



**CHALLENGES OF
TRANSITION
IN EASTERN EUROPE:
LESSONS FOR CIVIC EDUCATION**

Louisa Slavkova & Nora Korte

CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION IN EASTERN EUROPE:

LESSONS FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Edited by Louisa Slavkova & Nora Korte

Copyright of this publication is held by DRA e.V., all rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This publication is a product of cooperation between DRA e.V. in Berlin, Germany and Sofia Platform in Sofia, Bulgaria.

© DRA e.V. December 2019

ISBN: 978-3-00-063573-1

Published by DRA e.V.
Badstraße 44, 13357 Berlin
Germany
www.austausch.org

Editors: Louisa Slavkova and Nora Korte

Co-editor: Leonie Sichtermann

Proofreading: Matteo Mencarelli

Project lead: Stefan Melle, Louisa Slavkova

Project coordination: Anna Emelianov, Leonie Sichtermann

Cover photo: Polina Baigarova

The pictures on pages 20, 35, 62, 88, 102 and 112 are artworks from a group of young Bulgarian artists that have been part of a photography workshop dealing with thoughts and memories of transition.

Design by: Arsenia Hristova/ Meka M

Print by GroupA40 Ltd 1574 Sofia 144, Geo Milev str.

The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of DRA e.V., Sofia Platform or those of the editors.

CONTENT

Foreword

Louisa Slavkova and Stefan Melle 5

Understanding Transition

Dealing with the Past and Teaching History – Civic Education on the SED Dictatorship

Thomas Krüger 10

The Generation of Transition in Eastern Europe. A Generation of Uncertainty, a Generation of Distrust

Louisa Slavkova 20

Memories and Narratives of Communism: Selectiveness and One-sidedness

Vlada Gekhtman 33

Two Tales of Transition

Nora Korte 43

Challenges of Transition

Corruption

Rugilė Trumpytė 52

Urban vs. Rural during the Transition Period in Central and Eastern Europe

Mihai Lupu 57

East vs. West

Caroline Hornstein Tomić 66

Polarization as a Challenge of Transition

Botond Feledy 75

Intergenerational Dialogue

Olena Pravylo 84

A Soft but Mighty Power: Transition and Trust

Christine Wetzel 90

The Elusive Nature of Communist Nostalgia

Momchil Metodiev 97

Identity

Mădălina Mocan 106

Conclusions and Recommendations

Nora Korte 114

Acknowledgements 118

Partners 119

Foreword

By Louisa Slavkova and Stefan Melle

Motivated by the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a group of practitioners and academics from the former East Bloc countries got together in 2014. We reflected upon the impact communism and transition have had on our societies at large and specifically on the generation of transition¹, and as a result formed the Transition Dialogue Network². The essence of the experiences in some of the countries is captured in the publication “Mapping Transition in Eastern Europe: Experience of Change after the End of Communism”³.

The latest research paper, “The Generation of Transition in Eastern Europe: A Generation of Uncertainty – a Generation of Distrust?”⁴ explores the values and attitudes vis-à-vis democracy and active citizenship of those born between 1975 and 1995. An age cohort living in times of constant transformation, witnessing the collapse of socialist regimes with an omnipresent totalitarian ideology, the breakdown of economies, and the dissolution of their countries. Socialization and popular narratives matter as our attempted profiling of the generation demonstrates. There are huge differences of transitional experiences in the countries affected – stories of eruptive progress and lasting stagnation, stories

¹ As defined in our work, this is the generation born between 1975 and 1995 in post-socialist countries from the former Eastern Bloc, which reached adolescence in the challenging years of hopes, high expectations and deep transformations.

² “Transition Dialogue” is a network for organizations and projects that deal with managing transitional strategies and experiences. It aims at taking at snapshot at the variety of civic approaches and experiences in dealing with transition in Europe and outlining common essence. See <http://transition-dialogue.com/>.

³ Available on www.transition-dialogue.com, www.sofiaplatform.org, and www.austausch.org.

⁴ A working paper version is available on www.sofiaplatform.org.

of reconciliation and war, of loss and of gain, of new mobility but also of heavy constraints, of democratization but also of democratic recession. None of the countries seem to have come to terms with its past.

In the meantime, the generation of transition is the generation of current and future leaders, of agenda setters, teachers, and parents in our countries. When trying to understand a generation of an entire region, generalization is inevitable. However, it is a useful point of departure to speak about current events, popular perceptions, civic attitudes, behaviours and skills of the people who lived through massive (and still ongoing) transformations that were triggered with the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, new transformation processes have intersected their lives leading to an even more complex situation.

The generation of transition is not cohesive across the region, especially when it comes to their narratives vis-à-vis the past as well as their participation as active citizens. Nevertheless, there are common factors that are impacting their (dis-)engagement and similar patterns of civic and political actions can be observed.

Based on our research, it appears that in large part this generation is mostly a pragmatic one, disengaged and distrustful of traditional politics. Anything political is thought of as dirty business. Strong distrust exists towards institutions with the least trusted ones being political parties and parliaments. Nevertheless, people do care about issues they deem apolitical, such as the environment. A significant challenge remains in mobilizing people and encouraging political attitudes and positions based on democratic values.

In 2018, two gatherings – a workshop in Berlin, Germany and an international conference in Sofia, Bulgaria – were organized by DRA and Sofia Platform to discuss key questions such as: what are the main challenges posed by experiences with transition? How can civic education tools help foster active political participation in countries

and societies experiencing transition? What are the issues that have been ignored, overlooked or underestimated?

Historians as well as scholars in the fields of politics, democracy, transformation and generational research, educators, civil society representatives, NGOs and political think-tanks from across Central and Eastern Europe as well as from the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia came together and shared their different ideas in regards to the consequences of the insufficient or inexistent attempt to deal with the past for the process of democratization. They formulated recommendations on how to use means of civic education to improve democracy in the region. The publication at hand is a compilation of the results from these convenings. It captures the key challenges of transition, their impact on today's state of democracy in the region and the implications for civic education.

The introductory remarks are by Thomas Krüger, Director of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb). Krüger makes a point in regards to the differences in dealing with the SED dictatorship – on the one hand the importance of the legal work in order to restore justice while on the other the significance of civic and history education, which is the area that allows us to go beyond the victim-perpetrator paradigm allowing for a polyphony of voices and experiences in a dictatorship.

The first chapter offers a brief summary of the findings of the aforementioned research paper on “The Generation of Transition”. The second chapter is an attempt to capture different popular narratives and experiences, both positive and negative, of communism and transition in the region. Finally, the third chapter connects the experiences of transition with some of the main challenges that societies in Central and Eastern Europe face today. It offers examples of approaches, instruments and tools of civic education to address these challenges.

We consider this volume as an attempt to kick-start the conversation rather than an exhaustive list of remedies. Taking into

consideration the specificities of the different national contexts, it offers insights into a variety of experiences of the countries from the former East Bloc. However, the way experts suggest addressing some of the challenges in the region is not country-specific; the use of civic education to foster civic participation is acknowledged across the region. Particularly, they emphasize the role of communication and interaction between people in general, amongst different social groups and across borders.

Our main focus is on the active role of citizens for any functioning democracy. Albeit, non-ideological, civic education is a normative discipline that believes in the values of liberal democracy with civic participation being one of them. With this volume, we hope to positively contribute to the broader conversation on the best and most effective ways of engaging citizens, especially in a region with a specific experience of political, economic and societal transition from an authoritarian rule to democracy, which is being threatened in many of these countries today. Many citizens in Eastern Europe believe that transition is not yet over but have lost faith in a positive and prosperous future. We see our contribution as one that draws a multifaceted image of the current situation, but that provides a positive outlook for the future as well as inclusion and civic empowerment.

December 2019

Stefan Melle is managing director of DRA e.V. (Germany) as well as a journalist and an Eastern Europe expert. He is the leader of bilateral and European projects for strengthening civil society, media, education, social affairs, and the environment, one of the initiators of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (CSF) and of the International NGO Platform CivilMPlus for overcoming the Donbass Conflict.

Louisa Slavkova is co-founder and director of Sofia Platform (Bulgaria), is and invested in questions of democracy, civic education and foreign policy. She served as political advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria (2010-2013), was Program Manager at the European Council on Foreign Relations (2013–2016) and a Visiting Fellow at Columbia University (2016).

Understanding Transition

Dealing with the Past and Teaching History – Civic Education on the SED Dictatorship

By Thomas Krüger

With the benefit of nearly 30 years of hindsight, the declassification of the Stasi files can be viewed as a success story rooted in civil society and the constitutional state. The way that the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic (also known as the Stasi Records Agency) dealt with both the SED regime as well as with the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi) is considered exemplary by the international community – particularly by countries which had to deal with their own dictatorial past. Since work commenced at the beginning of the 1990s, the Agency has received more than seven million requests and applications to view files, including 3.2 million applications from citizens, and it currently receives around 50,000 applications each year. At present, the Agency employs around 1,500 employees across 14 locations.

Although individual applications to view files are difficult and those who inquire need to be very patient, the 1992 premise of the Law on the Stasi files is still valid: “My file is my property”. Since its establishment, the Stasi Records Agency has demonstrated a profound determination to process the history of the GDR and has become one of the key institutions in achieving this. But the good fortune of having access to such an institution as well as its files also brings with it the responsibility to critically examine the way we remember.

Thus far, the process of dealing with the past has relied on a perspective which could be described as that of a victim or affected person, whose goals included political retribution for the victims. In this case, dealing with the past in a historical context functions according to the categories of “victim” and “perpetrator”, “guilt” and “punishment”. Its aim was, and still is, that of shedding light on any wrongdoings and naming the guilty. Hence, fully dealing with the past vis-à-vis the abovementioned intention is not uncommonly equated with “punishing the guilty” or at least naming and shaming them. Unquestionably, it has helped many to at least partially come to terms with the past and restore their human dignity lost as a result of the dictatorship.

However, we need to be in a position to differentiate between dealing with the past and the broader domain of history and civic education. One of them is the fact that dealing with the SED dictatorship has up until now been driven by those affected by the system and those who want(ed) to understand and break the power mechanisms, hold those guilty accountable, and finally come to terms with their own stories, often damaged by the regime. But the challenge now facing German policymakers is a different one: there are at least two new target groups amongst the younger generation, most of whom did not themselves experience the Cold War, the GDR or the division of Germany, nor indeed the Stasi system.

On the one hand, these are the now adult children of GDR citizens who are interested in the personal stories of their perhaps already deceased parents or grandparents (themselves eligible for access to the Stasi Records Agency). As the 20th anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution and the Fall of the Berlin Wall came around, it became clear that this generation had been more or less forgotten or at times been presented in a negative light. Known as “Wendekinder” (“the children of transition”), their stories and insights have hardly received any publicity. Since 2011, on the other hand, initiatives known as the “Dritte Generation Ost” (“Third Generation East”) have countered this perception, establishing instead that the Wendekinder represent a highly diverse generation which has however, as a result of its dual

socialisation, assumed the harmonising, triangulating role of the mediator. This will enable them to develop into a key European generation, especially when one considers the future impact of all the Wendekinder shaped by transformation since 1989/90.⁵ It is important to incorporate their perceptions into history and civic education and to support them in their commitment.

As of now, there are already school children and youngsters without any family connection to the GDR: they will not independently seek out further detailed information on the defunct GDR, the Berlin Wall or the Stasi, and instead will just want to concentrate on the basics, i.e. condensed basic facts and definitions of the GDR, the division of Germany, the Wall, the Stasi system, etc. We need to make sure that this knowledge is readily made available to them. But at the same time, we need to nurture their curiosity by demonstrating why it is worth being acquainted with the recent past and sensitizing them to the variety of totalitarian tendencies and manifestations in the present and the future.

History and Civic Education and Dealing with the Past

The aims of dealing with the past and teaching history are different in some fundamental respects. Without discrediting the political intentions of rehabilitation and reparation, this differentiation is necessary to ensure that the way the SED regime and the Stasi system are dealt with is of such quality that it satisfies both the requirements of historical research practices as well as those of current educational landscapes. The aim of history and civic education is to support the development of a critical awareness of history as a source and inspiration for democratic action. Its task is to focus on the roles, facts, actors and places of remembrance – but not to moralise on historical events or the way these are perceived today.

⁵ Lettrari, A., Nestler, Ch., Troi-Beck, N. (Hrsg.) (2015): Die Generation der Wendekinder – Elaboration eines Forschungsfeldes. For more information see <http://netzwerk.dritte-generation-ost.de/sammelband-die-generation-der-wendekinder-elaboration-eines-forschungsfeldes/>.

The juxtaposition of dealing with the past with the teaching of history and civic education is the collision of two worlds separated by aspiration and function: one is primarily shaped by morality while the other is analytical; one aims to do justice to the suffering of those affected – the other to understand, contextualise and discuss historical events and processes; one concentrates on events in the past while the other has a wider horizon that creates connections to the present.

The search for “blind spots” in the work of remembrance is an important part of history and civic education. Remembering the victims creates an open and ethical process for further accounts and reduces the space for discourse on contrary views, narratives and argumentation. These are not mutually exclusive, instead they can and should complement one another.

A more critical approach to the past interprets the GDR in the context of a shared German post-war history. Here history is not told from a perpetrator/victim perspective, but considers also the followers (*Mitläufer*), helpers, rescuers, silent observers and profiteers, thus enabling a more comprehensive analysis. Of course we cannot and do not want to revise what has been already accomplished in the field of historical research on the GDR. The state was a one-party dictatorship under the supervision of the Soviet Union, and it lacked democratic legitimacy from the very start of its existence up until its demise. There is a consensus about it and it does not need to be proven over and over again.

This is the point of departure for history and civic education which explores the relationship between historical events and contemporary history through a broad range of questions and assumptions. One example is the system of citizen petitions (*Eingabewesen*) which enabled citizens and social organisations of the GDR to submit notes, suggestions and complaints to state institutions, factories and members of the People's Parliament (*Volkskammer*). The longer the GDR existed, the more prominent it became. At the same time, the risk of citizens putting themselves in

danger by appealing directly to the leadership of the State Council diminished over time. On the other hand, there was no independent administrative jurisdiction and therefore citizens were always at the mercy of those in power. Here parallels can be drawn to current petitioning systems.

Even the Stasi Records Agency can be viewed without the slant of the perpetrator/victim fixation and surprising facets of everyday life in the dictatorship discovered. For instance, the Stasi files testify of a high level of moral courage and show the full extent of the pressure people actually withstood in refusing to cooperate with the State security apparatus. In this respect, the Stasi records archive is also one of the most comprehensive archives in the world for the study of documented, model civic courage.

Exploration of Diverse Realities of Life Through the Study of History and Civic Education

Freedom from the burden of moral judgement enables the recognition of grey areas and a state of approximation. As a result, it is then possible to observe everyday life in the GDR, individual conformity, the various forms of pressure exerted in various ways such as at work, in unions, schools and in bloc parties, in a way that goes beyond the mere activity of the state security service.

Concentrating solely on constraint, fear and repression would mean to underestimate the risks dictatorships pose. Therefore – particularly in terms of history and civic education – the “binding power” of such dictatorships needs to be considered. The nostalgia for the regime (“Ostalgie”) which spread amongst parts of the East German population is in part due to precisely the unifying, albeit coercive power of the regime – this phenomenon can only be explained if one is open to consider and understand this binding power and allow for a reconstruction of real everyday life.

It is important to establish a relationship between the variety of factors described above and contemporary structures and realities.

Instead of expressing decisive and seemingly irreversible judgement, one must apply the concept of ambiguity inherent in the range of opinions and interests at the centre and on the periphery of the GDR regime.

On Being Open to Diverse Opinions and Multiple Perspectives

As with any other educational topic, when dealing with the GDR dictatorship we consider the so called Beutelsbach consensus. The consensus was agreed on in 1976 and it constitutes the standards of civic education in Germany. The Beutelsbach consensus has the following provisions:

1. Prohibition against overwhelming the pupil in order to avoid imposing on them the teachers' own political view;
2. Treating controversial subjects as controversial as long as this is how they are treated in politics and in academia;
3. Students should be empowered to analyse societal and political processes, to assess their own role within them and seek ways to actively participate in them;

The teaching of history and civic education should therefore allow space for different opinions when dealing with the history of the SED dictatorship and the Stasi and should help retain openness within the discourse. Non-negotiable boundaries are crossed however when human rights are called into question and the discussion is driven by nationalist thinking. Narrow historical perspectives are a danger to democratic freedom in which no one may claim a monopoly on interpretation. What is needed is a diverse, multi-perspective culture of remembrance in which various views are contrasted with each other and further developed. The teaching of history should be developed and shaped with reference to real life environments – but without inundation.

Openness and a multi-perspective approach are therefore basic principles of a democratic process of remembering which should also include a willingness to question the legitimacy and credibility

of one's own role as narrator – who decides which topics are to be researched and with whose interests in mind? On whose behalf and in what capacity are these being implemented? Who is legitimised by whom in the undertaking of “dealing with the past” – only the victims and those affected or also those not affected? Are perpetrators also permitted to be involved in dealing with the past? And who has the final say on this? In civic education, dealing with the past itself is subject to reflection – and in addition to the GDR period, dealing with the NS dictatorship in West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s is also an independent field of research. We must build on this.

This critical view on dealing with the past is not in and of itself an academic meta-discussion but is rather a corrective measure in the service of democratic openness. As historian Norbert Frei accurately establishes in his column for the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, despite consensus on the fact that no-one can monopolise an interpretation of the past, the politics of remembrance can also be guilty of an anti-enlightenment attitude.⁶ Frei formulates this in response to the national socialist tendencies of the culture of remembrance in Poland. Similar efforts to establish an exclusive and revisionist view of history are however also underway in Germany by nationalist and populist forces. History and civic education underline the constructability of historical perspectives and expose knowledge bases to scrutiny. And not least, the profession of civic education has a responsibility to constantly re-examine its own purported certainties in order to reflect current societal norms.

Particularly with regard to discussing and evaluating the GDR period and its legacy, the last few years have highlighted the narrow and fragmented view still predominant amongst many. Still to this day, it is not a logical analysis which dominates the conversation but rather a paternalistic viewpoint, one that reduces the diverse realities of people before the fall of the Iron Curtain and the transformation phase thereafter to stereotypes and black and white representation. The perspective of the East German population is largely neglected

⁶ Frei, N. (2017): Wenn Diktatoren über Geschichte befinden, wird es schlimm. Aber auch in der Demokratie sollten sich Politiker damit zurückhalten, see <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/kolumne-geschichtspolitik-1.3483756>.

in favour of a “cultural colonialism” with one’s identity being left invisible. The citizens of East Germany are under-represented in central positions both in politics and in society and over the last three decades their competences have not been adequately harnessed, and that is still the case today.

However, this does not mean that a differentiated analysis of the transition from dictatorship to a state constitution based on a free market economy must be based exclusively on the descriptions of direct experiences. A self-referential discussion which limits consideration of the GDR regime to the generation who lived through it will not in the end lead to progress. Not least because direct witnesses of this period will gradually be lost to the discussion through their demise, the work of remembering must continually explore new working methods. The media habits of younger generations and the new opportunities created by the digital age are developments which civic education has already embraced. We must find ways to keep this topic alive and refresh its relation to the present.

Dropping the Anchor of the Present Perspective

One example of this relates to how the urgent issue of democratic controls over security and intelligence services can be discussed in light of what we know today about the Stasi and the surveillance regime of the GDR. It can be cited as a cautionary example of a secret police becoming a law unto itself and used to provoke reflection on the purpose, legitimacy and abuse of data storage by secret services. What are needed are aids to enable a critical analysis of the present and, as is always the case in civic education, what is important is democratic empowerment and participation. Associations of this sort can inform discussions which transcend not only the timely but also the geographical perspective. Debates on historical memory are increasingly conducted from European and international perspectives. There is often a convergence of narratives from very different national origins. In terms of history and civic education, this requires the development of concepts which incorporate and interconnect the various historic recollections.



© Stefan Melle

The broadening of perspective is of paramount importance for imparting information in a pluralist and Europeanised society. The creed of social diversity demands new viewpoints on historical events and individual conceptions and certainties must be redefined. That

is the backdrop against which history and civic education must be set in order to become established in educational institutions. In a recent essay, historiographer Michele Barricelli stresses the need for learning spaces which are sensitive to diversity when dealing with historical material as follows: “Now more than ever before we have the prerequisites for genuine and productive negotiation on the substance and significance of the past, individual events, heritage and responsibility before the whole of history in the here and now in German schools in the form of the increasingly multicultural or multi-ethnic – i.e. diverse – backgrounds of the students.” He points out that ethnicity, class background and gender as socialising forces specifically inform perceptions of historical events.

Seen in this way, the differentiation between processing the past and the critical teaching of history and civic education produces a political consequence: common sense in the research of civic and history education must play a far larger role in the dissemination of contemporary German history, which has a real and lasting influence on all sections of our society, both individually and collectively. In order to give both institutions and players the opportunity for exchange, the state too is obliged to provide financial and organisational support for the interconnection of memories between societal groups.

About the author

Thomas Krüger, director of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) (Germany). He was a founding member of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the former GDR, and subsequently became the executive director of the SDP in Berlin (East) and the deputy chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in Berlin (East/West). He then served as the city’s Senator for Youth and Family Affairs (1991-1994) and a member of the German Parliament, the Bundestag (1994-1998).

The Generation of Transition in Eastern Europe. A Generation of Uncertainty, a Generation of Distrust

By Louisa Slavkova



© Johana Trayanova

This summary is based on a 2017 research paper⁷ that tries to answer the question: is there a generation of transition in Eastern Europe and if so, what are its values and attitudes towards democracy

⁷ Authored by Sofia Platform with the support of the German Federal Agency of Civic Education (bpb), December 2017.

and active citizenship⁸? Its point of departure is the assumption that transition as a phenomenon has an important impact on the citizens who come of age then. The following summary includes some of the findings and distills recommendations on how civic education can specifically address this generation and societies who have undergone transition from a totalitarian regime to democracy.

FRAMEWORK

The Generation of Transition

For the purposes of the study the generation of transition is defined as the age-cohort born in post-communist Eastern Europe between 1975 and 1995. This is the generation that has witnessed the collapse of a totalitarian regime with an omnipresent ideology, the breakdown of economies, the dissolution of their respective countries and war. While the generation of their parents had to reinvent themselves at an age when one's worldviews are rather stable, the generation of transition was born and lived in times of constant transformation. If anything, this generation is one of uncertainties. Basic goods disappeared, money wasn't worth even the paper it was printed on, and states went bankrupt or dissolved. The only rules that mattered were the rules of the strong of the day.

Today, the generation of transition forms the current and future leaders in politics, culture and institutions. Its members are raising and educating future generations, passing onto them values and

⁸ Referring to Hoskins, B. and Mascherini, M. (2009), active citizenship is defined as, "Participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy." This definition highlights a variety of topics concerning participatory activities: They range from holding governments accountable, to representative democracy (e.g. voting), and also participation in the everyday life of the communities; active citizenship in terms of new (e.g. one-off issue politics) and traditional (e.g. membership in a political party) forms of participation; values-based ethical boundaries that set the limitations for activities. Ibid: *Measuring Active Citizenship through the Development of a Composite Indicator*. In: *Journal of Social Indicator Research*. 90 (3), pp. 459-488.

attitudes. This makes it worthwhile investigating what this generation stands for and how formative transition has been for its worldview.

Transition from Communism to Democracy

Since transition is not an exclusively Eastern European phenomenon but rather one that has also occurred in other parts of the world, our definition refers to the transformative experience of transition towards democracy in the specific context of post-communist Europe.

Transition is one of the most-referenced analytical frameworks of analysing post-communist Europe. It describes the post-1989 processes of transition from totalitarianism to democracy, open society and free market economy. While much emphasis has been placed on the democratization of the political systems and their institutions, less attention has been paid to the formation of a democratic political culture under these specific circumstances. Obviously, institutions do not reform by themselves and policies are not enacted without active individuals and political will. Social transformation requires a large-scale shift, both personal and societal. While democracy indisputably knocked on the door of each post-communist country in Europe, it is a subject of debate whether it has managed to enter everywhere and to what extent⁹. Major criticism of the research body and theories of democratization lies in the neglect of the soft areas and of those difficult to measure. One of them is the question of how the transition from political culture in a totalitarian regime to a democratic one takes place.

Recent theoretical debates on post-communist transitions can be assigned to the so called second decade of research that has emerged since the late 1990s. The trend there is to emphasize contextual factors rather than applying universalistic approaches and it goes along with efforts to advance the existing theories using

⁹ Slavkova, L. (2017): Introduction, In: Transition Dialogue Network: Mapping transition in Eastern Europe: Experience of change after the end of communism, Berlin.

a historical and comparative approach¹⁰. The summary presented here falls within the same attempt to explore the conditions, capacities, and opportunities in the context of transition of former communist societies taking into account the specificities of each country. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the gap in looking at the democratization of political culture.

METHODOLOGY

Representatives of the generation of transition in the following countries were considered in the study: The Visegrád Group – Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia; the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia; Bulgaria and Romania; and the countries that are part of the EU Eastern Partnership – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.¹¹

The collection of data was conducted in three stages: an extensive literature review¹²; expert interviews with researchers on generational

¹⁰ Kollmorgen, R. (2013): Theories of Postcommunist Transformation. Approaches, Debates, and Problems of Theory Building in the Second Decade of Research. In: Studies of Transition States and Societies, vol. 5 (2), pp. 88-105.

¹¹ Data has been gathered also for the Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, East Germany and Russia but including it would have gone beyond the scope of the study.

¹² The theoretical framework for the research draws from Mannheim (1928), Kollmorgen (2013) and Jureit (2010). In addition, the following youth studies conducted in recent years serve as some of the main data sources: Gries, Rainer, Asboth, Eva Tamara, Krakovsky, Christina. Generation In-Between. Children of the Balkan Wars: Getting to know a crucial generation for Europe. Erste Stiftung, 2016; Hurrelmann, K. and Weichert, M. (2015): Lost in Democratic Transition? Political Challenges and Perspectives for Young People in South East Europe. Results of Representative Surveys in Eight Countries. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin, Maribor, Skopje; Mitev, P.-E. and Kovacheva, S. (2014): Young People in European Bulgaria – A sociological portrait 2014. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Sofia; Zarembo, K. (2017): Ukrainian “Generation Z”: Attitudes and Values – Nationwide opinion poll results. New European Center and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Kyiv; Mkrtichyan, A. et al. (2016): Independence Generation. Youth Study 2016 – Armenia. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Yerevan; Omanadze, S. et al. (2017): Generation in Transition. Youth Study 2016. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Georgia, Tbilisi; TUI Stiftung (2017): Young Europe – The Youth Study of the TUI Foundation. Conducted by YouGov on behalf of TUI Foundation; Generation What? (2017). See <http://www.generation-what.eu/en/#>; Kucharczyk, J., Lada, A., Schöler, G. (2017): Exit, voice or loyalty? Young people

topics; and 49 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the generation of transition from the whole region. The interviewees were representative of the generation in question, active citizens and could provide insights into the situation in their country.

A number of questions guided our investigation:

- How is this generation politically and civically engaged?
- Which values matter to its representatives?
- How are the current issues of these societies linked to the years of transition?
- How do the experiences in the past determine the way the generation of transition responds to present challenges?
- What is their perception of the present political system and its institutions?
- What lessons can be drawn for civic education?

The generation of transition is not cohesive across the region, especially when it comes to defining whether and how this generation engages civically and politically. However, there are common factors that impacted their (dis)engagement and common, even though not unified, patterns of civic and political actions.

The literature derived from the psychological research¹³ suggests three levels of contextualized factors that have an impact on political socialization: micro-factors including values and ideologies, meso-factors, which include the closest social environment such as family, friends, school and the neighbourhood, and macro-factors like institutional, political, social, cultural and technological dynamics.

on Europe and democracy – Case studies from Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Institute of Public Affairs and Bertelsmann Stiftung; Albert, M. et al. (2015): Youth 2015 – The 17th Youth Study. Hamburg; World Values Survey (2017). See <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

¹³ Chrysochoou X. and Barrett M. (2017): Civic and political engagement in youth, findings and prospects, In: Zeitschrift für Psychologie, Vol. 225, No. 4, p.291.

Following this logic, we looked at the generation of transition, analysing their values, the levels of trust in their immediate circle, as well as institutional trust, and have tried to explain those with the macro level, i.e. the major transformation after the collapse of communism which left no area of social and political life untouched.

KEY FINDINGS

East – West

Corresponding to the generation of transition of Eastern Europe is the generation of Millennials in the West. Even though drawing comparisons goes beyond the scope of this paper, there are few comparative studies that give an idea about the differences. TUI's recent youth study reveals a generation to the West which is more trusting, less worried about security and income, whereas the South and East are more focused on economic success and wellbeing. Tolerance and solidarity are not among the top five values of young Poles but do matter for Spaniards and French. In general, the combination of the factors described above help construct an accurate picture of a generation. Focusing on some factors (i.e. economy), whilst leaving others out, leads to creating stereotypes about a generation. Just like the generation of Millennials is often described as self-centred and entitled by birth¹⁴, the generation of transition is often considered to be passive and pragmatic. This paper aims to contribute to a more differentiated picture of the generation of transition in Eastern Europe, which not only tries to escape the fallacy of stereotyping but also the trap of over generalization.

¹⁴ i.e. Harris, M. (2017), Kids these days: human capital and the making of Millennials.

East – East

The four regions we have looked at show some differences which are related to their experience of transition. While there is a sensible democratic backsliding in the V4 countries these days, especially in Hungary and Poland and a more conservative and less tolerant generation of transition, in some Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Western Balkans (WB) countries we still cannot speak of consolidated democracies. The disenchantment with democracy is even bigger in the EaP countries than in the WB. The generation of transition in the Balkans, albeit having lived through war and the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, shows higher levels of trust in political institutions. Deficient dealing with the communist past seems to be a tangible impediment in both Romania and Bulgaria and the root-cause for many of the current challenges vis-à-vis accountability, corruption and the rule of law. The so-called pragmatism of civic causes is more so typical for the V4 countries, Bulgaria and Romania where democratization, especially after the EU accession, was considered an accomplished goal. The active ones there engage typically on issues that have tangible results and which are clearly related to their closest environment or interests. With deterioration of democracy in those two regions, there is a chance that the focus shifts from concrete initiatives to normative ones related to the independence of institutions or quality of democracy in general.

Values

The generation of transition cares greatly about its dignity, the way it looks, its career and social standing. Values like tolerance, altruism (with the exception of Kosovo), political or civic engagement or innovative spirit score the lowest on its value ladder. Pragmatism seems to be a core value, exemplified in the type of causes with which the generation of transition and especially the younger cohort engages. Anything political is thought of as dirty business. Hence, the active part of the generation of transition prefers to engage in

causes related to the environment, as these are considered apolitical. At the same time, the expectation is for a strong, paternalistic state which provides jobs, education, and medical care but collects very few taxes.

Trust

The greatest trust among the generation of transition is placed in family, friends and colleagues. Distrust though already appears amongst neighbours, more so towards people of different religion and beliefs as well as immigrants (i.e. V4 countries). Distrust of institutions surpasses distrust of social groups. The least trusted institutions are political parties and parliaments, followed by governments and often media (except for Albania where trust in the media is the highest of all). Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) become less and less trusted across the region. Elites working within power structures are least trusted and least appreciated. A recent PEW research demonstrated that the higher the levels of trust in people is, the higher the levels of support for democracy¹⁵.

Urban vs Rural

The communitarians vs cosmopolitans divide of which many analysts speak today as the new cleavage that predicts elections outcomes in the West is to a lesser extent also valid for Eastern Europe. The classical divide between rural and urban centres – civic hubs and civic deserts – is still a very accurate predictor of engagement for a variety of reasons, including structural. The so-called civic deserts, or the lack of civic infrastructure that enables engagement, are to be found in rural areas and small towns rather than in large urban centres and capitals.

¹⁵ PEW (2017): In many countries, higher levels of support for democracy among those who say most people can be trusted, see http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/democracy-nationalism-and-pluralism/pf-05-10-2017_ce-europe-08-16/.

Transition in Eastern Europe was approached with a strong focus on the capitals and less so on the peripheries. All efforts for greater cohesion between different parts of Eastern Europe will take a lot of investments and time to lift up the peripheral parts to the levels of the capitals and urban centres. The latter does not mean that small towns or villages have to evolve into cities, but certain civic infrastructure needs to be developed in order to make engagement possible in the first place. Opportunities to participate or engage are much more prominent in the urban centres than in rural areas. An important observation however is that the levels of trust in political leaders on the local level are much higher, as local leaders are much more accessible and their work is more visible to citizens.

Experience of Democracy

Our research confirmed that key sources of disenchantment with democracy are dysfunctional democratic regimes in their countries and negative experiences with democracy, or what citizens thought was democracy. We only now are beginning to realize how much personal experience matters when it comes to trust in democratic institutions. Over the past 30 years, prominent theories of democratization have paid a great deal of attention to the systemic level of democratization, but less to the level of citizens' socialization in democracy. Liberal democracies as opposed to illiberal regimes are not grounded in rigorous and all-encompassing propagation of one worldview – they are founded in what Schumpeter coined as the most important democratic values: freedom and equality. Hence, democracies are not canonical about teaching citizens democracy, especially when they are struggling to establish them from scratch. However, already Havel warned us of the danger of neglecting people's civility in transition. He argued that focusing on the economy is important, but what is equally important is to invest in people's general culture. A better salary, posits Havel, will not improve the way a nurse will treat its patients, nor would more money lead a farmer to better treat his or her stock.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Civic education is making small steps in each of the countries – in the V4 it exists for a little longer, in others it is making baby steps. There are great expectations when it comes to its potential impact. However, there is little consensus about what exactly constitutes civic education and how political it should be. The very understanding of citizenship is questionable, having in mind the ambivalent experience with democracy and the high numbers of citizens who long for a strong, paternalistic state.

In addition, the debates so far are about formal civic education as part of the school curricula and not about adult civic education, within the scope of which would fall the generation of transition.

In some countries, post-World War II Germany is used as an example to highlight the importance of political education. Keeping in mind that the generation of transition cares more about apolitical issues, encouraging political engagement and positions based on democratic values seems important. However, the entry-point should be with tangible causes which are close to the generation, such as the environment, education, career opportunities and travel.

There is a latent danger of turning civic education into a subject that nurtures nationalism. With the rise of right-wing populism, there is a real concern of overloading civic education with patriotic undertones. Civic education is not a matter of merely creating a separate subject in schools, but is also part of literature, history, geography and language teaching. Literature and history in particular follow a widely conservative curriculum across the region, which is important to revise. The school environment is equally important in teaching citizenship and democracy, just as teachers' life-long learning programs and trainings. With relative freedom of choice of books and materials, the formal process of teaching citizenship relies heavily on the levels of knowledge and the personal experience of the teachers.

There is a broad consensus that democracy is an abstract matter that should be taught through case studies and project work that empower students while also allowing them to gain positive experience with the democratic processes. The more positive the experience is, the higher the motivation to uphold democratic standards and the more likely students are to subsequently engage. As one of the interviewees from Romania put it, faith should be regained in democracy being able to solve more problems than it causes.

The school is not the only place that deserves attention. The family is the other avenue through which young people acquire their values compass. Intergenerational formats prove to be one of the few approaches that instigate conversations and can challenge misconceptions, not only about democracy, but also about the communist past for which many feel nostalgia.

The gap between urban centres and rural areas is another item of concern in all countries; transition has left countryside areas void of any sense of community. In addition to capacity building for local elites, there should be programs that encourage the exchange between the centre and the periphery, between urban centres and small towns.

Insufficient dealing with the communist past or an attempt to rewrite both its history and the history of democratization seems to be an impediment in all countries. In the V4 group there is an intent to degrade the process of democratization by trying to establish the notion of an illiberal state (in Orban's words); in Bulgaria and Romania there is a strong sense of nostalgia for the glorified communist past even amongst the generation that never witnessed it, but did witness the hardship of transition; in the Balkans, democracy consolidation is a struggle with various degrees of success and history continues to be divisive; in most of the EaP countries, war, frozen conflicts and oligarchic networks prevent them from unfolding their potential. Russia's role in making use of and enhancing the vulnerabilities of Eastern Europe should not be downplayed either.

It seems that the generation of uncertainties now slowly taking the wheel of their countries is for its most a pragmatic, distrustful of traditional politics and a disengaged cohort. Its elites, in the words of Ivan Krastev, are meritocratic and find it increasingly easier to go somewhere else than to stay and change their countries. But they do care about issues seemingly apolitical. The challenge remains to civically engage them, but also to draw all lessons for the upcoming generations as well as for other countries and regions in transition.

The state of the CSO sector plays an important role when it comes to active citizenship and civic education. The sector faces issues of sustainability and funding, but also a strong focus on the large urban centres and capitals. Not only should new and sustainable forms of funding be sought but also the disengagement of large donor organizations in the region should be reversed. Different Eastern European countries have a different status vis-à-vis the EU and democracy support from EU institutions follow patterns that do not correspond to the realities on the ground and the general trend of democracy backsliding.

This leads to the role played by international organizations and the donor community invested in democratization. If there are three major takeaways from the democratization wave post 1989/ 91 these are that:

1. Democracy is a long work in progress and support for it should not be cut off, even when countries join the EU;
2. Democracy should be thought of as the process of integration in a new political system – it takes time, positive experience, trust and repetition;
3. The political system's gradual refurbishment matters, but the democratic political culture of citizens matters equally. If no attention is paid to citizens in general but instead the focus is on the elites, when they start turning away from democracy there is no one to stand in opposition.

From the almost five dozen interviews conducted and the numerous studies read for this research, we have discovered quite a few powerful stories that have motivated the generation of transition to engage – run for senate, urge for transparency and accountability, gather people for a cause, develop and build on alternative ideas for policy shifts. It takes uplifting the positive stories that give more hope, build trust and restore confidence in one’s own abilities to be part of a change when necessary.

About the author

Louisa Slavkova is co-founder and director of Sofia Platform (Bulgaria), is and invested in questions of democracy, civic education and foreign policy. She served as political advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria (2010–2013), as Program Manager at the European Council on Foreign Relations (2013–2016) and a Visiting Fellow at Columbia University (2016).

Memories and Narratives of Communism: Selectiveness and One-sidedness

By Vlada Gekhtman

Black or White?

Positive and negative narratives of communism are inseparable: each seemingly positive “achievement” of communism has its “but” – the hard price which people at an individual level as well as society more generally had to pay for it. Currently, however, both camps tend to ignore these “buts” and try (often unconsciously) to simplify the decades long history and complicated stories to mere black and white narratives – both social entities and individuals take only one side and seem to be unable to have an open conversation with their opponents.

To borrow Theodor Adorno’s words, many individuals tried to live a righteous life amidst the wrongs and many have positive recollections of their lives under communism and are not ready to confront and accept the ugly truth vis-à-vis the past. On the other hand, critics of communism despise those who, based on their personal experience, insist on the advantages of the communist system. However, listening to the other side means listening to the truth. And reconciliation – with the past and inside society – is impossible without this truth. As Russian culturologist and journalist Nikolai Eppele wrote, *‘attempts to divide society into those who should repent and those who should accept such repentance are not just flawed, because they serve separation, not reconciliation, but are absurd, because often among the ancestors of the same person there are those who were shot and those who shot’*. Nikolai Eppele points out that *Truth and Reconciliation Commissions*, similar to those working in Latin

American countries, can establish this truth, advocate for it publicly and start the process of reconciliation.

Historical narratives often serve political agendas. Depending on the current situation, either the “positive” or “negative” sides emerge and dominate the discourse in society. The dominating narrative suppresses the less popular one and creates a further cleavage and polarization along the topic in society. Not only do the narratives and their dominance differ within the countries in the former Eastern bloc, they also vary from country to country. To a certain degree, regional generalizations can be made.

Hungary and the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Ukraine: Communism is Doomed

In Hungary and the Czech Republic, the negative discourse about communism has a long tradition: in these countries dissident movements were powerful and strong.

In Lithuania and Ukraine, communism is interpreted as a time of suffering and pain that was brought upon almost every family. In Lithuania, any positive narrative about communism is pushed out from the public space and marginalized, and often mocked as “old ladies talk”. In Ukraine, the current conflict with Russia obviously revives the negative memories of communism. Often in these countries the very Russian language is perceived as the language of communism and people talking in Russian are labelled as “enemies”.

Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia: From Severe Criticism to Nostalgia

People’s memories of and attitude towards the past are shaped by the present: the more disappointed people are with the present, the more positively the past is remembered. In Bulgaria, Romania and Russia, a wide-spread sense of disillusionment with democracy and capitalism is present. As a result, there is growing nostalgia for the past and communism gets to be viewed positively by a growing number



© Georgi Bonev

of people. In Russia, this nostalgia is heated by official propaganda which contrasts the “chaotic 90s” to “Soviet time stability”.

It seems that the key points of the narratives about the communist past have changed over the years of transition in these countries. In the beginning of transition, the communist time was perceived as undoubtedly negative and a painful period of history. The main aspects of the narrative have been:

- The decades-long negative economic situation, “fake economy”, unreasonable spending, poor living standards and deficit.
- Lack of freedom – both of the individual and collectively, human rights abuse (of freedom of assembly and association, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, etc.). The most tangible point of this oppression was a ban on travel and limited contact with foreigners, which is still represented in individual stories: *‘For me, what matters the most has always been freedom – of speech, movement, choice, etc. Back then it was possible at any moment to travel to the USSR from the USA, but absolutely impossible to travel to the USA from the Soviet Union. It was*

possible to come from the USA to the USSR at any moment, but absolutely not from the USSR! It was an unchangeable fact of life'.

- Oppression of the individual over the collective and dominance of the community over the individual, humiliation of the individual on different levels, from routine rudeness in communication to the lack of respect for institutions from the authorities. Particularly bitter feeling about the lack of respect and humiliation are reflected in private stories about delivery in Soviet maternity houses: *"The woman who gives birth is to blame – in the first place, because she had sex and got pregnant, secondly, because she cries and disturbs the staff, thirdly, because she cannot endure. As nurses put it: you all have become too spoiled and delicate".*

What we observe now is that the criticism over these abuses has not only softened or vanished, but bluntly turned into positive features.

Take the economy for instance. Nowadays, it is described as profitable, especially for rural areas. It is described to have positively contributed to industrialization and modernization of the respective country. The measures of the planned economy are justified by characteristics such as job security, equality, stability and predictability of the future of each worker.

Another example is the interpretation of the interplay between the collective and the private: people in many countries (Russia and the former Yugoslavia) interpret the forceful collectivism as solidarity, strong bonds between the people as opposed to the current atomization and extreme individualism. People often do not realize that the current lack of connectivity between people and atomization are grounded in the communist past (this is especially relevant for Russia, where years of Stalin's policies of terror forged extreme mistrust). The communist system suppressed non-state civic engagement and networks. People therefore did not develop the ability to mobilize around a cause based on their own personal

initiative. Therefore, anything but a *humane* communist system has caused the large-scale erosion of trust and gradual deterioration and fragmentation of civic engagement.

Many of the oppressions of communism are being whitewashed today. Even those who criticize the communist regimes rarely mention large scale violation of human rights, dignity and freedoms.

Being confronted with the growing gap between rich and poor, people change their attitude to communist equality and begin to idealize it. Many seem to forget that the notions of equality and justice during communism were mere “imitation”. These otherwise noble values were officially proclaimed but in reality did not exist. Today, the idealistic perception of communist equality is amplified by the dominant perception of the lack of both social mobility as well as meritocracy. The prevailing mood is that money buys everything and that the only way to accumulate wealth is through unlawful means – neither hard work nor talent can lead to a successful and prosperous life.

For many, these shortcomings are the ultimate proof of equality under communism and a sign that those happy days are irreversibly gone. Many forget that both health care and education remain largely free to this day. Individuals also seem to forget those negative characteristics of the health care system which were strongly criticized in particular in Russia in the beginning of transition (the above-mentioned humiliation of the patient, corruption, the often bad quality of health care). Similarly, school education under communism is praised as universal and approachable – discussing the school system people are not ready to admit that it is free today too and that it had serious deficiencies in the past, such as the general lack of respect for children or the strong ideological component in education. Yet even critics of communism admit that there was a well-developed system of support for talented children, however often with the right family background as well as accessible additional education (sport, music, arts, ballet etc.).

Recently, some new notions and readings of the communist past have emerged, especially in the post-Soviet countries. The communist time is viewed as a 'moneyless world' and is interpreted as spiritually elevated, with clear morals, values and guidance. In Russia, one can witness a growth of interest in popular Soviet movies as well as children's books and cartoons which are believed to deliver the *right* examples of behaviour and social interactions.

In countries that experienced ethnic-based conflicts and wars (e.g. Armenia), communism is often romanticized as the time of happy co-existence in a multi-ethnic society. But the Soviet reality of nearly state-approved anti-Semitism (the notorious 'Doctors' plot' of 1952-1953 accusing Jewish doctors of conspiring to assassinate Soviet leaders as well as the unspoken restrictions on the admission of Jewish applicants to universities, especially in the capital cities) and the prevalence of the Russian language and culture over the national one are often "forgotten" or ignored. Surprisingly, even critics of the communist system fail to almost ever mention that the regime was hypocritical and based on a lie or, at least, on hiding the truth.

Narratives of Communism in Current Reality

Loss of identity trauma and the danger of nationalistic tendencies

As experts point out, both positive and negative recollections of communism result from trauma and traumatization caused by both communism and transition.

Living under the oppression of the regime, being dependent on external rules, regulations and prohibitions, individuals, especially those who grew up during communism, lost their ability to take responsibility for their own life and still hold the belief that "the state should take care of them". Furthermore, the situation of the failing social welfare systems in combination with struggling economies during transition made it hard for people to learn how to "take care" of themselves. The leap from the previous regime to the new system

was quite drastic and required significant personal strength and courage to adapt, and people felt helpless, lost and betrayed by the state.

Hence, people tend to interpret current relations between authorities and individuals as lack of protection and feel dangerous nostalgia for strong authoritarian leaders who “will take care of them”. In addition, individual identity and self-representation were sacrificed to ideological and collective identities of the “great fatherland”, “great achievements” and “great society”. The trauma from the loss of those grand identities has not been overcome and is currently transforming into dangerous nationalistic tendencies.

Lack of dialog is misused

Both memories and narratives are subjective by definition and remain personal until the hard work of dealing with the past is completed on the societal level. In order to embrace the past in the collective discourse, justice needs to be restored, wounds need to heal, archives need to be disclosed, facts documented, myths debunked and stories told anew and assimilated. It seems that perceptions and memories of communism in many countries remain subjective and individual. These narratives are still not part of the common understanding or part of the public discourse. Furthermore, people often keep silent on the communist past even amongst family members. In Bulgaria, for example, the older generation is reluctant to discuss with their children and grandchildren how their lives used to be under communism. The lack of dialogue, or emphasizing only certain aspects of communism over others (either negative or positive), inevitably leads to a lack of consensus in society and to some dangerous tendencies:

- In countries with predominant negative narratives, right-wing and nationalistic political forces stigmatize contemporary leftist concepts and exploit negative narratives for their own benefit.

- On the contrary, authorities in Russia currently profit from emphasizing the positive aspects of the past. It allows them to stigmatize liberal reforms and democratic opposition and institutions portraying them as those who want to take away all of the past positive achievements and destroy the idea of “the great fatherland”.

Recommendations

Wherever possible, both positive and negative narratives and memories of communism should become part of the public discourse: introducing roundtables, festivals, broad discussions (not only limited to scholars) which could help overcome gaps between an “idealized” picture of communism and reality, listening to opposing views, breaking the silence, and establishing widespread dialogue within society.

Opening a museum or organizing exhibitions exploring “communist times”, or at least specific periods, presenting personal stories, demonstrating everyday life on an official and personal level (juxtaposition), are all activities that could help provide society a more objective picture of the past. The exhibition “Moscow Thaw: 1953-1968”¹⁶, held in Moscow in the winter of 2016 and the spring of 2017 is one of the examples of this kind of educational work.

It is important to teach history to the younger generations through the medium of personal stories. This could mean different projects involving the youth – for example, young people could collect and discuss oral memories of their parents and grandparents. Civic organization could organize a national competition of essays based on these stories and publish the winning works, or these stories could simply be part of an online project on the past.

¹⁶ For further information see <http://mosmuseum.ru/exhibitions/p/moskovskaya-otpeel-1953-1968/>.

These online projects, with both oral and written testimonies and documents, could represent a genuine source of individual memories of the communist past. In Russia, for example, the project “Prozhito” (“Got lived”)¹⁷ is developing a collection of diaries of individuals from the 18th to the 21st century while the project “Oral history”¹⁸ is creating an archive of conversations on science, culture and everyday life of the 20th century.

This personalization of the recent past can be recounted in an entertaining way through various games and applications. For example, Moscow Memorial has recently developed and published the game “74. Board game on Soviet history”¹⁹ where players experience the periods of Soviet history with both its tragic and uplifting moments through the creation of their own character and by moving it on the board.

Other useful activities could include schools, classes, courses and roundtables for grown-ups: in these schools not only legacy and memories of communism could be discussed, but also advice and help could be provided on how to adapt to change. These initiatives can be modelled on the roundtables and schools organized regularly by the Sakharov Centre in Moscow and which are open to the public (e.g. Moscow Open School for Human Rights).

Performances and theatre pieces based on personal perceptions of the communist past may not only be helpful in bringing about fresh and authentic perspectives in understanding this period, but they may also help us reconcile with our own past. An example of this past reflection through theatre and art is the Bulgarian show ‘Поколение Б’, the Moscow-based ‘Teatr.Doc’ as well as other theatre projects of ‘memory drama’, centred on testimonials and archival sources.

¹⁷ For further information see <http://prozhito.org/>.

¹⁸ For further information see <http://oralhistory.ru>.

¹⁹ For further information see <https://urokiistorii.ru/article/54295>.

About the author

Vlada Gekhtman, Happy Thinking People Agency (Germany), works in the area of market research and public opinion studies. Her studies focused on the values and life styles of Russian youth, challenges of Russian entrepreneurs and perceptions of gender division in Russia. Vlada took part in the “Mapping Transition in Eastern Europe” study.

Two Tales of Transition

Nora Korte

Not only has it become evident by now that the much awaited results of transition and “blossoming landscapes”²⁰ for the countries behind the Berlin Wall did not materialize, but also that the political narratives accompanying this process have failed to grasp the radical experience of more than 400 million citizens affected by it. Their lives did not simply “transition” into something new, they were turned upside down – in many cases literally overnight.

Political scientists use the terms transition or transformation to describe the development of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union over the past three decades.²¹ What these analytical concepts have in common is the idea of specific criteria for a successful or unsuccessful transition, goals that should be reached and institutions that should be transformed. The ongoing changes should be properly assessed and evaluated for further future growth and democratization.²² When closely examining developments,

²⁰ Television address of Helmut Kohl (then Federal Chancellor) on East Germany in 1990. See <https://www.helmut-kohl.de/index.php?msg=555> (in German).

²¹ We consider the differentiation between the terms transition and transformation. The former describes the change from an authoritarian regime to democracy, the latter encompasses pretty much any change in society, without necessarily having to do with a transition from one form of governance to another. In the common use of the terms, they are quite often interchangeable thus causing some confusion. Whereas societies are constantly undergoing change, it is not necessarily as radical as transition. There is a growing body of literature that demonstrates that transition is not a one-way street and the democratic regimes established in former authoritarian countries are not always consolidated. This leads to skepticism about the periodization of transition. Political scientists often peg the beginning and the end to certain events, i.e. in the former GDR to reunification, in Poland and other countries to joining NATO and the EU. However, depending on one's school of thought or understanding of the transitional processes, the end of transition can be dated differently.

²² Schwanitz, S. (1997): Transformationsforschung: Area Studies vs. Politikwissenschaft? Plädoyer für einen akteurstheoretischen Ansatz. Berlin. p.7-10

however, this framework falls short in providing a viable narrative for today's political and social challenges across the region.

The discourse on transition has been dominated by scientific and institutional elites, using the rhetoric of transition research. This has left little space in public fora for actual social realities, bypassing the needs of the people and turning them into objects of change. They are perceived as an adaptable mass that reacts in response to the transforming institutions around them, both formal and informal. Therefore, they would either have to accept the changes and adapt – or fail to do so and thus be unable to “transition”. They are assigned the role of the “electorate”²³, needing to be educated in order to make well-informed choices or the task of forming a civil society in order to legitimize and “consolidate democracy”²⁴.

Following from this analysis, the rise of autocratic and right-wing extremist positions would then be the direct result of both a failure to transition as well as that of the population to perform their duties as active citizens. But how does deeming these societies as a “failure” improve the situation? It is becoming clear that establishing democratic institutions alone is not enough to fill the void that socialist societies have left behind. Not only was the political system required to change, but also the individual's identity and place within it – the latter having to cope with this change by itself without understanding the “rules of the game”²⁵. This discrepancy between official discourse and social experiences leaves ample space for political pied pipers. Acknowledging transition not as a task, a political idiom or economic problem but as the daily reality for people and their environment can thus be a starting point in making room for those who feel left behind in the political debate

²³ Dahl, R. (1989): *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven/London

²⁴ Merkel, W./Puhle H.-J. (1999): *Von der Diktatur zu Demokratie. Transformationen, Erfolgsbedingungen, Entwicklungspfade*. Opladen

²⁵ Schwanitz highlights the importance of transformation in informal structure, cultural norms, e.g. religion, expectations and that it affects how relevant actors interact with each other (cf. Schwanitz 1997,p.7)

and create access points to the democratic process. Understanding how we talk about transition and how it is being conveyed to the new generation in different areas of society is an important prerequisite. Often, the positive narratives are perceived as “Westernized” and appropriated from the outside, whereas the individual stories away from official narratives focus on more problematic aspects. The line between them is blurred, as there are in fact many tales of transition. Many of them are two-sided – they can be perceived as positive or negative, depending on individual experiences and whether or not people perceive themselves as “winners” or “losers of transitions”. This division not only applies to certain social groups, who due to their age or affiliation with the socialist regimes had a hard time accepting the change but to countries as well. Many people from Central and Eastern Europe tend to rather perceive themselves as “winners of transition”, whereas others, like the citizens of post-soviet Ukraine, feel that they had lost the “transition run”.

Time of Transition – Time of High Hopes

The most common narrative of transition is that of the “peaceful revolution” for freedom. For the first time people experienced a sense of participation and influence in politics. The feeling of taking to the streets and shaping political events was overwhelming for many and it is in these images of Gdansk, Leipzig and Moscow that transition is now remembered most vividly. It was a time characterized by high hopes, when everything suddenly seemed to be possible and enthusiasm and euphoria ran high. Society projected its future as well as its dreams and wishes on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Socialism, with all its promises for a glorious future had failed them and now capitalism and democracy took its place rushing onto the scene as the ultimate saviours.

The time of transition was the time of fulfilled dreams, which was particularly true for the GDR. The West, a canvas for the projection of all kinds of dreams for decades, was suddenly accessible and came

into people's homes in the form of goods and Western chain stores. When the first McDonald's opened its doors in Moscow in 1990, long queues filled the square across from it for days and weeks to come. The price for one single meal would be equal to a weekly salary, but this did not stop the queues. The freedom of movement was also the fulfilment of a long-held dream for many and the embodiment of a finally unified Europe. Millions changed their place of residence after 1989/1991, usually migrating to the West. While many of them fled ethnic tensions following the formation of nation states, all of them left in the hope of a better future.

The sudden creation of an "open society" with the introduction of civic rights, freedom of speech as well as press and civic rights was a positive shaping experience in transitioning countries. For the first time in their lives, people could speak their minds freely and so-called "kitchen talks" moved into public spaces. It was their first chance to be "citizens" and for many a way to regain their dignity after decades of feeling oppressed. People actively fought for their freedom on the streets, as in the events of the 1991 coup in Russia. The process of "dealing with the past" was set in motion and the crimes of the communist regimes were revealed. In the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, the GDR and partly in Ukraine, former government officials were purged – this is referred to as the process of lustration. Societies started to open up, recognizing social classes, and a general de-elitisation took place. The concept of merit was introduced – skills and talent were now decisive for a person's future opportunities. While in the past career paths were often predetermined by the political standing of a person's family and many professions were exclusive to a small social group close to the nomenclature, suddenly transition gave everyone the opportunity to climb up the social ladder or choose a career in the arts or sciences based on objective talents and accomplishments. While on one hand the introduction of privatization led to new opportunities for making a living and building a career, on the other, it also laid the foundation for the spread of oligarchies, especially in post-soviet

Russia and Ukraine, and is thus judged quite differently in narratives of transition.

Music and pop culture played an important role during this time. Western pop culture had served as one of the motors of transition, advertising freedom and the American way of life as well as providing a mental escape. Since the 1980s, Russian rock bands such as Kino and Nautilus Pompilius represented the soundtrack of these evolving times, representing renewal and freedom. In Germany, after the fall of the Wall, artists from the East provided a sense of community and identification and mirrored feelings of uncertainty, restlessness and loss.

Another Experiment – Gone Wrong

As described above, the most prevalent narratives of transition are the negative ones or the negative aspects or the perceived experiences. The 1990s are seen as a failed attempt to build Western type democracies, as another “failed experiment”, following the defeat of socialism. They are perceived as a period of crime, poverty and danger. This view is prominent in the Russian perception, but also common in Ukraine and Bulgaria. Being raised in dangerous surroundings, where violence lurked around any corner and in which supermarket shelves remained empty for months and even years, deeply impacted the generation of transition. Many of today’s grievances and peculiarities are rooted in these experiences. In this regard, the perception of crime and danger as an all-encompassing new reality played an important part. For instance, despite crime rates being much higher during the 1990s in Bulgaria, especially compared to the decades of communist rule, these statistics did not match the perception of the people in terms of how much these figures had risen.

Society experienced an ideological and spiritual void. Symbols of power were demolished or sold on the flea markets across the capitals. Soon the emerging niches were filled foremost by the

church, but also by fortune-tellers, conspiracy theories, criminal mafia structures and the dream of Western style capitalism. Representatives of these groups became relevant and influential actors in their local communities.

Another central narrative encompasses the entire post-socialist space – that of deprived social identity. A very small percentage of people stayed in the same workplace after 1989/91 and an even smaller percentage continued to work there under the same conditions. In the GDR alone, almost one third of the working population lost their jobs, leaving vast and busy economic and social areas in the southeast to turn into post-industrial wastelands. However, the paradox for these former GDR citizens was that while their financial situation improved tremendously, their actual livelihood broke away. This was due to the fact that the unemployment money, now paid to them in West German currency, was worth about five times more than the income they had previously received. At the same time, the market was flooded with goods from the West as well as from new emerging markets in Asia, leaving East Germans “wealthier” than ever before but without any value creation process taking place. In post-soviet states and in Bulgaria, people were deprived of their social identity in a different way. Industrialization, largely fuelled or set into motion by communism, came to an abrupt halt, changing the whole structure of society and leading to extreme centralization which in turn left regions decades behind vis-à-vis development. Though at first many people decided to stay at their current workplaces, that income could no longer support them. In order to get by, people resorted to small retail and barter businesses, leading university professors to sell trading goods on the streets. This period also gave rise to oligarchs and businessmen of all kinds, catapulting single individuals to the very top of a new and developing social hierarchy.

Closely connected to this is the narrative of (re-) appropriated national identity. In one instance, people were citizens of a multi-national empire or of socialist states, firmly integrated in a confederation of well-disposed neighbouring countries governed by the

ideology of internationalism and anti-nationalism. Suddenly, their nationality became the defining factor of their identity as well as of the greater cultural space they belonged to. If one interconnected space previously existed, these connections ceased to exist or altered their quality completely – Germany was reunified, Czechoslovakia gave in to rising nationalism and peacefully separated into two states, Yugoslavia broke apart and slid into civil war and the Soviet Union fell apart setting off conflicts in the Caucasus that still remain unresolved today.

Since the old connections and networks ceased to function as well within societies, this led to transition being perceived as the time of atomization and failing cooperation. Formerly functioning professional and private networks broke apart, creating numbness and dysfunction in society. Even the smallest of social networks, the family, was affected given that parents could no longer fulfil their role in establishing the connection between the child and the social group surrounding them. While younger people were able to cope with the altered surroundings, often perceiving this change as an opportunity, the older generation, as well as more established individuals, perceived this change as a tragedy – a perception that is mirrored in the high suicide rates of the 1990s.²⁶ The feeling of not being understood and simply not understanding how things around you work largely impacted how transition was conveyed to the younger generation. It ultimately led to a generational gap. The trust in oneself and the institutions broke down, personal relationships like friendships and families became vital for survival. The economic and political rules had changed. Many political activists who tried to participate in the change were not heard and experienced defeat. And so did many people who sought economic success in running their own business. These new rules generated mistrust in the state and a disconnect between society and civic activists. NGOs and free media could not live up to the expectations directed towards

²⁶ Lester, D. (1998): Suicide and homicide after the fall of communist regimes. In: *European Psychiatry*, Volume 13, Issue 2, p.98-100.

them. Society became pragmatized with individualism as the main doctrine. This created a generation that was defined by its historical context, with no identifiable agenda other than to adapt and move forward. For this reason, this generation is not easily mobilized for civic activities, and like in Russia for example, the younger generation born after 1995 is now the one taking the lead vis-à-vis civic activity.

Closely connected to this is the feeling of nostalgia that many people associate with transition. The older generations would remember the social protection and feeling of belonging and experience dissociation in today's societies. In some countries such as Germany, Poland and Ukraine, it is frowned upon whereas in others it is a quite accepted and promoted view, like in Bulgaria or Armenia, or even a crucial part of the state politics like in Russia.

Outlook

Laying different tales of transition out in the open, provides us with new angles for public discussion and possibilities to tackle the issues connected to them. Providing a place in public discourse for both sides of transition can help people feel validated in their experiences and become less susceptible to populist and radical ideas. Civic education in schools can play a valuable role in this task but can hardly cope with it alone. Investing in possibilities for self-validation and strong social infrastructure in local communities seems to be at the core of what is needed to solve many of the problems described above. New project-based approaches in non-formal civic education, local project work by NGOs and more courage from local administrations to allow political participation in communities are promising means in that matter.

Against polarization in society and nostalgia, civil society projects can do their part, as in for instance the project "Germany speaks" of a major German newspaper, where people from the East and West would discuss current political events. In order to tackle the social imbalance produced by urbanization, positive examples

would be projects involving young people travelling to villages in Ukraine and investing in capacity building there. De-urbanization and de-centralization in general can be a way to retrieve a sense of community and belonging.

On an international level, talking about transition as a shared experience – even though they might differ severely in some cases – serves as a starting point for a new quality of intercultural dialogue in the conflict prone region and as a basis to reconnect people on the grounds of shared experiences, goals and possibilities. Telling each other their tales of transition can be one of the bridges towards regaining a common ground based on mutual understanding and solidarity in Eastern Europe.

About the author

Nora Korte, works as a project coordinator on youth and education for DRA e.V. (Berlin, Germany). From 2013 to 2017, she lived in Moscow where she headed the German-Russian Forum's office at the Embassy of Germany. She studied political science, journalism and literature in Berlin, Moscow and Copenhagen and taught political science and media studies at the Moscow Institute of International Relations.

Challenges of Transition

Corruption

By Rugilė Trumpytė

Corruption is a phenomenon that has a strong impact on the quality of democracy, particularly in countries that recently underwent a transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy. Corruption cannot be narrowed down to mere monetary transactions, it has to do with abuse of power, enhancing distrust, delegitimizing rules and institutions. As a result, citizens feel discouraged to trust and engage with politics and public bodies which are used for private gains rather than to enhance the public welfare.

Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”²⁷. Depending on the amounts involved and the areas where it occurs, corruption is classified as grand, petty and political.²⁸ However petty, corruption has an impact on all members of society. Although decreasing²⁹, it is still widespread in the Baltic region compared to Western democracies and might be experienced on a daily basis – from visiting your doctor, to getting construction permits or participating in public procurements. According to the Global Corruption Barometer published by Transparency International, 24% of Lithuanian residents and 15% of Latvians have paid a bribe in recent years in order to receive public services.³⁰

²⁷ Definition of Corruption by Transparency International: <https://bit.ly/2IMPCX9>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International, overview, <https://www.transparency.org/research/gcb/overview>.

³⁰ Global Corruption Barometer, Transparency International (2017): <https://bit.ly/2Ay9a0M>.

This naturally frustrates citizens. In a survey, they ranked corruption amongst the top five problems their country faces alongside low wages, inflation and emigration³¹. However, although perceived as a challenge, the majority of those that encounter corruption decide to remain silent and to carry on as it is, leading to poorer services and possible bribes in the future. Only 7% Lithuania and 3% in Latvia have reported corruption cases in the last two years³². Part of the problem is that blowing the whistle remains risky and does not guarantee one's safety. Whistleblowing still carries connotations of betrayal and could lead to job loss, as well as the experiencing of humiliation or even physical abuse. However, the problem also lies our society's low civic self-esteem and the perception of what we as citizens may do to influence and change the status quo.

Teaching anti-corruption is important, but just like civic education, it is not a phenomenon that happens in isolation. Academic integrity is reflected in the holistic approach to learning and living anti-corruption practice in the formal educational sector. However, there is still a long way to go before fully understanding and implementing its power.

Academic integrity is about honesty, transparency and openness in educational institutions. It is a culture where teaching, learning, and research go hand in hand with trust, fairness, respect, honesty and responsibility.³³ Research shows that there is a clear correlation between integrity standards applied for students in schools and universities and the ethical standards they subsequently practice in their respective working places.³⁴ Students who cheat in school and

³¹ Lithuanian Map of Corruption, Special Investigation Service (2016):
<https://www.stt.lt/lt/menu/tyrimai-ir-analizes/>.

³² Ibid.

³³ International Center for Academic Integrity: Five Principles of Academic Integrity, see <https://bit.ly/2OV2GkS>.

³⁴ Graves, Sh. M./Stephen, F. (2008): Student Cheating Habits: A Predictor of Workplace Deviance. *Journal of Diversity Management*.

in college are more likely to engage in deviant activities as adults.³⁵ Those who do not cheat on tests or homework are not that likely, for instance, to steal tools or equipment from their employers and are more honest and community-minded after graduation.

To put it in a different way, what we learn at school in terms of norms that frame our behaviour is often what we practice as adults. And how many students are used to open and transparent decision-making in schools? How many took part in participatory budget initiatives? Is school a community where students learn how to participate in public matters? More often than not, the answer is *no*, although we expect students to become concerned citizens once they graduate.

Lithuanian students claim that family, education and honesty are the most important values they prioritize in life.³⁶ This sheds light on the potential of academic integrity, especially when they indicate their role models - school teachers and administration. On one hand, it sends a positive and optimistic message, on the other, it is quite worrying for a number of reasons. Firstly, 49% admit that they do not interfere when witnessing dishonest practices, moreover, the majority have themselves cheated when taking tests or preparing their homework.³⁷ Secondly, 47% think that dishonest behaviour is common in their school whilst 42% make this claim in regards to their university.

This picture clearly illustrates that academic institutions are not the agents of change. So far, to the best of my knowledge, only one school in Lithuania gave participatory budgets a try.³⁸ As noted by students at that school, there were nearly €10,000 for them to distribute and this created an exclusive feeling of responsibility and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Transparency International (2013), Youth Integrity Survey, see <https://bit.ly/2sEWSls>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Skaidrumo linija, Žinių radijas (2015): What's the added value of participatory budget? (News radio), see <https://goo.gl/zzdMtR>.

mutual cooperation with the school's administration that was not experienced before.³⁹ As a result, and for the first time, they could start thinking about the needs of their community as well as efficient spending and democratic procedures.

A participatory budget alone is not a silver bullet, but international experience shows some significant outcomes. For instance, more and more schools in Canada⁴⁰, the United States⁴¹, France⁴², the Czech Republic⁴³ and elsewhere, are piloting the initiative where students are in charge of the budget and it is up to them to decide how to spend it. Furthermore, they are enabled to gain deeper knowledge through practical participation, better identify problems and set priorities to create accurate solutions. In other words, more and more schools are searching for innovative methods to prepare students to become part of what we call civil society.

The other possible tool worth considering to boost academic integrity is integrity pledges. It is a micro-level promise to act honestly in different circumstances – when doing homework, writing an essay, preparing for a test or taking an exam. A well-known scholar, Dan Ariely, examined the effect of publicly-made integrity pledges by students to see if signing this kind of a pledge could reduce the level of cheating in the classrooms.⁴⁴ In 2017, Transparency International Lithuania tested this idea in a number of schools⁴⁵. The results are worth mentioning – during the experiment students became more

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Schugurensky, D. (2017): How Schools in Canada Successfully Engaged Kids in Participatory Budgeting, see <https://bit.ly/2CxLglo>.

⁴¹ Zocalo Public Square (2015): How Would Students Spend the Principal's Money?, see <https://bit.ly/1FRWviC>.

⁴² Budget Participatif des Écoles, <https://bit.ly/2FBOAQC>.

⁴³ Participation at schools helps everyone, D21, see <https://bit.ly/2CxTEkM>.

⁴⁴ Ariely, D. (2013): The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves

⁴⁵ Transparency International Lithuania (2017): Cheating at Schools: Integrity Pledges Experiment, see <https://bit.ly/2DpWYjD>.

honest with the number of students who admitted that they had cheated occasionally decreased by a quarter (36% compared to 49% prior to the experiment).⁴⁶

Such initiatives could be a good starting point but much more is needed to truly create a culture of integrity in schools. Students need open and safe spaces to have genuine conversations about the issues they face and have their voices heard by the administration. An established version of partnership between administrations and student councils do not encourage wider participation and involve only the usual suspects. This is something the open government movement tries to overcome by nudging policymakers to become more open and engaging. However, it is hard to expect any systematic change without making a shift in our educational system and start practising democratic procedures already at a younger age. It is the participatory approaches and simulations, rather than the traditional classroom-style teaching, that have proven to be most impactful and sustainable.

About the author

Rugilė Trumpytė, Transparency International (Lithuania), is an anti-corruption and transparency expert with over seven years of experience. She is a national Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) researcher for multilateral initiative Open Government Partnership (OGP) and a senior lead at Transparency International (TI) Lithuania.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Urban vs. Rural during the Transition Period in Central and Eastern Europe

Not a good time to be a peasant in Central and Eastern Europe, yet

By Mihai Lupu

Notes on the Theme

As Viola Stefanello recently wrote in an article on Euronews.com⁴⁷ in regards to the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France, what started as a protest against rising fuel taxes, quickly escalated to more profound demands such as “calls for lower costs of living for the working and middle classes and more economic parity between large cities and rural areas.” Furthermore, Cédric Szabo, director of the AMRF⁴⁸ is quoted in the same article as saying that “the rural world is normally not on the radar of political discussions. So, the Grand Débat can be another chance for the citizens to say what they really feel and want.” Szabo refers to the recently inaugurated Grand Débat tour of Emmanuel Macron that will bring the French president “all over the country to meet mayors and citizens and listen to their questions and criticism.”⁴⁹

Despite France being a solid democracy and one that has not experienced communism, as other Central and Eastern European countries have, it still faces strong challenges and appears to be vulnerable to double standards when policy makers are faced with the question of urban vs. rural needs⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ Stefanello, V. (2019): What do French citizens want from their government?, Euronews, see <https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/18/what-do-french-citizens-want-from-their-government-use-our-interactive-map-to-find-out>.

⁴⁸ Association of French Rural Mayors.

⁴⁹ Stefanello, V., Idem

⁵⁰ See for instance, Talandier, M. , Jousseume, V. and Nicot, B.-H. (2015): Two centuries of economic territorial dynamics: the case of France, Regional Studies Association, see <https://rsa.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21681376.2015.1090887>.

On one hand, the base assumption of this text is that urban-rural discrepancies are a global phenomenon, regardless of the state of democracy and development of the territories in question. On the other hand, one will build on the idea that the next step in dealing with the urban-rural relationship and dynamic is to encompass the needs within rural areas and other geographical peripheries equal to those of larger cities – equal not in the strategies to be used nor in the solutions to be tried but in the consistency and dedication to tailoring initiatives to the specificities and the potential of rural and smaller areas. Smaller communities, including villages and smaller cities, have their own dynamic, peculiarities and needs. Given that the rural population of the world amounts to more than 45% of its total⁵¹, one should further elaborate on this narrative – one cannot be considered without the other as cities and villages are complementary forms of human manifestation as social groups and of human creativity and ingenuity, both being subject to criticism and praise.

Instead of projecting a future exclusively within mega cities, with nature and smaller communities solely preserved in memories, stories, visuals or protected areas, one should attempt to project a future that is built by nurturing the right solid context for different forms of social interactions to co-exist and work with one another. In addition to urban and rural realities, others should also be considered including those that might occur when more individuals are involved in the dynamic of the communities – the geographical and cultural ones, skills and expertise as well as values and principles. These are to be considered in relationship with the transitions to different stages of human development, seen through economic, social, political and cultural eyes.

⁵¹ See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>.

Some Challenges to Consider

One such opportunity arose in Central and Eastern European countries that were within the Soviet sphere of influence⁵² following the end of the Second World War until the early 1990s. Namely, the transition to more democratic regimes and all of the positive accomplishments that followed – a free economy, the re-emergence of civil society, free media, freedom of movement and pluralistic politics, to mention but a few. And of course, with all of the realities that these societies had to confront, such as the lack of replacing elites in most of these countries, the absence of lustration⁵³, the minor or non-existent exposure to practices of liberalism and pluralism in over forty years of communist regimes resulting in unawareness vis-à-vis basic rights within large areas of the population, the disinterest in the public space as *Agora*, as civic catalyst, the lack of trust amongst people and in authorities, and the impact that the few real wider public debates, if any, had on the effects of communism in relation to the psychology of the citizens and on the social interactions among them. Not to mention the stigma of the *provincial*⁵⁴, used to refer to anyone outside of the capitals. As everything was to be centralized, being outside of the chosen group, the *nomenklatura*, or those favoured by the *nomenklatura*, and being outside the place where the chosen ones are taking decision for the rest (i.e. the capital) was almost like being a second-class citizen.

⁵² Military, political, ideological and economical.

⁵³ The term generally refers to the policy of limiting the participation of former communists and especially informants of the communist secret police in civil service positions and successor governments.

⁵⁴ Coming from the Latin *provincia*, 'in Roman antiquity, a territorial subdivision of the Roman Empire - specifically, the sphere of action and authority of a Roman magistrate who held the imperium, or executive power. The name was at first applied to territories both in Italy and wherever else a Roman official exercised authority in the name of the Roman state. Later the name implied Roman possessions outside Italy from which tribute was required', see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government>.

One simple example will be considered here: in the 1990s, in Romania and other countries of the region, it was common to use the word *peasant*⁵⁵ when referring to a person originating from any other part of the country that was not the capital. The term was used in a pejorative way and meant un-educated, ill-mannered, a little savage, poorly dressed, or a person that did not follow modern trends or ideas. One would not wish to be referred to as a *peasant* but could easily be termed one if he or she came from any other village or smaller city in Romania that was not Bucharest. The term evolved and nowadays one could be referred to as a *peasant* by a person coming from any bigger city or village. One can of course trace the entire metamorphosis of the reference from being a source of pride for national identity building in the 19th century (i.e. the rural heritage) to a stigma, by looking to the forced collectivization and industrialization in these countries. The massive population movements from villages to newly created and existing cities should also be considered – there were no solid plans to integrate the peasants into these alien environments and no interventions to equip the existing residents to welcome considerable numbers of individuals that would subsequently affect the substance and dynamic of their communities. This resulted in a chronic disinterest to both consider and subsequently act in having a smaller social impact both in the villages as well as the host cities.

Taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture, one can observe one of the major realities and challenges resulting in the transition in Central and Eastern Europe – the almost general disregard in the 1990s in assisting rural and smaller communities to defend themselves against the *ghosts* and failures of the centrally planned economies enforced by the communist regimes.

One should consider, for instance, the reality of closing dozens of factories and industrial plants both because of their lack of economic viability or because of instances of fraud and corruption at the

⁵⁵ 'Țăran' in Romanian.

hands of the former *nomenklatura* and secret services which were controlling the means of economic, administrative and political power after the fall of the communist regimes. Amongst other effects, this would lead to the creation of *ghost cities* given their dependence on the now dying mono-economies. Furthermore, there was no back-up plan to rely on and citizens had to deal with this new reality virtually on their own.

The main consequence was that many citizens, now in their second or third generation of living in urban areas, were once again forced to move in large numbers to much bigger cities or abroad, or to enrol in social assistance programs, placing further pressure on the state and thus leaving more room for disinformation as well as being treated as second-class citizens⁵⁶. The social fabric of these communities was once again affected, and the trust in the potential and sustainability of smaller places was eroding. Being peripheral, from the *provincie*, was now a stigma, not only in an elitist kind of narrative⁵⁷, but as a reality seen and felt in the quality of life of those citizens. Again, not a good time to be *peasant*.

And the bad news was yet to come. Fewer taxes collected by local authorities for example (given the fewer number of inhabitants) resulted in a reduction or worsening of public services, poor infrastructure, a diminishing appeal vis-à-vis smaller communities, both for investment as well as for living, the lack of consistent support to update the existing social infrastructure for continuing to circulate ideas and knowledge amongst and inside these communities (either villages or small towns) as well as connecting them to larger cities, the brain drain but also the closing down of vocational schools that were securing critical technical expertise much needed in these communities.

⁵⁶ And from here, it was a small step towards the *urban legend* of the socially assisted citizens that are 'strangling the state', as the case in Romania, the reality being far from the one circulated into the public space. See for instance Meseșan, D. (2018): 'Războiul imaginar cu asistații sociali' (in Romanian), Scena9, see <https://www.scena9.ro/article/razboiul-cu-asistatii-sociali-VMG>.

⁵⁷ As mentioned above.

As a result, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Romania in particular, ended up experiencing a depopulation of villages and towns, with a less active work force, and more seniors and children as permanent residents. Those left behind experienced a lower level of self-esteem, were not proud to be part of their communities and were easily influenced by populist and nationalist narratives from politicians. They morphed into a captive electorate dependent on state aid and assistance, less educated, with high levels of functional illiteracy, with less exposure and opportunities to engage in recurrent cultural, social and informational actions, apart from the main-stream, commercial media and the occasional, usually low-quality annual, town and village celebrations. Once these countries joined the EU, the phenomenon was amplified, at least in terms of a massive exodus to better paid jobs in EU countries. The rural and smaller communities' ecosystems were breaking once again, affecting not only these peripheral communities but also the centres, the main cities.



© Georgi Achov

Given that the conventional movement of peoples over the last two centuries took place from the peripheries towards the centres, having less educated, less involved, less skilled and less informed citizens in smaller communities, (i.e. *the peasants*), naturally led to a bigger pressure being exerted on larger cities to absorb and integrate these citizens searching for better quality of life. This in turn led to segregation within the cities, not to mention the potential pressure on maintaining a higher standard in terms of cultural, social and civic life, that are prerequisites for a healthy society. As a result, a lose-lose situation emerges.

Grasping Resources for Change

Nevertheless, despite the challenges, the energy within society always manages to bring about solutions with communities always being surprisingly resilient and able to undergo a rebirth. The solutions do not arise from one single entity or a single group of people that know *the way* and will act as saviours. One should look to those (usually interconnected) individuals who are not necessarily content with the status quo. They usually comprise a minority that is ready to act, that has the knowledge, the will, the drive and the right attitude to do so. The flow usually follows the technology adoption life cycle or derivatives and is self-perpetuating. The challenge lies not in securing this process, as it almost seems like a natural progression, but on how societies can nurture prompt defending mechanisms to prevent populism, dictatorships as well as common enemies of open societies⁵⁸.

One should not question the capacity of societies to react to injustice, given that usually and naturally that happens when a breaking point is reached, but rather the capacity of these societies to nurture healthy ecosystems that can shorten the distance between the decisive reaction when an injustice is spotted. For instance, if countries like Romania will become more prone to dictatorial

⁵⁸ As described first by Henri Bergson and then by Karl Popper.

regimes in the coming years⁵⁹, then the question is not *if* the society⁶⁰ will react, because eventually it will, but rather *when* will it react? A timely reaction will indeed signal a more mature state of democracy. This will not be possible without creating the context for healthier societies, including a healthy educational, informational, cultural, social and economic exchange between rural and urban areas.

Therefore, in the long term, any practices that will equip citizens with the right tools to actively participate in the lives of their communities and their countries, will naturally lead to more people contributing to improve the state of democracy. This will lead to a different civic environment that we cannot really grasp but one that would certainly be more averse to dictatorships and authoritarian systems.

One example will be considered here, that of a country's social infrastructure, as mentioned above. This often refers to the network of the numerous libraries, museums, schools, cultural houses, theatres and concert-halls, to name a few. By investing in enhancing the functionality of these places, one can secure a flow of knowledge and non-formal education from the centre (larger cities) to the periphery (villages and small towns). The social infrastructure can act as host and catalyst of the communities for those organizations and groups of professionals ready to scale-up their projects and mediate their expertise at the local level. The result is a win-win-win situation. The local community wins by being exposed to quality information and education, the local social infrastructure (e.g. libraries, schools) also wins because its educational and social offer is enhanced, while the organization that has the chance to scale up its methods, projects and initiatives in other areas⁶¹ is also a winner.

⁵⁹ But we can easily consider the political situation of Hungary and Poland.

⁶⁰ And we include into the *society*: the institutions, the civil society, the citizens, the private sector, the media and all of the active forces in a territory.

⁶¹ See for instance the EduCaB methodology designed and piloted in Romania and under implementation in various countries such as Romania, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Tanzania, Senegal etc. EduCaB stands for Educational Capacity Building in Local Communities. More on <http://www.educab.org/>.

As a result, the *peasant* is also likely to be exposed to pretty much the same quality of informational content that the inhabitant of a bigger city is being exposed to which in turn adds to his/her sense of pride, of belonging and of getting more involved in one's community. That community will no longer be a static, geographically delimited entity, solely defined by those born within its boundaries, but has the chance to enhance its definition into the collection of assets and human capital that is participating to its dynamic.

As a result, the term *peasant* transitioned and lost its stigma while gaining a new sense of pride. When the President of the Republic visits those local communities during his Grand Débat tour, he will use the existing infrastructure for that meeting – the sports hall for example, big enough to host all those interested in attending. Naturally, the consistency, the recurrence as well as the good faith in implementing such initiatives, should be the indicator of success. But the solutions are there, one just needs to look closer and take the necessary time to develop them while at the same time fostering a sense of normality in being inclusive and acting in an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and wired way, including building more bridges between the urban and the rural, the centre and the periphery.

About the author

Mihai Lupu, Romanian Centre for Innovation in Local Development (Romania), specializes in behaviour change mechanisms in small and large groups and communities. He is interested in designing and testing various inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional solutions for activating local communities to work on enhancing the quality of their life through connectivity with the exterior and by using internal potential and resources. He is the founder of EduCB (educab.org) and Short Film Breaks (shortfilmbreaks.com).

East vs. West

By Caroline Hornstein Tomić

The generation of transition in Europe – both *East* and *West* – has for some time been raising awareness that there is still a divide, one that was initially meant to be overcome by the transition from communism to democracy and to market economy – the divide between *East* and *West*. There are evident differences in perspective, experience, affluence and position, and these differences are physically at display, in built structure or artefacts, in living standards and styles. At the same time, *difference* is stated and asserted in representations, perceptions, claims and arguments. If there is a divide between *East* and *West*, it is reinforced by the assertion and representation of *difference*. Such dividing of *East* and *West* is being practiced in political camps, and is demonstrated in rifts over questions of security, migration, or diversity politics⁶². The challenge facing Europe, both in its Eastern and Western parts alike, is a deeply polarized public space, both virtual and analogue of those who support and believe in, and those who question the Western model of an open society, liberal democracy and the rule of law; of those who defend and those who compromise the universality of human rights and the principles of the Enlightenment – reason as basis of authority, individual freedom, equality, tolerance, constitutional government and the separation of church and state. It goes without saying that three decades after the transition from communism, Europeans everywhere, whether in the *East* or the *West*, are challenged to deal not only with the legacy and *longue durée* of divisions and separation, but with the current practice and temptations of dividing, i.e. between those who belong and

⁶² Needless to say that differences in political views exist as much within societies, be it in Eastern or Western Europe.

those who (supposedly) do not belong; to face up to and deal with the consequences of historical divisions as much as with current polarization.

In 1989, Western German citizens did not perceive that the fall of the Iron Curtain was something that happened to them, but rather to their Eastern fellow citizens on the other side of the Wall. Transition was not understood as something one had to pass through jointly. Still, everybody was influenced by the transformations that were unleashed with the collapse of communism. Overcoming separation, gaining access and mobility were major aspects of transition. There were movements eastwards, returning migrants from Western diasporas, or Western investors and experts who came to assist in, or profit from, the transition. However, the main migration lane ran from *East* to *West*, labour and educational mobility just like the refugee movements who escaped from armed conflict, i.e. during the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

East and *West* are not only geographical, but equally historical, cultural and political categories. The *East/West* dualism has a century-long tradition. It is running through literature and science, and it has been analysed as a product of *Western* imagination, projection and thus as a construct rather than a fact, most prominently by Edward Said.⁶³ *Westernization* emerged during the Enlightenment as the euphemistic term for the exploration, exploitation and submission of the *Eastern* World, conceived of and declared as a civilizing mission. Colonialism created the *Eastern* "other" as a projection of *Western* self-affirmation. Throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century, emancipation movements all over the world and in Europe respectively were oriented towards a canon of *Western* values codified by Enlightenment philosophy, by Immanuel Kant and his contemporaries. State- and nation-building processes in the *East*, within the Ottoman Empire, during and after the Balkan Wars all followed *Western* ideas and models. During the Cold War, the binary

⁶³ Said, E. (1978): *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon.

opposition of *East* and *West* was structured around contrasts and in blocks – authoritarian vs. liberal/democratic; poor vs. prosperous; collective vs. individual; Soviet sphere of influence vs. American sphere of influence; *West* stood in the *East* for all that was forbidden. The run-up to 1989 and the eventual collapse of communism again were conceived of by the *West* as a process of liberation from authoritarian rule, a triumph of *Western* values and affirmation of *Western* superiority – “return to Europe” in Central European states was the word of the day. As the Ukrainian case shows, the *East/West* matrix is still being evoked and applied in discourses on values and identity, reinforcing divisions within society. And in the German case, unification of *East* and *West* in fact resembled a take-over of the *East* through the *West*. Three decades after the transition, the wounds of the process are still not fully closed, and differences persist – in living standards, affluence, recognition of life achievements, vis-à-vis pensions, and most blatantly in inadequate and unequal representation in the power structures of society and politics.

In 2011, the so-called “Wendekinder”, which were named by some of its protagonists in Germany as “Third Generation East”⁶⁴, appeared on stage in the German public. It was the first time that the last cohort born between 1975 and 1985, and partially socialized in still communist *Eastern* Germany, claimed visibility as a “generation of transition” with specific and distinct experiences in a unified Germany⁶⁵ – and as different from its fellow age cohort raised in

⁶⁴ The first lived through WWII – after; the second generation lived through Communism in the GDR. See: Hacker, M. et al (eds.), *Dritte Generation Ost: Wer wir sind, was wir wollen*, Berlin: CH Links Verlag, 2012. See also: <http://netzwerk.dritte-generation-ost.de/>.

⁶⁵ The term *generation* is applied in reference to sociologist Karl Mannheim, who in 1928 presented a reflection on “The problem of generations”, which has an impressive revival today (1927/28, republished 1952, pp. 276-322, in: Kecskemeti, P. (ed.), *Karl Mannheim: Essays*, London: Routledge, 1952). At the peak of the Weimar Republic and on the eve of the Great Depression, Mannheim proposed the concept of generations as interpretative frame which would allow linking important historical events and life circumstances with specific age cohorts that were collectively experiencing such events and circumstances. Locating the individual in what he called a “generational context”, he tried to grasp changes, in values/world views/attitudes and in cultural practices/way of life a specific generation brings forward within a shared frame of reference.

the *Western* Federal Republic. By highlighting experiences which were distinct from their *Western* fellow Millennials, they raised the question of representation – they criticized that *Eastern* experiences were not adequately represented in *Western* hegemonic discourse.

Clearly, differences matter, with respect to experience, to social position and to outlook. And yet, is it ignorance of differences and divisions which reinforces them? Or are divisions and differences being constructed through claims of difference? Or can divisions be overcome through a politics of identity which points at and asserts difference?

East vs. West Raises Challenges

- **of one direction/perspective**

The political, economic and social transformations that followed the transition meant for the *East* to incorporate and implement legal and political standards and rules in order to catch up with the *West*. Adopting the EU's *Acquis Communautaire*⁶⁶ meant profound structural and institutional reforms to establish democracy, a liberal market system and the rule of law, which would eventually lead to acceptance and integration into, and representation within, the European Union. Those transformations deeply affected and still affect first and foremost the self-esteem in Eastern societies, as well as ways of dealing with their past. As a process of recognition between unequal power positions, post-socialism bears traces similar to postcolonialism.⁶⁷ Do citizens in Western European societies perceive those transformations as something that concerns them

⁶⁶ The *acquis communautaire* is the accumulated legislation, legal acts, and court decisions which constitute the body of European Union law. During the process of the enlargement of the European Union, the *acquis* was divided into chapters for the purpose of negotiation between the EU and the candidate states.

⁶⁷ Giordano, C. (2014): Does Postsocialism in Eastern Europe Mirror Postcolonialism? Grand Narratives, Myths and Inventions about the Fall of the Berlin Wall and What Followed, in: Christian Giordano, Francois Ruegg, Andrea Boscoboinik (eds.): Does East Go West? Anthropological Pathways Through Postsocialism, Zurich, Berlin: LIT Verlag, pp. 225-243.

as well? Is integration a reciprocal process of recognition between *East* and *West*? What did both learn about each other, and what is there still to learn about and from each other? Where is the narrative of learning, of experiences, of the gains and losses inflicted through those transformations in both *East* and *West*?

- **of stereotyping, of ignoring processes and complexities**

The transition space is highly heterogeneous spanning different countries and sub-regions (Baltic, Central European, Balkan and Danubian regions etc.). Clearly, there is no such thing as a unified region of Central and Eastern Europe.⁶⁸ There are extreme disparities today between those who underwent peaceful transitions or Velvet Revolutions and others who had to or are still coping with war or post-war trauma. There are regional cultures, legacies and histories to consider in order to understanding the course, motivation, successes and failures of transition in specific contexts. The lack of awareness, knowledge or interest in cultural differences, historical legacies, pathways and specificities contributes to a stereotypical and homogenizing view of *East* and *West* likewise, which is reinforced from different sides. Transition takes time, as Lajos Bokros states⁶⁹: “Transition is far from over – and even if it was in the formal and narrow sense of economics, it has certainly not been completed in terms of institution building and human behaviour.” Transition is a process of modernization and change ongoing in spheres of culture, society, economy and politics, which deeply affect a sense of self, or identities. It is reductionist to call transition a *Westernization* of culture, society and politics. It is, however, a transformative incorporation of values and practices perceived and known of as *Western*. There is a complexity of cultural entanglements, traditions, patterns and memories at play, which form a sense of self both on the individual as well as on societal levels. Identity formations are fluid, dialogical

⁶⁸ Todorova, M. (1997): *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford; Oxford University Press. See also Giordano 2014, pp. 225-243.

⁶⁹ Bokros, L. (2013): *Accidental Occidental – Economics and Culture of Transition in Mitteleuropa, the Baltic and the Balkan Area*, Budapest: CEU Press, p. 4.

and often conflictual, and in constant flux; any essentializing view of *Eastern* or *Western* identity prevalent in public discourse ignores complexity, process, and ambivalence, and therefore undermines mutual understanding and respect rather than contributing to it.

- **of lacking perspective, and of emigration**

If perspectives of integration into the European Union stay out of reach, a sense of being stuck in transition, stuck in what the *East* has come to stand for spreads and pushes those who have little to lose and much to gain to leave their home countries. At the same time, EU accession accelerates mobility and intensifies rather than dissuades emigration and further fuels the brain drain. Inefficient bureaucracies, crumbling welfare structures, high-level corruption, compromised rule of law, exclusivist networks and privileges, political polarisation, educational systems in mismatch with knowledge and skills required on the domestic labour markets, dim economic or career prospects, lack of infrastructure, high youth unemployment rates eventually brush community bonds and home attachments aside. Everywhere there are losers and winners of transition – the latter not seldomly being those who managed to cling to old privileges and elite positions, to dominate “the rule of the game”. The social cleavages that run through societies severely challenge social cohesion and fuel populism and political extremism while also furthering emigration. Brain drain has the potential of widening both in reality and perception the development and power-gap within societies, between European centres and peripheries, and the division between *East* and *West*. Last but not least, emigration fuels resentment towards the EU and what it stands for amongst those who stay home.

- **of identity politics**⁷⁰

Identity politics is becoming particularly pronounced when perspectives of convergence of living standards, integration, equality/

⁷⁰ Fukuyama speaks not of the challenge but the threat of identity politics. Fukuyama, F. (2018): *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

equal representation, participation and belonging are no longer convincing and when there is a loss of trust. Recent historical events have been moments of truth, where differences and divisions were on display and social rifts deepened consequently – the financial and economic crisis of 2008, which weighs particularly heavily on weaker Southern European and Eastern European transition states; the 9/11 terrorist attacks which, as a consequence, placed an increased focus on Europe's Muslim population; the migration crisis, which more than anything divides public opinion within societies in regards to who belongs, who should have access, and who does or should not. And last but not least, the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain which has been and still is a moment of reckoning for a united Europe that has, or perhaps has not, overcome the divide between *East* and *West*. All these moments of truth have been triggers for identity politics.

How Civic Education (Not Only but Specifically in the East) Can Meet those Challenges

The generation of transition is first and foremost a mobile generation. It is familiar with transnational life practices that embrace *East* and *West*, it is capable of inhabiting the space-in-between, of relating and creating a sense of belonging to different worlds at the same time. Mobility is a crucial tool for developing an understanding and a vantage point which is neither *Eastern* nor *Western*, but rather a fluid merger of perspectives – a vantage point crucial for civic education. Who migrates through Europe is caught, or deliberated, in ongoing dialogue by attempting to make sense of what is going on, *here* and *there*. Mobility helps to discover the mutual influence of different cultures, languages, histories – and certainly not only when national borders are crossed. Mobility allows detaching from positioning, to change vantage points and merge perspectives – it is an invaluable resource for civic education, for working on a mutual understanding. Hence, the existing good practices include:

- Dialogue formats;
- Meetings of multipliers and youth exchange between *East* and *West*;
- ERASMUS Plus;
- EUROCLIO – civic education textbooks;
- Körber-Foundation sponsored history competition including teachers from *East* and *West*;
- History textbooks including diverse perspectives/representing multicultural histories (Yugoslavia, Ukraine etc.);
- Teacher trainings in civic education based on dialogue and integration.

Civic education – both in formal and non-formal settings – can provide platforms for negotiating the common good; it has the means to break through echo chambers and to retrieve public space. Practices of civic education bear the chance of communicating the complexities of a highly fragmented and polarized world, as is *Eastern* Europe, quite like its *Western* twin. Civic education can challenge misrepresentation and manipulation by solid information. Through inclusion and representation of multiple perspectives, the crucial principle of controversy may be asserted as a key element of civic practice: to bring into representation the non-represented, the marginalized, and the unheard voices. Clearly what is missing or indeed needed is:

- Facilitating participation, inclusion, providing resources and financial means for more civic education work;
- Development of key social and civic competences;
- Interdisciplinary and practice-based approaches to teaching and learning;
- Developing critical thinking;

- Including good practices from Western Europe in Eastern civic education formats.

Civic education has a crucial task in securing and sustaining what has been a major achievement of transition that today is again at risk: overcoming authoritarianism. That democracy cannot be taken for granted is a call for practical engagement for an open, liberal and pluralistic society. Europeans today, whether *Eastern* or *Western*, are equally faced with the challenge of a strong stream that questions the benefits of transition and the values and principles of an open society, first and foremost mobility. Thirty years of transition clearly show that overcoming authoritarianism and the endurance of liberal democracy are not undisputable. Civic education has to therefore engage in learning and practicing the civic art of dispute, to face up to and challenge those who resent the principles it stands for.

About the author

Caroline Hornstein Tomić, Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (Croatia), is the co-founder and chair of the Management Board at the foundation Wissen am Werk/ Znanje na djelu. She is a senior research associate at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar in Croatia and specializes in high-skilled and return migration and related policies, identity politics and state building processes with a focus on South-East Europe. Further to her academic and in civil society engagement, she has also been working in the public sector, most recently as head of the operative division at the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (2016 to 2018).

Polarization as a Challenge of Transition

By Botond Feledy

Polarization has become a buzzword similar to the terms fake news and populism. Its growing use covers multiple meanings that must be outlined before tackling the issue itself. It seems like *understanding* the mechanism of the phenomenon rather than focusing on the contemporary *themes* of polarization is more important, because the themes might change over time, but the dynamics leading to polarization remain the same. True and sustainable resilience against polarization is hence not as much dependent on the factual understanding of dividing debates, but rather on the levels of trust and density of social networks. For a better understanding, it is necessary to differentiate the connotations and draw a matrix of polarization.

Broadly speaking, there are two different interpretations of polarization – either as a *state of affairs* or as a *process*.

Polarization as a State of Affairs

There are generally two prerequisites in order to witness a group of people *being polarized* on any given issue:

- The group must hold extreme views of the given question compared to mainstream considerations;
- The polarizing issue must be framed in a nearly existential form, which results in the inability to compromise, the unwillingness to listen and to dialogue.

Therefore, a polarized state of social communication is an impediment to dialogue, a step closer to open hostility than to debate. This can be applied regardless of the normative issue. In the

current context, this could be on abortion rights, the war in Ukraine, migration, the status of the LBGTQ⁷¹ community or GMO⁷² food.

Polarization as a Process

Polarization as a process is typically described by having active and passive actors. The active actors usually drive a given debate into a polarized and deadlocked state with a certain purpose or motivation. The passive actors or “victims” of the polarization are not conscious supporters of the polarization process as such, but they convey the message and reinforce the process unwittingly. Now one can see the difference in motivation: the second group takes part in a debate that they did not frame, and the first group frames a debate that it does not actually want to drive for the sake of the debate itself. In other words, polarization is a result of mass communication by a limited group to large masses of people who are pushed to take sides in a debate, and at the same time, to deny the legitimacy to hold opposing views.

Supposedly, the active actors have different motivations for driving a social discussion into a polarized debate. One should of course not discount that certain actors might simply hold radical beliefs themselves or are just mismanaging the debate. However, when focusing on Central European problems in the 21st century, the active actor is likely to have a hidden agenda when moving to enforce polarization. The motivation might be more about taking or retaining political power, occupying the information space or simply flooding it, focusing public attention on certain non-cardinal issues artificially pushed forward instead of issues of public interest. This is hence a malicious and manipulative act vis-à-vis levels of communications.

⁷¹ The abbreviation for lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer or questioning.

⁷² Genetically modified organism.

True existential debates certainly exist – such as debates about religion, beliefs and principles – but when actors are simply unable to reach a compromise it is not polarization as a process, as this definition requires the outside actor to employ polarization as a tool. This restrictive definition of polarization might aid in using the term in a clearer way applying it to phenomena observable today across Central and Eastern Europe.

In sum, polarization can be interpreted as a communication tool in the hands of malicious actors willing to hijack a social debate into a deadlocked state by exposing their audiences to extreme and existential arguments in order to achieve a different objective than the debate touches upon (hidden agenda). This state is mostly reached by means of manipulation through oversimplification. Also common is the disproportionate level of attention that individuals devote to such polarized debates: they allow for their attention to be focused in an excessive way vis-à-vis the degree in which the phenomenon per se would influence their daily life. This is precisely why polarization is a practical tool in the hands of malicious actors in order to occupy and fill the information space.

But this also offers a rational way to counteract polarization: citizens should simply ask to what extent the given question truly influences them. If citizens have pre-identified agendas in regards to their local communities, it would be much harder for outside actors, both at a national or international level, to impose radical changes. To put it differently, the strength of the local community and of its democratic institutions serves as a firewall against abused polarization driven by malicious actors.

It should be the role of the political elite, journalists and intelligentsia to track the true initiators of polarization and expose their hidden agenda bringing it to light. They are responsible for continuously assessing the risks at the local and national level and should do so publicly so that individuals can refer to realistic priorities.

Tracks of Central European Debates Being Polarized

Almost all of the countries of the region are experiencing polarizing debates vis-à-vis history: usually a minority of a neighbouring country or certain roles of social groups in the historical context (Serbo-Croat debate, partisan-debates, Hungarian minorities, communist collaboration, forced movement of Germans etc.). These debates are long-existing ones and can easily be exploited by political actors for the sake of political gains. This means that people with diverse experiences and socialization will hold differing views on communism, Tito, Yugoslavia, Great Romania or Hungarian reunifications. While these differences could be bridged, they might become permanent via political instrumentalization.

The traditional division of Central-European societies placed anti-communist conservatives and inclusion-friendly liberals against one another. Such debates often got polarized. In Poland and Hungary for example, both conservative governments used the pretext of anti-communism to seriously amend the age composition of the judiciary. Technically, they were referring to both the enforced and early retirement of judges as they saw them as representatives of the pre-1989 era. Clearly, a significant part of the society in Poland and Hungary had very negative experiences with the communist court system – the “blood judges” of the 1956 revolution for example, who might never have had a proper education in law and got to their chief justice positions due to their party affiliation. The complete ideological takeover and party loyalty inside the prosecutor’s office and at courts naturally led to a long decline in the level of trust – a phenomenon still easily recalled 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, especially amongst the elder generations.

Hungary in 2004, during the socialist government of Ferenc Gyurcsany, serves as another textbook example of early polarization predating the era of social media. The opposition forces, led by Viktor Orbán, initiated a public referendum on the status of ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries proposing to fast-track their

Hungarian citizenship. The liberal-socialist camp strongly opposed the idea while Fidesz and the conservatives supported the case. The socialist foreign minister used the threat and imagery of “20 million Romanians” ready to inundate the country should the citizenship track be eased. Hardly anyone was left free to decide on the referendum question, it became a pure ideological question of hard-core party politics. No national solidarity was suddenly easy to construct with Hungarian ethnic communities across the borders. This was all the more a sign of political polarization, as just 15 years ago, around the time of regime change in Hungary, one of the defining moments were the large-scale protests in Budapest against the forced village demolitions in Transylvania, Romania, where ethnic Hungarians formed a majority. Prime Minister Gyurcsany, just for the sake of never embracing conservative proposals, tore this national consensus apart.

Returning to the regional level, we have recently witnessed how quickly it is possible to sink in a completely new and polarizing debate, that on migration. It is more related to identity politics than to policy-making itself, and one can witness the debate from Poland to Greece with clearly very different on-the-ground realities in each country. Why would political actors turn these debates into polarizing ones, especially in countries without external Schengen borders? The political calculation is obvious – it is possible to win voters from across the party spectrum with this new issue. The political borders of previous traditional debates have clearly been marked and settled, meaning that much more effort would have been needed to win over *new* voters to any given side. Those camps – on topics like abortion, Roma-integration etc. – are mostly solid by now. The introduction of a new issue such as migration offers the chance to quickly dominate a fresh debate rallying more supporters around the flag and transcending traditional party divisions.

All of this does not reflect true policy choices vis-à-vis migration. A government can be migrant friendly in its communication, such as Austria was at the outbreak of the crisis, while at the same time

increasing protective measures around its borders. It can be hostile to migration while accepting migrants on its territory under different conditions, as was the case with Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico hosting Austrian asylum-seekers in the Gabčíkovo camp in return for funds. A government can also use the issue to strengthen its Christian identity for example as was the case with Poland accepting one to two million Ukrainian migrants, or Hungary as it rejected migration both rhetorically as well as physically. Recently however, despite the policy differences, the political leaders of the above-mentioned countries largely overlapped in their negative comments vis-à-vis migration. Hence, for the sake of this analysis, polarization around migration was more of a political tool rather than a policy debate.

Tracks of Central European Debates Through Foreign Influence

It is also possible to witness a third form of polarizing debates in Central European countries – when the malevolent actor is foreign, abusing existing social divisions, stirring them up and hence boosting polarization. In this case, all of the classical measures of strategic deception, online, offline and through personal assets, are conceivable and the issue becomes a national security risk. Usually, these exploited political division lines have been present as organic debates in the respective societies – whether on NATO membership, EU membership, bilateral relations with Germany, the standing of Angela Merkel, or ties to the US or Russia. But their amplification, their increased prominence on the agenda, and their simplification suggest that certain hostile actors used these classical division lines to further drive polarization in these societies. This, in turn, undermines democratic debates of relevant issues and the consequences of strategic deception are well-known by now.

Difficulties of Addressing the Problem

While it is possible to address each aspect of polarization separately and try and offer compromises or simply present facts, this does not address the root problem.

We must again conclude that the best protection against swiftly imposed polarizing issues is a healthy civil society, aware of its own agenda and priorities. The culture of dialogue and compromise is something that the region has not had the chance to learn and absorb during its recent history. Therefore, it entails a long and painstaking effort on the ground with local communities, helping to form small networks and awakening citizen's courage, social responsibility and collective identities.

This job begins at an early age, already in kindergarten and schools. We must focus on the new generation, which is not socialized in heavy historical events and raise them in a different civil culture. However, emigration from the region, imbalanced representation of different generations in the ruling elites or growing social segregation do not help this mission.

We must also take into consideration the extreme speed of information and the growing emotional character of narratives. Earlier generations were exposed to a smaller number of polarized debates for the simple reason that newspapers and early television operated in a different and much slower way. When it comes to social media – the soundbites, videos and tweets – the difference is huge when it comes to the level of human information processing. In other words, it is less cost intense, much faster and easier to create polarizing debates. This frees lots of politicians from dialogue, delivers virtual enemies for them to fight and unites their supporters against them. Therefore, the logic has remained the same with the socio-political environment being much more fertile for polarization.

Furthermore, the generational divide among digital natives and early millennials and the elder generation is seriously affecting the initiation of polarization. Generational politics is on the rise: age divide is more and more important among voters of different ideologies, may that be a US-style Democrats-Republicans divide, the Brexit debate, or the demography of PiS and Fidesz voter camps in Poland and Hungary for example. This division is also present at the family-level, where patchwork families, broken authorities, lack

of inter-generational communities (living with grandparents) are all easing the formation of echo chambers at the individual level.

Inter-generational dialogue has become a focal point. The UK Ministry of Health just recently published advisory material on how families should avoid screen time (computers, tablets and mobile devices) during dinnertime simply for the sake of having a normal conversation around the table. The same challenge drove to discussing “digital curfew” in Finland, New Zealand and South-Korea, among others, either to encourage families to spend time together or simply to let teenagers sleep. Our region should also consider how to foster family ties, how the state and local municipalities are responsible for the existence and encouragement of local groups, quality family time as well as promote a culture of dialogue.

In other words, the number of polarized debates is also a symptom of the health and resilience of society. In order to build resilience, it is not enough to offer more information, fact checking mechanisms or to counter polarizing narratives. Central and Eastern European local communities need to further tie their web of interconnections. Individuals can be members of overlapping communities, exposing them to diverse sources and at the same time allowing them to be traders of information, building trust at all layers of society and hence, reinforcing social resilience. However far-fetched this sounds, any type of standard social gatherings and its encouragement, form the starting point for resilience: common cooking evenings, common jogging on Saturday mornings for the elderly, monthly reunions of the inhabitants of a given street to discuss issues of cleanliness or safety, scout and Parish communities, sharing groups, animal welfare groups and many more. The point is that while consumerism and modern IT is pushing individuals into self-reclusion, local leaders and state measures should help create healthy and vibrant offline small communities.

Take the example of schools. Sofia Platform offers civic education classes for students in Bulgarian high schools about different issues

of contemporary democracy, with the simple aim of helping children understand their social environment and local politics – the local phenomenon of corruption, elections and local identity politics, for example. The Budapest-based Institute of Social Reflection started a pilot project to bring the Parents' Academy to life in Hungarian countryside schools which seeks to promote continuous dialogue between parents and teachers about local current affairs through the future of their children. We need to develop a holistic approach in order to find how small scale and sustainable projects actually interact with each other's target groups as well as ways for them to identify synergies and enhance their effects together. Parallel activities of small NGOs should be better co-ordinated.

There is no magic pill against polarization, but investing hard work, patience and attention are all needed measures, together with the reckoning of our everyday social responsibility. This is unique for post-soviet countries, as citizens' responsibility was weakened for decades under the totalitarian regimes. Paternalistic approaches must be scaled down, avoiding dependency on the state, or overreliance on state help. Taking responsibility through citizen action should be encouraged. It will still take time to transform former comrades into active citizens as well as pushing the new digitally native generation towards civic engagement.

About the author

Botond Feledy, director of the Budapest-based Institute of Social Reflection (Hungary) which focuses on social justice and digital ethics. He also teaches international relations and journalism at the Catholic University in Budapest and is a senior fellow at the Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy.

Intergenerational Dialogue

By Olena Pravylo

Transition turbulence has brought to light countless vivid memories and discussions across Eastern Europe. With deeper social media penetration in daily affairs, we are observing a radicalization and spike in hate discourse amongst various groups and communities – if one dislikes an idea or a fact that does not serve his or her opinion, this individual will simply cross out anybody promoting such views. As result, opinions on the past polarize societies and form closed bubbles of post-Soviet nostalgia, national pride as well as total ignorance of any facts. In many countries, the ways in which one thinks about the past is supported on the national level or used in the local and foreign political spheres. As a result, this strengthens biases on the local level, especially in small towns. In Ukraine, for example, this divide between nostalgia and national thinking is quite clear and lies between the self-proclaimed Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, supported by Russia with the strong myth of the “one soviet nation” and on the other hand with territories of Ukraine controlled by the official government promoting nationalistic ideals with a strong victimization of the past.

Post-soviet countries are characterized by the BTI Transformation Index as regions in a stable crisis that goes deeper as a result of the wave of mass demonstrations in 2014 known as the Euromaidan (or Revolution of Dignity, as it is referred to in Ukraine) as well as escalation in armed conflict in Donbass. That brings to the table a new form of cold war that is reflected on activities in Eastern Europe. An especially challenging task is that of dealing with past and present polarized groups ready to destabilize countries even in the European Union. A lack of trust perpetuated by autocratic leaders during the 20th century is strongly present and impedes any

opportunities for dialogue and shared memories about the past. On the other hand, bottom up initiatives, NGOs and independent think-tanks play an important role in the development of the region, especially in regard to discussing the past. They are important agenda items for policymakers as well as researchers for future policies and studies. In the case of Ukraine, new initiatives have been developed as a reaction to the “Lenin-fall” phenomenon (or the chaotic destruction of Lenin statues across Ukraine during the fall of 2018), de-communisation policies and the falsification of news about Ukraine at the hands of Russian media outlets and internet bots. NGOs work today as an army of invisible servants to initiate changes in a country. They are checking facts, designing new agendas for international representation, support governments by their knowledge and expertise. Initiatives that influenced policymakers were, “New Mythology of Ukraine”, Nestor Group with their public manifesto “Contract of dignity for sustainable development”, and Long-term strategy for culture “Culture 2025”. Such bottom-up projects lead to various discussions and divergent thinking.

In Russia nowadays, there are no challenges in discussing past Soviet times. The subject is quite sensitive, there might be positive or negative opinions, but there are no barriers. The official position has always been characterized by strong feelings of nostalgia that end up moulding and shaping mass public opinion in the country. Nostalgia in Russia is at the root of the official narrative and discourse. For instance, life under Stalin’s regime is depicted with positive connotations and shielded from criticism. In doing so, officialdom is also promoting the idea that the country necessitates of a strong leader in order to survive. Overall in Russia, Soviet times are often remembered positively, mostly by people who were young at that time, who remember a feeling of social protection and stability, openness amongst individuals as well as the feeling of unity and that of a common dream. On the flip side, some intellectuals are attempting to rethink this reality and understand how to best deal with it. A prime example of this practice is the

“Kafka and Orwell Forum” established in Kaliningrad. It started as an open-access discussion platform for all those interested in any kind of philosophical or critical thinking. Between 50-100 attendees participated in the last edition, strictly Russian citizens recommended by at least two previous participants.

Making use of critical thinking as an instrument for dealing with the past can also be observed in Latvia. “In Ukraine you check the mindset of a person by asking: Who does Crimea belong to? In Latvia we are asking: Do you read “Rigas Likas”?” – We heard often from Latvian intellectuals. “Rigas Likas” is a popular “magazine for slow reading” as it is positioned by publishers. For Latvians it is a platform for discussing the past, challenging reality, and offering opinions for changes. The team of the magazine is well known for its projects connected to creating spaces for thinking, like festivals that deal with a critical thinking approach. One of these activities took place in the Latvian National Library where a special glass cube was installed, and people would simply sit around and reflect. Such events are hugely influential on the youth allowing them to challenge reality and question the past.

In the Nordic and Baltic Sea region, an interesting phenomenon known as “Democracy Festivals” takes place. Similar to Latvia, discussions around the issue of democracy are widely popular. The aim of these initiatives is to strengthen the culture of democratic conversations in the country, to foster civic engagement and active involvement in social and political processes as well as to encourage a desire for continuous learning in an ever-changing world. Safe places to discuss the past are crucially important for Eastern Europe and initiatives such as the above-mentioned festival create this much needed space.

In Poland, for example, the creation of public spaces and participatory budgeting made possible new practices of participation. For example, the Polish NGO “Other Space Foundation” created “Transkaukazja” while a music festival was established in the

Georgian countryside Marneuli district. Following a few of these festivals, young musicians from both Armenia and Azerbaijan were able to play songs together on stage when only up to very recently they would not even been able to discuss a common past.

In many countries, a big role during the transition period was played by art, music and cinema. For example, popular rock bands in Bulgaria, Russia, Poland and Lithuania became a symbol of freedom and democracy.

In Romania instead, the level of nostalgia vis-à-vis the communist past is quite low. This nostalgia might only be present in movies and although Soviet times might be portrayed negatively, these might still arise a feeling of nostalgia as they represent an important part of one's past.

In Bulgaria, many streets and cities are still named after communist leaders and despite much discussion, this has not yet changed. Renaming of streets in Ukraine met a lot of confrontation. The most discussed case was the renaming of the street *Moskovska* (in honor of Moscow city) to *Stepan Bandera* (in honor of the controversial national hero) and the street *General Vatutin* (in honor of the Soviet General) to *Roman Shukhevych* (in honor of the commander of the Ukrainian National Army during WWII that collaborated with Germany motivated by the independence of Ukraine from Russia). Mostly renamed streets and towns in the process of de-communization stayed with their new names, besides those two that were renamed back by court decision at autumn 2019, after Volodymyr Zelenskiy was elected as the President of Ukraine, and the political atmosphere in the country became more pro-Russian. In case of small towns renaming is an even more sensitive topic. Chervonograd town (translated: RedCity) didn't change names because of local conflicts. In Melitopol a weird situation happened with renaming the *Dzerzhynskiy street*. The New Generation Church demanded to rename it into *Christian street*, but historically on this street a synagogue and a mosque are located, as a result it was

renamed into *Intercultural street*, and only the part of street with the New Generation Church was renamed into *Christian street*. Such renaming in Ukraine creates spaces for discussion and better understanding of the past and it has a positive impact for a transition in the public discourse.

One of the aspects that should be considered while dealing with transition in order to facilitate intergenerational dialogue is that people tend to have a different perception on the past depending on whether they were adults or teenagers during the transition period. Following from this perspective, it is important to find the correct way for recounting Soviet history as well the transition to the younger generations. Often, history teachers limit themselves to historical facts without taking into account and conveying to the students the historical context as well. The task should be to teach critical thinking as well as the fact-checking of historical events. It is also necessary for parents to talk more with their children about the historical past of their country but at the same time, the presence



© Georgi Valkov

of a wide generational gap must also be taken into account. Modern technology can also be used in ways that aid the ways in which history is taught to the younger generation.

About the author

Olena Pravylo, is chairwoman of the NGO Congress of Cultural Activists and the PU Association of Active Citizens (Ukraine). She is a facilitator in the “Active Citizen program” in partnership with the British Council, working with local communities and activists on social actions projects, local strategies development. Furthermore, she is a moderator and expert in “Culture 2025. Platform for changes”, a project focused on the development and implementation of a cultural strategy for Ukraine 2016-2025, as well as a short movie producer in the production company “Kontora Pravylo” and an organizer of the multidisciplinary festival “Transkaukazja”.

A Soft but Mighty Power: Transition and Trust

By Christine Wetzel

The Concept of Trust

The level of trust in a community influences the quality of relationships and is the glue and prerequisite of a democratic society. When speaking of democracy, one can refer to deliberative democracy embracing the idea of citizens participating in public discourse that shapes decision-making, politics as well as society based on the principles of freedom, pluralism and civil rights.

Where choices, options and opinions are plenty and thus the outcome of any process is uncertain, trust is mandatory. Trusting that – whatever may be – there is a shared code of conduct that guarantees the respect of everyone’s dignity, human and civil rights and equality before the law. Or, more simply, the confidence that all in all things are going to be alright. An open society requires a certain level of trust.

For Robert Putnam, trust is an indispensable part for the social capital that people necessitate in order to build a stable democracy. The more social capital there is in any community, organization or group – meaning the existing functioning connections between people – the easier any action is facilitated and the more stable the system is as a whole.⁷³ Starting from there it seems clear that the task for countries in transition should be to rebuild trust by any means.

⁷³ Putnam, R. (2002): Democracies in Flux:
The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society.

Democratic societies operate on the idea of regularly verifying the trust invested in the representatives of any office. In that sense, trust is one of the main variables that influence democratization in societies in transition, between citizens and political institutions as well as between institutions themselves and different groups within a society. The challenges in this regard vary between different countries in transition.

The need for trust applies to both ends of the relationship between people and authorities.⁷⁴ To give two simple examples, governments which do not trust their people will be more likely to suppress freedom of press while people who do not have trust in their own government, are themselves more likely to avoid taxation. It is only when people have trust that they are able to have an impact with the effort they make that they will then invest their time, resources and civil society activism – or in other words, be willing to positively contribute to society.

Trust has a very fluid quality, hard to build on and easy to destroy. It is a soft power, albeit a mighty one. The important question is, how can trust in political institutions be restored? And, is the actual challenge really about trust that *needs to be restored*?

Challenges for Southern and Eastern European Countries

In South and Eastern Europe, the 1990s have left societies in a survival and defensive mode with an overarching sense of mistrust. Those years are remembered as a time where everybody seemed to be in a grab-and-run-mode, where everyone just tried to somehow make ends meet, where everything we knew and believed in was suddenly gone or invalid and where crime was high.

The trust that individuals have in institutions is often seen as a health indicator for the state of a democracy and is repeatedly

⁷⁴ Although there are other relevant institutions like the media, given the shortness of this article the focus here is on the relationship between people and state authorities.

analysed in surveys. An overview glance at OECD figures and statistics suggests that the issue of trust and trustworthiness is a quite complex and delicate one. According to data from 2017, for example, 64% of those surveyed in Russia had confidence in their national government, in Germany that figure was at 60%, while in the Czech Republic and in Poland, only 34% and 25% respectively.⁷⁵

Trust indeed requires trustworthy institutions – that work well, are able to deliver expected services, are accountable, act according to the law and treat citizens equally regardless of their social status or financial capacity. But given that some countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, massively struggle with mistrust issues like corruption, the question is: What should be done if distrust is indeed justifiable?

At this point civil society and NGOs in particular can assume a crucial role in forming new grounds for trust where state institutions are still affected by a long negative track record that has undoubtedly left its mark.

Here, civil society activists and NGOs should assume the role of critical observers and pressure institutions to deliver better services or be more transparent.

Drawing on Hirschman's concept of "Exit Voice Loyalty" (typically applied to explain migration) when people are unsatisfied with state services, they have two options: exit (leaving the country) or voice (addressing problems and trying to change things for the better)⁷⁶. Indeed, exit was a choice massively made by hundreds of thousands of people in Eastern Europe, who have left their countries over the last 30 years. But people also exit from political participation (i.e. low voter turnout). As exit tears relations apart and worsens the crisis of trust, NGOs

⁷⁵ OECD (2015): Public Governance: A matter of trust, <http://www.oecd.org/governance/public-governance-a-matter-of-trust.htm>.

⁷⁶ Hirschman, A. O. (1970): Exit, Voice and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States, Cambridge.

should help by giving people a voice. They should see themselves as advocates of people's interest by addressing problems and demanding better public service. NGOs can help people make themselves heard, for instance, by providing legal advice or a platform to facilitate civil activism or act as a mediator between people and the public service. They could help create a feasible selection process for public service or parliament posts that are trustworthy and bound to the rule of law through monitoring mechanisms like Parliament Watch-projects that hold a record of votes or incomes.

Furthermore, it can be beneficial to look into different levels of trust: trust amongst individuals, trust within a smaller community, and trust in state or federal institutions – which, in the end, are also a collection of individuals.

The fact that the highest levels of trust can be found within families points towards the importance of bonding and closeness as a prerequisite for trust. People tend to trust people and things they know well and distrust people and things they know less – which appears to be quite a natural and instinctive kind of behaviour.

Examples & Good Practices

Following from the above, we could seek to increase trust in society by bringing people closer together and linking groups and institutions with one another that are currently rather detached and isolated from each other. We can start by doing this in our local communities – by talking to people we are not usually in contact with, by creating spaces for encounters and inviting different people or by creating a common experience to build on and rebuild trust.

Taking that into account and thinking for instance of populist movements today, frictions between social groups are also exploited to deepen mistrust and this kind of relationship building is especially important in this respect.

“Decent behaviour” on the part of politicians and bureaucrats plays a role too. People need to feel that their matters are treated seriously and that their voices are being heard. Asked in a Transition Dialogue-project-survey about what would be a signal for progress in the state of his country, a Ukraine citizen agreed that being treated with respect by a civil servant in a public office is important.⁷⁷

The *behaviour in public service institutions* that people experience during their daily affairs is a key point in building or destroying trust. When registering a new car, picking up a new passport, applying for social welfare or construction permits, settling tax declarations and so on, public servants are the state officials that people meet and talk directly to.

Therefore, efforts should be made to change the self-serving concept and stress the aspect of *service* in public service. Sometimes, this is also an issue of generational change in the realm of public service. A project from Lithuania, for instance, aims to attract young people returning from Western European countries to work in public service, thus bringing a new spirit and fresh ideas into this sphere. Participants felt that people and civil society organisations should also be more persistent in demanding that kind of cultural change in public service.

Ralf Dahrendorf famously said, “it takes six months to create new political institutions. [...] It will probably take 60 years to create a civil society.”⁷⁸ Going back to the essence of deliberative democracy, it is about bringing democracy to life: NGOs can bring politics back to the people, facilitate the process of gathering, discussing, listening

⁷⁷ In the first period of the Transition Dialogue Project (2015-2017) Ukraine Partner-NGO Congress of Cultural Activists collected video interviews reflecting on the transition period after the end of the Cold War and the long shadows of the past, e.g. regarding the political culture. One question asked repeatedly to interviewees was: when will you know that something has changed in your country? [Transition Dialogue Blog](#)

⁷⁸ Dahrendorf, R. (1990): Hast the East Joined the West, in: *New Perspective Quarterly*, Vol. 72, p. 42.

to each other, and teaching the whole system on how to integrate deliberative democracy into a daily practice for all citizens.

Thereby, *NGOs help give people a voice, articulate protest or suggestions, exercise public control over public institutions and pressure poorly working institutions to change.* They could, for example, invite politicians and public servants in discussions to encourage personal encounters and get locally involved. In Poland, for instance, a noticeable change in local politics across various communities could be observed over the last few years – local authorities started caring more about peoples' opinion and responded positively to the change. As perceived by many Poles, trust was indeed restored in this context.

Another example is the cooperation between NGOs and the public sector to involve active citizens in urban planning processes in their local environment. Participatory budgets could be another approach that *actually allows citizens to make joint decisions* on public spending. However, this kind of participation is rather demanding in terms of both time and knowledge and thus tends to activate and involve individuals who already have an advanced social position.

A need exists for *civic education in schools* as a means to uniformly reach out to many young citizens in a critical age. A task that cannot be solely fulfilled by educational institutions themselves, but also in cooperation with NGOs. They have the potential to contribute to civic education by providing democratic practice experience through projects that interact with students in decision-making and reflecting their choices and values. Examples are the already widespread election simulating projects, but also approaches involving decision-making on very concrete social or environmental problems, exercising the – often complex – way of managing interests and following legislative and bureaucratic processes.

While the suggested measures can and should be set up and maintained on a long-term basis, there are moments that call for a more spontaneous engagement, when, for example, public protests arise as a result of political scandals or other events. At this time,

for instance, NGOs that fight corruption have the chance to reach a larger audience. Thus, NGOs can make use of social movements and take the momentum to channel anger to long-term constructive engagement.

The question of trust also affects credibility in NGOs themselves. Earlier, the mutuality of trust was pointed out – offering trust can often lead to trust in return while mistrust is likely to further erode trust. What is the role that NGOs could play to help it, if the mistrust and legitimacy crisis affects them just as much? NGOs themselves need to be considered trustworthy. Thus, in improving trust, NGOs should take the lead by making their budget public or undertaking other transparency or trust-building measures.

About the author

Christine Wetzel is a board member of DRA e.V. (Germany) as well as working as a fundraiser in Berlin. Prior to this, she worked as a media and communications advisor in the field of civic education. While freelancing as a journalist and as an academic researcher she studied international relations and media studies in Trier (DE) and Lancaster (GB).

The Elusive Nature of Communist Nostalgia

By Momchil Metodiev

Communist nostalgia is disliked by sociologists: it is much easier to prove its existence than to discover its essence and its consequences. However, thirty years following the end of communism, one does not need sociologists to prove its existence. Signs of communist nostalgia can be seen across Eastern Europe. Sometimes, Western ignorance in regard to the meaning of communist symbols, provokes negative state reactions: recently, the Baltic States [Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania] officially protested against the sale of T-shirts with Soviet-era symbols produced by a large American clothing manufacturer. But in other countries, communist symbols are so widespread that they do not even trigger a debate. In tourist shops in Bulgaria one can easily find T-shirts with the inscription “СССР” (USSR) and in shops and restaurants across the Bulgarian countryside, portraits of the communist dictator Todor Zhivkov can still be found. The phenomenon is noticeable also in other former communist countries – portrait of Erich Honecker next to a table with leaflets of *Alternative for Germany* could be seen in a bar in the outskirts of East Berlin.

What are the reasons for communist nostalgia? How sustainable is it? What does it mean and how is it transmitted from older to younger generations? Does it affect their political choices, and finally, is it a threat to democracy in Eastern Europe?

Reasons for Communist Nostalgia

As it is well known, memory and images of the past are a function of the assessment of the present. For the first time, the phenomenon of "communist nostalgia" was observed in the late 1990s when the euphoria of the Velvet Revolutions was replaced by disappointment following the inevitable, and sometimes painful, economic reforms that caused significant changes in the social status of many people. At that time, sociologists and observers noticed with surprise the emergence of a significant group of people that began to value their lives higher during communism compared to their new social status in the years of transition. Most of all, they were surprised to discover this phenomenon in East Germany, where the economic and political transition happened in the smoothest and most organized way when compared to other post-communist countries. That is how the term "Ostalgie" was coined, which was captured and depicted tragically in the film *Goodbye, Lenin*.

Subsequently, the phenomenon of communist nostalgia started to be noticed across Eastern Europe. Later, more in-depth understanding allowed for a regional differentiation of its characteristics. This phenomenon is least noticeable in Central European and Baltic States where economic and political transformation was relatively quick and successful and where the end of communism also led to the strengthening of both national identity and pride. Nostalgia was more noticeable in countries where the transition was slower and more painful, such as in Romania, Bulgaria or Albania, and where former communist elites succeeded in remaining important political and economic players in the years of transition. The existence of communist nostalgia in those countries does not come as a surprise. In the 1990s, large sections of society experienced a significant decline in the quality of life. Finally, a third group is formed from the societies of the former "Cold War empires" – the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia – where the reason for nostalgia was not only the decline in quality of life but also wars as well as the loss of both influence

and power. Nostalgia for the former Soviet Union is well described in Svetlana Alexievich's book *Secondhand Time*, while a longing for the former Yugoslavia is captured in the cinematic work of director Emir Kusturica.

The experience of those three groups, and especially the existence of nostalgia in East Germany, suggests that there is no direct correlation between success or failure of economic transition and communist nostalgia. More important than prosperity seems to be the question of status – at a personal, community or national level. Nostalgia is weaker in countries whose international influence and respect grew during transitional years while it is stronger in countries and societies whose status declined during this period. The same applies to nostalgia among social groups – loss of social status is more important than the actual economic reality.

Regardless of the reasons, communist nostalgia should have already disappeared in 2019. But thirty years later, it seems that it has morphed into an idealisation of the communist past, especially given that this phenomenon is also noticeable amongst the younger generation which had never experienced communism first-hand and is only indirectly familiar with the regime through the memory of the older generations. A Pew Research Center poll from 2017⁷⁹ attempts to assess levels of nostalgia for the Soviet times by testing people's views on two political leaders – Josef Stalin and Mikhail Gorbachev. It concludes that neither of them is viewed positively across the region as a whole. But in several former Soviet republics, including Russia and his native Georgia, a majority of people view Stalin favourably compared to Gorbachev. Stalin is viewed positively by 57% in Georgia, 58% in Russia, 25% in Serbia, while in Bulgaria both men are regarded equally – Stalin is viewed positively by 33% while Gorbachev by 32%. Gorbachev receives more favourable ratings than Stalin in the Baltic States and in Central Europe (56%

⁷⁹ Pew Research Center, (2017): Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe, p. 39. See <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

in Estonia, 54% in Hungary, 53% in the Czech Republic and 47% in Romania). At the same time, majorities across the region agree with the statement that “most people are better off in a free-market economic system, even though some people are rich, and others are poor”. Free market is supported by 77% in Estonia, 74% in Romania, 73% in the Czech Republic, 68% in Poland, 65% in Georgia, 69% in Russia, 59% in Greece, 52% in Serbia, 51% in both Bulgaria and Croatia, 48% in Moldova and 47% in Ukraine⁸⁰. It seems that these societies understand the advantages of the free market and simultaneously long for a strong and possibly charismatic leader. How did this become possible?

Nostalgia for What?

In its purest form, nostalgia occurs amongst the older generations which are nostalgic for both their youth as well as their social status during communism. This is understandable given that inactive social groups (especially pensioners) were amongst those who suffered the most as a result of the transition. In this sense, nostalgia can represent a feeling of longing for both a stronger state as well as for brotherhood and proximity amongst people in comparison to anonymity in modern society. Compared to the general sense of insecurity and instability prevalent in contemporary society, this generation is also nostalgic for the overall social cohesion and stability of communism. Paradoxically, from this point of view, the “Era of Stagnation”, or the period of late communism which became negatively popular, is now associated with stability and receives positive connotations. Nostalgia may also focus on overall social security (the myth of free education and free healthcare) and the overall perception that communism was a just society (or at least more socially equal), compared to the new one, associated with inequality, corruption and unexplainable richness of certain individuals.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 165.

In countries like Russia, for example, stability is also favoured by the official discourse. Compared to the more stable periods of the late communist era, as well as to the present day, the period of the 1990s is regarded as a period of decay, chaos and lack of order. The argument for stability can also be extended to other states – it can be summarized that older generations feel nostalgia mainly for the stability and predictability that characterized their lives over a relatively long period of time. This type of nostalgia, however, must not be exaggerated – in its purest form it is only visible amongst the older generation, while the younger generation is often either irritated by it or tends to ridicule it.

How is Nostalgia Transmitted to the Younger Generations?

Different factors in different countries contribute to the transfer of nostalgia. One factor is the popular culture (cinema, music etc.) of the communist era, which creates a common cultural code that unifies one or several generations. Given the society's closure under communism, it ended up producing its own local "stars" or created "cultural events" that often remained limited in their own context, but which played a unifying role for several generations. Much of this cultural product was created as part of the regime's propaganda machine, and even if it was not a direct product of that propaganda, its existence was sanctioned by the communist censorship. When this cultural product is taken out of the context of its creation, it morphs into a vehicle for indirect propaganda of the old regime (without denying the qualities of some of these cultural products). That is how the commercialization of culture from the communist period has become one of the factors contributing to the transfer of communist nostalgia.

The same applies to the commercialization of trademarks and products that became popular during communism. Today, they are presented as symbols of tradition and quality simply because they are known to several generations and do not need additional

advertising for their market promotion. No one is interested in pointing out that if those products were of truly high quality, they would have also been scarce in the communist economy.

Another factor is the demographic crisis, coupled with the major social changes in Eastern Europe. The emigration of the younger generation strengthens the position of the older one as the main “target” of much of the newly commercialized culture or advertising. Again, due to emigration, there are entire villages or towns whose active citizens work as seasonal workers abroad (in Bulgaria at least, this phenomenon is well documented by both field studies and documentaries). Families that fall into this category witness their children being actually raised by their grandparents who in turn transmit their memory and nostalgia to the third generation. Along with the common cultural code, they pass to the young generation the overall nostalgic image of the greater tranquillity or social stability attributed to the communist period.



© Stefan Melle

Is Nostalgia a Threat to Democracy?

In its purest form, communist nostalgia hardly poses a threat to democracy. If it remains only nostalgia, sooner or later it is doomed to vanish.

However, it can become a threat once it morphs into the idealisation of an undemocratic regime, and after it is linked to other undemocratic ideas, not necessarily associated with the left. It could be both nationalism and current identity politics, whose affirmation of one's own identity (national, but often also religious) undermines the principles of the liberal state. This led to the emergence of the so-called illiberal democracy – although it remains an ambiguous term, its distinct message is that of disdain towards liberal democracy. Communist nostalgia can therefore become a threat to democracy insofar as it idealises an undemocratic order and prioritises stability, identity and charisma over institutional building and liberal principles.

The origin of some of these illiberal ideas can also come from the West – the idealisation of communism is visible not only in post-communist societies, but also in many Western universities, who traditionally positively assess left-leaning ideas. The whitewashing of both the image and theories of communism, combined with a lack of knowledge of its practices, can easily lead to the approval of an anti-democratic system with vague but clearly anti-democratic ideas (which makes possible T-shirts with Soviet symbols to be produced by big American companies or the co-existence of Erich Honecker's portrait with *Alternative for Germany* leaflets).

In other countries, this identity policy, combined with a nostalgia for stability, may become a cover for much more aggressive ideas and regimes. In societies where people are nostalgic not only for the stability of communism but also for state power and influence, these ideas risk not only undermining the democratic form of government but can also boost the emergence of neo-imperial

projects or strengthen the national state to the level of becoming a threat to other nations. This is exactly the case of Russia with its vague attitude to communism, which is simultaneously negated and celebrated.

A Possible Antidote

Education is the obvious antidote against the aforementioned social and political trends. In the countries of Eastern Europe, the emphasis lies on the necessity for education and knowledge of the communist past. This is a positive and necessary development as long as it does not lead to the upbringing or propaganda of another anti-democratic ideology. Therefore, this type of education should also be combined with civic education and placed in the proper historical context. Civic education should be focused not only on the understanding of the democratic system and institutions, but also on the creation of broad historical ideas for the changes that the Eastern European societies experienced.

In Bulgaria, for example, a widespread myth exists stating that the quality of life during communism was higher compared to today. While everyone is aware that the liberal system has provided greater freedom (most cherished amongst them is the freedom of movement), the notion and understanding that communism was a superior regime in terms of crime rates, social security, and even income, is very strong. Especially popular, even amongst specialists, is the myth that the crime rate was lower during communism, which is explained by the totalitarian character and the big security apparatus of the regime. Recent data, however, proves categorically that this is a myth and that the level of violent crimes was higher during communism than it is today. That means that people prone to nostalgia nowadays continue to emphasize facts and myths from the 1990s, when there were objective reasons for nostalgia, despite the fact that it is readily clear that in the long run the democratic system

leads to an improvement in the quality of life, including lowering the rate of violent crimes.

It could be concluded that in itself communist nostalgia does not pose a threat to democratic societies. It becomes a threat when it morphs into some sort of idealisation of an undemocratic regime and when those ideas are combined with other undemocratic principles. Consequently, the phenomenon of communist nostalgia should neither be underestimated nor overestimated. It must be balanced by strong civic education and combined with an awareness of the difference between communism and liberal democracy. This education should be focused not only on the study of democratic institutions but also on the knowledge of comparative characteristics between communism and democracy. It should not promote the assumption that democracy is "the least bad of all existing forms of government", but rather point out that democracy is the best available option on the market of political ideas. It should include an explanation that democratic rule and media freedom led to institution-building that actually improves the quality of life. The history of transition of the post-communist countries is a proof that precisely institutions, and not charismatic leaders, are those that bring real change to people's life.

About the author

Momchil Metodiev, historian and editor-in-chief of the Christianity and Culture Journal, Institute for the Studies of the Recent Past and a research fellow at the Institute for Studies of the Recent Past in Sofia (Bulgaria). His research interests are focused on the history of the communist state security and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Identity

By Mădălina Mocan

The Struggle for Common Ground

Whenever various groups, from academics to civil society activists to media pundits have tried to explain current political and social developments to broader audiences, few other concepts (with the probable and notable exception of populism) have been so intensely used as much as “identity” has. What identity is and the extent to which it can contribute to a better understanding of our societies was shaped by the kind of perspective that we are willing to employ; by how we get to “define who we are”, how much “self-identification” is possible given the constraints of the environment; to what extent assuming one of them comes in a “package” with subsequent demands and positioning. Defining identity as being part of/belonging to various groups within society reveals the puzzle pieces constructing it: history, language, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, our ability to put them together, set them apart, and simultaneously, to prioritise among them.

Grouping these factors or prioritising them will often take into account the relations between minority and majority groups and the power relation within a given context. The rise of “identity politics”, understood as the “idea that groups are calling for social treatment based on ethnicity, religion, sex, or other characteristics” and the labelling associated with it, did not make the concept easier to grasp, on the contrary.

Given a certain social and political context we might choose to relate to identity in an exclusive or inclusive way. The absence of political and/or social conflict would most likely give space for a more inclusive definition of identity: individuals being comfortable in asserting who they are rather than who or what they are not.

At the core of the concept, though, appears to be the need to associate oneself with a story of success and achievement, be it at an individual or group level of a certain status, rights or acknowledgement. Overcoming historical or personal obstacles, at either of those level, often comes with a price for those advancing as well as for those interested in preserving the status quo: it means emigration and immigration; remittances and brain-drain; it means affirmative actions and reparations; it often means transitional justice and collective memory. In all of these cases it means challenging existing structures of power.

History, Language and Home: a Generation Old Enough to Remember, Young Enough to Leave

History

The role of personal, group and national history in shaping one's identity remains central from several perspectives: how authoritarian the communist regimes were, what kind of contact did we have with our neighbours before the fall of the Iron Curtain, what happened during the "revolutions", the success of the different transitional justice tools used – each of them are relevant in understanding who we are today. Which side of the curtain you were on might shape to this day political perceptions or understandings of political concepts: the meaning of "communism" or "transition" might have different connotations for someone living in the former Federal Republic of Germany, East Germany, Romania, former Yugoslavia or former Soviet republics.

History also plays a role in the case of the ethnic communities whose motherlands at some point in time challenged the territory of the state within the borders of which they live in today: Hungarians in Romania, Russians in Ukraine. It impacts the way textbooks are written to the same extent it does to how personal family stories of grief and loss are told over dinner at home.

Language

Besides the ordinary examples of how we can use language to assert our identity (from the use of regional dialects and various accents to the frequency of more abstract forms that could imply one having benefitted from a certain type of education), language can also be weaponized as it could be perceived to be the case in Ukraine. As one of the speakers noted, it is to be seen if the emphasis of using the Ukrainian language alone, especially after the war in Crimea, would not further push Russian speaking Ukrainians to isolate themselves from the rest of Ukrainian society. In societies experiencing the trauma of distant or recent conflict, it is to be seen how language can assert one's identity, as well as how it also can be seen as a form of empowerment or of dissent.

Religion

Religion as a factor influencing identity is also multi-layered. One perspective is that of assuming to belong to a certain denomination or rather to identify as a nonbeliever. Linked to that is the debate of what it really means to be "culturally Christian/Muslim" as opposed to being a "true believer". This distinction might be more relevant than initially envisioned especially in the regional context where societal hierarchies of various religious denominations have embraced a political agenda by trying to influence and amend legislation, particularly when it comes to human rights. An example is the role of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria in opposing the Istanbul Convention or the role of the neo-Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches in Romania in trying to amend the constitution in order to illegalize same-sex marriage.

Home and Away

The effects of migration in shaping identity are deep. Eastern Europe is experiencing an ongoing exodus of young people leaving

in search of increased stability and more prosperous economic conditions. Some of those migrating are seasonal workers (in agriculture, construction or hospitality), while others have left in the hope that it would only be temporary. Most of those who have emigrated routinely send remittances back home and a few still find ways to engage with their homeland by actively participating in diaspora communities.

Gender, Class and Ethnicity: Eastern European Intersections

Among the several structural changes witnessed in Eastern Europe over the last three decades, how we relate to gender is probably one of the most nuanced. In most traditional societies, the concept of gender is becoming in itself a source of abuse. While the struggle to decrease domestic abuse and physical violence is getting some traction, more nuanced concepts such as “consent” or “gender fluidity” are turning into ideological battlefields within the larger context of outside interferences. In the fall of 2018, a constitutional referendum to ban same sex marriage failed because of low voter turnout but nonetheless managed to further polarise society and increase mainstream hate speech. Similarly, in Bulgaria, the refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention generated the same amount of “labelling” of human rights activists as corrupt foreign agents. In Ukraine, being a “feminist” acquired negative connotations because of its association with radical forms of expression. Intersectional feminists in Romania still have a daunting task in explaining that the overlapping structures of ethnicity, gender and class still represent systemic barriers for individuals to access opportunities or simply live a dignified life.

More Challenges: National and Supranational Identities

Our capacity to belong as well as who we are and what we are equally depend on our own personal journey as well as on that journey's direction – many practitioners looked at what it means to

define oneself as a feminist in Eastern Europe versus what that might mean in Western Europe. What are the implications of assuming an identity while being a local and what does it mean for those who are joining a group that has already had certain acknowledgements in terms of values and agenda-setting? How do we talk about ethnicity and structural racism in societies that still discriminate against individuals belonging to a certain ethnic group at their peripheries?

Generations of Transition; Generations of Sacrifice

One's personal experience in transitioning to democracy will definitely have an important role on today's hierarchy of values: memories of fear and political oppression might make one more prone and willing to protest on the streets aware that hard-fought freedom must be guarded; those who have witnessed the Bulgarian economic collapse of the 1990s, and the heavy price paid by Bulgarian society, might cynically distance themselves from any new political endeavour that lacks social solidarity. Even transitions traditionally considered successful such as the reunification might still require additional time to strengthen social inclusivity.

Identity as a Foundation for a Better Future

A Matter of Perception

What shapes our identity seems to be less and less the geographical space around us, although existing borders between the European Union and its neighbours do count. What is however potentially more relevant is how we perceive "the future of Europe" and to which extent we, in Eastern Europe, consider ourselves European.

When asked where they are travelling to, many Ukrainians on their way to Western Europe would answer "Europe" as if they themselves do not belong within its geographical confines. Similarly, much of the public discourse in countries such as Romania and Bulgaria is very

much built on what “Europe expects from us”, “how much we have longed to belong to Europe”, or the “national need” to not “make fools of ourselves in Europe” – the need to prove both to ourselves and to a very broad “them” that we are worthy to belong or be there. Time and again Western Europe and liberal democracy seem to be as much of a geographical as an existential destination.

What Now? Potential Strategies of Reckoning

With so many questions raised around the question of how one defines oneself, we should explore potential strategies to help us navigate such complex issues.

Dialogue with Witnesses

From Germany to Ukraine, several initiatives seek to engage with traumatic past experiences by making sure that the voices of witnesses are heard and that those in need to understand have the opportunity to engage with survivors of war and of authoritarian regimes. In an era in which we are flooded with questionable information and perspectives on both our past and present, remembering the past might help us set the course in our understanding of history – what was it like to live in East Germany before the fall of the Iron Curtain and how did people live with the omnipresent secret police? What does it mean to be on the frontline of the war in Donbass and how does a civilian in need cross the frontier?

Open up the Space for Dialogue

Another similar strategy of dealing with identity is to open up spaces for dialogue that would require us to listen more, to understand the numerous potential conflicts at both the national and supranational level as well as the collective and personal ones, their context and values. Creating spaces for people to open up would require a certain amount of compassion that one would need to find in listening to ideas one might not agree with as well

as making attempts to relate to personal processes one would most likely be unfamiliar with. Such an experience would also require to account for how different individuals relate to certain political and social processes and our very different ways of internalizing them.

Conclusion: Coping with the “In Between”

As much as identity is belonging – to a group, to a place, or to an idea – a notable takeaway is the need to negotiate the “in between” of what we define ourselves to be. Some would call this process a “softening” of definition, something that is a personal as well as a group process. The strategies mentioned above might lead us to less restrictive definitions that would allow us to engage with others, ever hopeful that they would consider and be willing to act in a similar manner. They too might be in search to associate themselves with a success story.



© Lubov Cheresh

About the author

Mădălina Mocan is a researcher affiliated with the Center for the Study of Democracy and political theory teaching assistant at Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca (Romania). She previously served as the executive director of the Ratiu Center for Democracy in Romania, an organization focused on developing democratic practices and defending human rights.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By Nora Korte

This collection of papers on “Challenges of Transition in Eastern Europe: Lessons for Civic Education” aimed at capturing the key challenges of transition in Eastern Europe, their impact on today’s state of democracy in the region and the implications for civic education. For practitioners of civic education these topics are of specific urgency, as democratic practices do not function without educated, motivated and engaged/active citizens. What are the topics that societies in transition are coping with and what are the lessons we can draw from them?

“Challenges of Transition” can be found on different levels in society and must be assessed in different ways. On a state level, this concerns the economic difficulties these countries are experiencing as well as issues of demographics, emigration and brain-drain from the regions in transition. Additionally, the limited official or societal prevailing narratives of memory of the 1990s and early 2000s, often do not correspond with the individual experiences of many people. It concerns the functioning of institutions, the distribution of power, the allocation of goods – all aspects that had to be completely remodelled after the collapse of communism.

On a social level, most challenges were found with regard to social segregation and polarization between different groups, the nostalgic idealization of undemocratic regimes, capturing of information space and a high number of polarized debates as well as the East-West divide and the growing political gap between generations. On a personal level, the transformation remains an inner journey or struggle for millions of people. It is connected with personal trauma in countries that experienced war or severe economic scarcities in

the 1990s, with self-reclusion and consumerism, nostalgia of the past, a generational divide and fragmented identities.

These factors combined encourage a more polarized, antagonistic and populist public debate, people being in favour of a “strong state” or leader, cause a low level of civic engagement, nationalism, a lower threshold for violence – in short: a fertile ground for authoritarianism and reactionary political forces. What can society and what can civic education do to oppose these developments? How can a culture of dialogue, trust and compromise be developed? And how can a truly and sustainable democratic society be created that goes beyond the principle of majority rule?

A number of propositions repeatedly came up in the texts of our authors. On the one hand, they referred to how the transformation period should be more accurately conveyed in formal and non-formal education, while on the other, how a transitioning society can answer to challenges of democracy it encounters. Both aspects are interconnected, as without an understanding and an open discussion on transition new democratic societies cannot be build. At the *state and social level*, the recommendations were:

- Widening the public discourse on transition by fostering a culture of dialogue and debate in the political and societal sphere, giving room for both positive and negative narratives;
- Equal development of all territories of a country concerned (e.g. rural areas, smaller and bigger cities) and of all sectors of the population;
- Provision of trainings on the code of conduct for state officials in public service institutions, as this is where trust in institutions and the state is rooted;
- Strengthening the role of civil society and having the support of NGOs for civic educations in schools, in particular on difficult topics and experiences of the transition period;

The state is responsible for creating a framework that allows for open public discourse, democratic procedures and strong civic engagement. The main work on civic education should happen in public schools. The recommendations for *formal education* were:

- Including the topics of transition in the official curricula, teacher trainings and courses on history as well as in school debates;
- Including active democratic procedures in schools, i.e. introducing participatory budgets for students, and fostering a culture of dialogue and compromise in classes;
- Developing key social and civic competences as well as critical thinking;
- Promoting student mobility and exchange programs, in particular in other countries with transition experiences.

Furthermore, challenges of transition should be processed in non-formal civic education as well, as the local/community level plays an essential role for a functioning democratic society. Recommendations for *non-formal education and civil society actors* are:

- To launch non-formal educational programs aimed at transmitting knowledge and initiating the discussion of issues on experiences of transition and its political and societal implications at the regional, national and international level. This includes pointing to the support needed from municipal, regional and national level;
- Small scale and sustainable neighbourhood projects in order to foster social cohesion and a constructive way of handling fragmentation and frictions in society, especially in regions negatively impacted economically by the transition processes;
- Focusing on dialogue and debate, creating spaces for people of different social and generational backgrounds to exchange views and ideas on challenges caused by historical experiences

and transition as well as by actual controversial events (e.g. immigration and emigration),

- Integrating personal stories and “actual life events” to depict the recent history (“personalization of the past”, “dialogue with witnesses”) and enhance a sensitive and complex societal memory, using different media, such as theatre, exhibitions, online formats etc.

All recommendations have in common the fact that they emphasize the role of communication and interaction between people in general, amongst different social groups and across borders.

The project “Generation of Transition” aimed to contribute to this aspect by creating an international dialogue and exchange on the experiences of transition in countries of Eastern Europe. The political developments in the past years have shown that democracy is neither set in stone nor that establishing it is a one-way street. The unprocessed trauma of transition is one of the major reasons democracy is under threat today in the countries of the post-socialist space and across Europe. Active dealing with the past in all of its facets, including an open discussion on the controversial aspects of the experience of transition as well as reconciling with it must thus be the task of a European civic education – without any further delay.

About the author

Nora Korte, works as a project coordinator on youth and education for DRA e.V. (Germany). From 2013 to 2017, she lived in Moscow where she headed the German-Russian Forum’s office at the Embassy of Germany. She studied political science, journalism and literature in Berlin, Moscow and Copenhagen and taught political science and media studies at the Moscow Institute of International Relations and managed the “German Studies Russia” program for Freie Universität Berlin.

Acknowledgements

The Transition Dialogue Network was made possible with the support of the German Federal Agency of Civic Education (bpb). We would like to especially thank Thomas Krüger, President of bpb and Christoph Müller-Hofstede, consultant and Networking European Citizenship Education (NECE) Coordinator on behalf of bpb. In addition, we would also like to thank Caroline Hornstein Tomić – at the time Head of the Operative Department at bpb – who was essential in initiating the network.



Transition Dialogue 2019-2021. Dealing with change in democratic ways.

Transition Dialogue is a programme that since 2015 has developed a network all over Central and Eastern Europe, and currently works with partner organisations from seven countries. The Transition Dialogue Network consists of civil society representatives and practitioners of historical and civic education who take a closer look at public discourse around transition after 1989/1991 and how it finds its way into education both inside and outside the classroom. Its goal is to come to a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the impact of transition on communities both locally and internationally, and to use the findings to provide new methods and tools for civic education in the future.

Core partners:

DRA e.V., Germany, www.austausch.org

Sofia Platform, Bulgaria, www.sofiaplatform.org

Foundation Wissen am Werk/ znanje na djelu, Croatia, znanjenadjelu.hr

Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Croatia, www.pilar.hr

Open Lithuania Foundation, Lithuania, of.lt/en

Center for Citizenship Education, Poland, gowna.ceo.org.pl/english

Permer Centre for Civic Education and Human Rights, Russia, www.cgo.perm.ru

Congress of Cultural Activists/ Association of Active Citizens, Ukraine,
www.culturalactivism.org

Partners

DRA e.V., Germany



The DRA e.V. is an international non-profit organization originally founded in 1992 as the German-Russian Exchange. Together with its partner organization, the German-Russian Exchange in St. Petersburg and numerous partners in Germany, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and various other European countries, the DRA e.V. works to establish a strong civil society in both the East and the West. The organization facilitates the creation of networks between different sections of society – civil society actors, state and educational institutions, scientific and religious groups. In cooperation with partners, the DRA e.V. organises advanced trainings and other educational projects related to a range of areas, including freedom of the press, promotion of small businesses, memory politics, civic education, conflict prevention, organizational development and the environment. The DRA e.V. is one of the founding NGOs of the CivilM+ platform for conflict resolution in Donbas.

For more information please see: www.austausch.org.

Sofia Platform, Bulgaria



Sofia Platform

The Sofia Platform Foundation is a non-governmental organization focused on enhancing democratic political culture with the means of informal civic education. At the same time it is informing the debate on historical legacy, transition and democracy consolidation through research, public dialogue and discussions. The Sofia Platform Foundation promotes remembrance and dealing with the recent past through methods of historical dialogue, education and teacher trainings. On the local level, it supports the development of capacities and skills of individuals and organizations to strengthen their active citizenship. Internationally, the work of the Sofia Platform Foundation focuses amongst others on developing education materials on communism and transition in Eastern Europe as well as civic education materials for hard-to-reach learners.

For more information please see: www.sofiaplatform.org.

The Transition Dialogue Network is funded by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education



There are huge differences in the way Eastern European countries experienced the transition from communism to democracy. There are stories of rapid progress and of persisting stagnation; of reconciliation and of war; of gain and of loss; of new mobility and of enduring restriction; of democratization and of democratic recession. None of these countries seem to have come to terms with their past.

As part of the programme “Transition Dialogue” historians and political scientists have come together with educators, civil society representatives, NGOs and think-tanks from across Central and Eastern Europe. They shared their ideas about the consequences of the insufficient or non-existent attempts to deal with the past, which forms an important part of the process of democratization. The following publication compiles the results of these meetings and the recommendations for civic education as a means to improve democracy in the region. It captures the key challenges of transition, its impact on today’s state of democracy, and the subsequent implications for civic education.



WWW.TRANSTITION-DIALOGUE.ORG

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/TRANSITIONDIALOGUE