

## **MAPPINGS OF THE TRANSITIONAL DIALOGUE PROJECT: WHAT IS MISSING?**

### **TRANSITIONAL DIALOGUE PROJECT MAPPING**

- Review of the school textbooks used in the seven countries from the region of Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Ukraine), representative for their historical experience of transition.
- Bulgaria: for a negotiated character of its initial transition;
- Poland: for the region of Central Europe, regarded as the most successful in terms of institutional transition.
- Croatia and Lithuania: new national states, established as a result of the collapse of communism, which clearly refocuses also the understanding of transition.
- This brief review of the understanding of the transition is posed in the context of the existing in the political science explanations but is based primarily on the review of the school textbooks used in those countries.
- It means that this review should be understood as representative for the practical application of the term “transition” and processes associated with it.

### **WHAT DOES “TRANSITION” MEAN? THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING**

- Today the concept of "transition" and its content remains as controversial as it was 30 years ago. The term “transition” initially was introduced in political science, and then quickly became popular in the everyday language. Three main schools in the research body:
  - 'Transitological school' in the 1980s was aiming at developing a theoretical model of the dependencies during transitions from authoritarian and military dictatorships to democracy in Latin America and East Asia.
  - The school of 'revolutionists' acknowledges the negotiated nature of the transitions across Eastern Europe, the thinkers of this school mostly focus on the internal forces and factors that compelled the communist parties to share power and subsequently step down.
  - 'Transformationists': Following Huntington's typology of the "third wave of democratization," this group of researchers includes, above all, those who focus on the agreements initiated by the elites, but also on the so-called "rearrangement", i.e. on agreements between the ruling party and the opposition, e.g. through "round tables".
- Major criticism of the term “transition” both of the research body and theories of democratization lies in the neglect of the soft areas and those difficult to measure, issues such as how the shifts from totalitarian to a democratic political culture take place.
- As an answer to those new challenges, consensus emerged regarding the context-sensitivity when looking at post-communist transitions/ democratization.

## TRANSITION TO WHAT? PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

- The term transition as it is used in the textbooks refers to the transition from totalitarianism (authoritarianism) and a state-controlled economy to a democratic pluralistic system and a private market economy. 30 years after the collapse of the communism both textbooks and public perceptions tend to reevaluate the goals, dimensions, and results of transition from the perspective of the later processes.
- **The goal:** establishment of liberal democratic state or only the restoration of national dignity. (The second view was predominant in Russia from the very beginning, but in the countries in Central and Eastern Europe the goal for restoration of national dignity initially was perceived as secondary to the liberalization of societies).
- **Dimensions:**
  - First was democratization of political process and creation of classical liberal democratic states.
  - The other dimension was economical with emphasis on the privatization and opening of the economies. The problem is that quite often criteria for the success of those reforms were imposed by the international financial institutions and thus both at the time of their implementation and today they are subject to criticism that reforms were imposed externally and superficially, without taking into account the specific situation in each country.
- Measuring the success of the political reforms depends on the expectations but also on the ultimate goal of “transition”, usually set by politicians.

## WHAT IS MISSING: THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING.

- **Who benefited from transition (winners and losers from transition):** In the context of peaceful transition, in which the representatives of the old elites retained certain representation and influence, and the process was accompanied by a large-scale change of ownership, the social perception of those who benefitted from transition is related to the understanding which social group benefited mostly from the newly available opportunities. It can even be summarized that the more gradual the transition happened, the longer and therefore more sustainable the presence of those old elites in the country has been.
- **The question of social status:** Privatization and political transformation were accompanied by rapid changes in the overall societies. Many social groups, most notably among them the pensioners, but also whole regions that were depopulated as the result of the changing economic geography, changed or lost their social status in comparison with communism.
- **The problem of the rule of law:** Is transition fair and can it be fair at all? The very emergence of these questions was indicative for the lack of justice in society.
- **Technological revolution** and the radical change in the way public opinion is formed and expressed: greater visibility and influence of radical ideas and theories, often combined with conspiracy theories.

## TEXTBOOKS: CHRONOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY

- **Division of narratives:** The search for general, socially accepted explanations of transition as a common process in the region became a hopeless task. Each country has its own understanding and controversies about transition.
- **There is not even a consensus on the term:** In Germany and Croatia the term “change” or “turning point” is more popular. In other countries, the common term for the post-communist period is "transition". In textbooks in Russia the term "transition" is not mentioned.
- **There is no dispute when this process started:** The beginning was the end of the communist system, defined by the events important for the respective country. In Germany it is defined by the growing dissident movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the long-awaited prospect of the unification of East and West Germany
- **In each country emphasis is laid depending on the specific features there.** In Germany, the debate on "change" takes place against the background of the discussion whether a comparison between National Socialism during World War II and communism in East Germany is correct. In Ukraine, the public and textbooks are trying to explain the reason why the superficial liberalization of socio-political and economic processes did not lead to the formation of a firm institutional base and establishment of a sustainable and mature democracy.

## TEXTBOOKS: “BLIND SPOTS”

- Topics omitted or only mentioned in the textbooks are the most traumatic issues in society. No public consensus exists on those topics and therefore the curricula and authors of the textbooks try to avoid them. In Germany, for example, the topic of privatization is mentioned, but in most cases the emphasis is laid on the inevitability of its implementation. In the same way, the topic of privatization is mentioned, but without being seriously discussed, in textbooks in Bulgaria.
- Although social change during the transitional period is particularly addressed, textbooks avoid the question of how fair the transition process has been, but also the problem for rule of law, which is the most debated aspect of transition today. Concentrated on successful reforms and integration into NATO and the EU, textbooks avoid addressing the emergence of new public elites.
- There are similar gaps in textbooks in Croatia, which again do not talk about the ways of privatization and its consequences, nor does it discuss the emergence of civil society. Significant gaps exist also in current Polish textbooks, where the role of Lech Walesa and other important figures in the movement is omitted or seems underestimated. In Lithuania the country is presented as undergoing a unique transformation, as a result of which other countries in Eastern Europe with a key role in the transition were missing.

- In Russia the 1990s are presented as a dark, gloomy, terrible period, dominated by crime, declining living standards and collapse of the economy, weak authorities, who adhered to the political interests of the “enemy”. Against the backdrop of the 1990s, the changes of the 2000s are presented as intended for strengthening state power, with a goal of real 'resurrection of Russia'.

#### **TEXTBOOKS: “BLIND SPOTS”**

- It can be summarized that in each country the transition or change is focused on events within the country, often presented without the wider context of the region. (Insofar as these events are considered in a broader context, it is related to the European Union).
- This is an important omission, since the national focus of the history textbooks (inevitable to some extent) is a reason why the success or failure in the reforms in the country are considered as a unique experience, not comparable to the other countries in the region. A student in Croatia or Bulgaria, for example, hardly could realize that the issue of privatization in the 1990s is a hot topic for discussion even in Germany, which is presented in their textbooks as unquestionably positive example.
- The other general omission, characteristic for textbooks in all countries in the region, is the problem of globalization and consequences from the technological revolution of the late 1990s.

#### **CONCLUSION: “DEPROVINCIALIZATION” OR “DENATIONALIZATION” OF TRANSITION**

- This is possible path not only to democratization the discourses, presented in the textbooks but also to better understand the processes that were common and developed simultaneously in all post-communist countries.
- Viewing those processes in the broader historical and regional context would prove that the transition turned out to be more difficult than expected, but also that its successes became possible mainly as a result of the citizens' engagement in that process.
- No one could claim persuasively that transition in Eastern Europe was fair for everyone, but it undoubtedly led to the improvement of life of the whole region and in that sense the whole civic power, that has been invested in that process, did not remain in vain.