted in the German example, was the existence of a number of informal social networks and physical spaces of organised communal exchange (see *Germany: A Tale of Two Generations*). The dismantlement of these networks has given people a sense of alienation and a view that the old social fabric has been destroyed. The system of trading favours, where people had the sense, if not of equality, at least of being equally deprived of goods, has been replaced by petty corruption where only some hold power over others. While alienation in transition might be a side-effect of globalisation, just like improvements in people’s condition under communism came as a side-effect of modernisation, once they set in as simplistic equations, it becomes almost impossible to explain why democracy is not equal to alienation and communism not equal to prosperity.

Institutionally and on paper, most Eastern European countries can be seen as textbook examples of successful transitions. To various degrees, democracy has been institutionalised, there are somewhat strong checks and balances, and citizens have different means to influence politics and policies beyond elections. Indeed, after the fall of the Berlin wall, it felt as if democracy had won and history had finally come to an end. The current rise of illiberalism and populism in Eastern Europe shows this victory is fragile and democratic societies are vulnerable. The high levels of susceptibility to these phenomena, which can arguably be traced back to the communist past, demand close examination. One lesson from the region for both struggling and consolidated democracies around the globe is that democracy is a constant work in progress.

## The Consequence of not Dealing with the Past

When the refugee crisis hit the continent, many people in Central and Eastern European, including in East Germany, reacted in a negative way. This sentiment was additionally fuelled and misused by political elites. When governments did propose welcoming policies for migrants – like in Germany – this gave a boost to anti-immigration parties. In a report commissioned by the Tent Foundation about the public perceptions of the refugee crisis<sup>12</sup>, Hungary leads the rank of negative attitudes with 67%, reaching 82% among millennials. There is data suggesting that seven out of the ten least empathic countries in the world are in Eastern Europe<sup>13</sup>. Ivan Krastev argued that the region's "compassion deficit" was founded in unmet expectations as "we were promised tourists, not refugees"<sup>14</sup>. There are potential alternative explanations.

Can the forceful attempts to create largely unitary societies under communism be a prerequisite for the lack of tolerance and for the rise of xenophobia? What does the comparative isolation and cultural homogeneity of Eastern Europe before 1989 tell us about the negative attitudes towards "the other"? And what does the lack of sanctioning of hate speech imply about the way we interpreted the newly gained freedom of expression?

A study commissioned by Sofia Platform in 2014<sup>15</sup> showed that 55% of Bulgarians evaluated communism positively, compared to 76% denouncing it in 1991. Does the lack of knowledge about the atrocities of the communist regime and the fading memories of the past result in disillusionment with democracy? Today, rather than perceiving themselves as victims of the former communist

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<sup>12</sup> The TENT Foundation, Public Perceptions of the Refugee Crisis, (2016) [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/5706810201dbae9366c3a7ad/1460044090846/TENT\\_Main+Report+JAN+2016+Re-contact.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/5706810201dbae9366c3a7ad/1460044090846/TENT_Main+Report+JAN+2016+Re-contact.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> J. Bryner, The Most and Least Empathetic Countries (Full List), (Live Science, 2016), <http://www.livescience.com/56557-most-and-least-empathetic-countries.html>

<sup>14</sup> I. Krastev, Eastern Europe's Compassion Deficit, (The New York Times, 2015), [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?_r=0),

<sup>15</sup> Sofia Platform, The Transition: Myths And Memories, National Public Opinion Survey, (2014), <http://sofiaplatform.org/2014/the-transition-myths-and-memories-25-years-free-bulgaria/>

regime, people identify themselves as victims of transition. Central and Eastern Europe's recent call for 'cultural counter-revolution', led by Budapest and Warsaw, speaks loudly of the push against more European integration and is also a reminder of the nationalist sentiments in the midst of Europe.

“ Beyond installing democratic institutions and pushing for transitional justice, one of the most successful ways to ensure that citizens today learn from the past is to instil a 'never again' mentality when it comes to totalitarian regimes. Civic education is an ideal tool for this.

However, the Sofia Platform study cited above showed that 94% of young adults in Bulgaria know nothing or almost nothing about this period and only 10% of what they know is acquired at school. Most of their knowledge comes from private conversations with family and friends. Adequate historical knowledge and formal civic education<sup>16</sup> are absent, as is a strong and unequivocal political denouncement from political elites of the former system. The picture is similar in other countries.

Against this background, the younger generation's opinion about communism is formed by the older generation's changing memories and interpretations. The older generation is often nostalgic for an idealised version of the past because the imagined democratic future never came to be.

It has become increasingly hard to separate fact from fiction when it comes to communism. Many now believe communism provided equality for all, while democracy brought wealth and success, but just for some. *"Before, one did not need to become rich, and today, one cannot with honest work. Before, we were not permitted to travel, and today we cannot afford to. So why have freedom if we cannot enjoy it?"*, an interviewee from Bulgaria told us.

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<sup>16</sup> Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Citizenship Education in Bulgaria, (2016), <http://www.bpb.de/veranstaltungen/netzwerke/nece/206152/citizenship-education-in-bulgaria?p=all>

In the absence of facts, nostalgia kicks in. While one cannot blame the older generation for longing for their youth, nostalgia can be dangerous. Both internally and externally, authoritarians and charismatic populists make use of it, as its emotional appeal can be very powerful. Nostalgia also paves the way for myth propagation and is passed on to the young generation, especially in the absence of fact-based narratives embedded in the context of personal experiences.

## Recommendations

Our research and discussions have revealed that a useful metaphor to think of citizens of countries in transition is the way we think of integration of citizens with migration background. The process of transition should be thought of as a process of integration into a new society, i.e. not only expecting citizens to adapt, but also helping the elites to understand by actively listening to the experiences prior to the change. Integration takes generations and it would be naïve to expect a transition from a communist to a democratic political culture to take place instantaneously. As Dahrendorf warned: "It takes six months to create new political institutions, to write a constitution and electoral laws. It may take six years to create a half-way viable economy. It will probably take 60 years to create a civil society"<sup>17</sup>.

“ While the focus on institutions and formal structures in Eastern Europe’s transition has been strong, political culture, attitudes and beliefs have been largely neglected, even within the work on boosting civil society. Former regimes forced citizens to internalise the communist political culture for half a century. Therefore, communist ideas are deeply rooted and their durability is very much underestimated by democracy promoters. Therefore, they cannot be changed instantly and should be targeted specifically through tools of civic and history education.

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<sup>17</sup> R. Dahrendorf, *Has the East Joined the West?*, (1990), *New Perspective Quarterly*, 7:2, p.42

In addition, there is a rift between the normative story of democracy and the way citizens in transitional countries perceive it. Working on improving the democratic process in Eastern Europe has to involve a dialogue with citizens who have been disillusioned with democracy. In other words, the challenge for civic education is to combat this disappointment with a positive experience of democratic practice. Civic education efforts should be fact based without dismissing personal experiences. People's stories should be factored in and discussed, keeping in mind the subjectivity ingrained in each individual narrative.

It is well-known among advocates of civic culture that civic education needs to be more prominent. But advocacy activities need to take place in order to convince more people apart from the already 'converted' that civic education has a crucial role to play, whenever processes of societal change of this magnitude take place. Apart from Germany, none of the countries examined are giving a prominent place to civic education and they have struggled to include it as part of the formal curriculum at schools. In addition, areas like history education, culture of remembrance and dealing with the past should be integrated into the toolkit of civic education.

None of the policies of large donor organisations active in the region have been targeting the civic culture in a systematic way. To a large extent this is understandable, as civic culture is difficult to measure compared to institutional progress. Against this background, it is even more important to map the history and civic education efforts more thoroughly in order to identify the gaps, as well as draft systematic recommendations for actors like the European Union, the Council of Europe or the World Bank.

### ***Personal experience matters***

“ Our findings suggest that there is untapped potential for learning about democracy through practice.

Explaining why one regime is better than another is important, but experiencing and practising democracy, and bringing historical dilemmas closer to modern day dilemmas, appears crucial to provide the right context. The often contradictory experiences of citizens, just like their changing memories, should be taken into account, too. They might be subjective, but unless citizens are given agency and the sense of being listened to, we will keep swirling in a spiral of angry people and detached elites, widening the space for populists.

### ***The importance of exchange among 'equals'***

Another lesson learned in our project is the importance of the comparative perspective and the exchange among Eastern European societies. The access to similar, yet different contexts enables citizens to realise that other societies struggle with similar issues. Sharing stories of difficulties, alongside with good practices makes for a genuine exchange among equals, where citizens do not feel that one country outperforms another. The equal footing makes this method superior to other approaches.

### ***It's time to talk!***

Fact-based civic education in history and politics is not only desirable, but absolutely essential. However, facts should be framed through relatable narratives. This is precisely what dialogue is about. It provides a space for people to come to understand transition by listening to different stories about how transition has affected people's lives, a place to reflect on experiences and narratives. This helps citizens recognise that there are different viewpoints about the same event.

Another important role is ascribed to civic education in regards to facilitating the dialogue between generations, or even groups with contradictory experiences of the recent past. Citizens born after 1989/1991 are often more open and cosmopolitan, while their parents and grandparents remain largely traditional. This conflict is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of each other's experiences. As an interviewee in Bulgaria put it, the former regard the latter as

backwards, the latter think of the former as being immoral. The lack of dialogue between people hinders the normal functioning of a society and additionally undermines a core feature of democracy. Democracy should provide a space for criticism, dissent and public dialogue, and a platform that enables citizens to agree to disagree while sustaining openness and dialogue. With a restored dialogue, conventional means and techniques of civic education can find their way back into the process.

“ Right now, we are at a point in time, where younger generations and more cosmopolitan groups do not recognise the looming dangers of the authoritarian past, while older generations and more traditional groups do not recognise the benefits of the democratic present. Using dialogue to build a bridge between the two groups is vital, as divided societies are an easy target for demagoguery.

In this respect, Eastern Europe has important lessons to teach both older and other younger democracies around the world. Beyond consolidation of institutions, experiencing genuine democratic practices and sustaining dialogue appears to be crucial. Democracy, it seems, is not set in stone. Citizens should be constantly empowered to be an active part of the ongoing renegotiation of the foundations of the societies they live in.

## About the author

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