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History's Debris. The Many Pasts in the Post-1989 Present

Abstract. The article is a reassessment of the aftermaths of the events of 1989 in (South-) Eastern Europe. It supplements the well-worn debate pitting civil vs. uncivil society with examinations of the role nationalism has played in the formerly socialist bloc and of the (self-) identification practices within the region's societies. Here I map the various postcommunist legacies that have affected the region's countries. Grand explanations of the upheaval of 1989 tend to obscure and simplify the continuities that have extended beyond this threshold year. Common trends within the region, which often remain hidden in the long shadow of 1989, may explain contemporary tensions between the revival of civic mobilization and the rise of populism. I conclude that only by clearing history's debris—from before and after 1989—will we understand the nature and identity of the 'we' who claim, contest, or (increasingly seldom) celebrate this *annus mirabilis*.

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Introduction

A good quarter-century after the *annus mirabilis* 1989, one should not explain the collapse of communist regimes exclusively via the antagonism of party versus society—or in terms of the debate, as it has habitually been called in recent years, between the opposed paradigms of civil society and uncivil society.¹ In what follows I will revisit this latter scholarly trend by comparatively analysing the connections between state socialist conceptualizations of national community and the politics of the communist past. I believe that these two issues can better explain not the events of 1989 in themselves, but rather the tribulations in their wake. I take the pre-1989 past to be a factor that helps clarify the region's present difficulties with pluralism, representation, and tolerance.

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The article tentatively maps out some defining features of the baggage that former socialist countries have carried with them in the aftermath of 1989. I argue that if one gets caught up in the 'civil versus uncivil society' polemic, one risks missing the impact of deeper pasts, pre- and post-1945, on postsocialist developments and their ongoing resilience in the present. In addition, going beyond grand but reductive explanations for 1989 enables the identification of trends common to communist rule as it was experienced in the region's states. Last but not least, the continuities that have often remained hidden in the long shadow of 1989 might explain contemporary tensions between the revival of civic mobilization and the rise of populism.

My approach's originality consists in its reinterpretation of the pre-1989 period, which breaks the polemical duality between the terms of the civil/uncivil paradigm. I dispel this limiting conceptual opposition by drawing attention to the persistent ambiguity and overlap of the two notions themselves. On the one hand, the practices of mobilization and identification during state socialisms' autochthonizations created civic-political aggregations across societies rather than simply fuelling oppositions between party and people. On the other hand, the relationship of the past decade's mass protests to 1989 exemplifies how a reading of these developments informed by the past muddies the waters of our understanding of postsocialism. Since 2006, we have witnessed public demonstrations that reinforce authoritarian/populist tendencies in several of the region's states. At the same time, other movements have revitalized the principle of an active citizenry that seeks to counterbalance cronyism and corruption in these countries.

Another note should be made here. Conscientiousness about the past's continuing role in the present notwithstanding, one cannot ignore an odd concurrence of new, populist tendencies among some of the new EU members and the radical right's continued strength on the continent as a whole, as evinced, for example, in the 2014 European parliamentary elections.² One sees here how contemporary European countries are showing fatigue with democracy, are still dealing with the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis, and are beset with anti-immigration politics and hysteria; EU institutions and decision-making processes are undergoing steady de-legitimization. One political scientist has even warned about 'normative disintegration': the slow erosion of EU values and norms.³

² Cas Mudde has convincingly rejected the idea that the elections of 2014 represent 'a political earthquake' caused by the gains of the far right. But he has acknowledged that it brought 'local shocks'. Cas Mudde, Local Shocks. The Far Right in the 2014 European Elections, *Eurozine*, 13 March 2015, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2015-03-13-mudde-en.html>. All internet sources were accessed on 12 May 2016.

³ Jan-Werner Müller, Europe's Twin Dangers. Normative Disintegration, Normative Disengagement, *Eurozine*, 14 November 2014, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-11-14-muller-en.html>.

Civil Versus Uncivil Society

In 2010, the editors of the *Journal of Democracy* remarked that at a remove of two decades from 1989, 'transitions to (electoral) democracy' in Eastern Europe 'have largely been a success story—the consolidation of democracy much less so'.⁴ For a while, explanations about success in these two areas were tied to arguments concerning the difference between countries where civil society (and, implicitly, dissent) had been strong and had challenged the party state and those where it had been weak and unorganized. In the latter cases, elites from the party's second and third echelons had monopolized the transition process. Thus Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (belonging to the former category) made the initial transformation to liberal democracy, a market economy, and, ultimately, the adoption of an *acquis communautaire* much more rapidly than Romania, Bulgaria, or Slovakia (which belong to the latter group). But apparently around 2006 the 'era of liberal ascendancy that began in 1989 has now come to an end'.⁵

At that time the region looked increasingly more uniform, as most of the former communist states had joined the EU and, negatively, the outcry of 'revolution betrayed' became ever louder from Poland to Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The economic crisis only accentuated the waves of dissatisfaction. The politics of the communist past informed these trends and in many cases veiled the resurgence of ethnocentric martyrologies. Such currents, which persist to this day, reflect two grand narratives of postcommunism: the negation of the scale and even the revolutionary nature of change represented by the events of 1989, and the persistence or the return of 'fantasies of salvation'⁶ derived from the politicization of the past.

The widespread 'revolution betrayed' sentiment brings us to the civil vs. uncivil society debate. Two of the most important authors in this scholarly discussion have adamantly maintained that 1989 was revolutionary. Vladimir Tismaneanu, often associated with the civil society school—though he accepted the other side's main points⁷—has insisted that

'the upheaval in the East, and primarily in the Central European core countries, represented a series of political revolutions that led to the decisive and irrevers-

⁴ Democracy's Past and Future, *Journal of Democracy* 21, No. 1 (January 2010), 2-5, 3, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Editors-Intro-21-1.pdf>.

⁵ Ivan Krastev, Democracy's 'Doubles', *Journal of Democracy* 17, No. 2 (April 2006), 52-62, 52, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Krastev-17-2.pdf>.

⁶ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation. Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe*, Princeton 1998.

⁷ Tismaneanu returned to the 'civil society' narrative in Vladimir Tismaneanu, Revisiting 1989, in: Vladimir Tismaneanu / Bogdan C. Iacob, eds, *The End and the Beginning. The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History*, New York, Budapest 2012, 15-33.

ible transformation of the existing order. Instead of autocratic, one-party systems, the revolutions created emerging pluralist polities. They allowed the citizens of ideologically driven tyrannies (closed societies) to recover their main human and civic rights and to engage in the building of open societies. Moreover, instead of centrally planned command economies, after 1989, all these societies have embarked on creating market economies.⁸

He did insert the caveat that ‘in these efforts to meet the triple challenge (creating political pluralism, a market economy, and a public sphere, i.e. a civil society) some succeeded better and faster than others’.⁹

In his turn, Stephen Kotkin, the author of *The Uncivil Society*, emphatically declared in 2013 that

‘1989 was a revolution. Communist party political monopolies were dissolved. Communist economic systems were dismantled. Civil societies became possible. Whatever the ongoing disappointments, legal private property, legal markets, legal non-Communist assembly, non-Communist judiciaries, and much else came into existence—a profound turnabout. Important aspects of this transition did not begin in 1989, but 1989 accelerated and radically deepened the changes.’¹⁰

So why does the sense of revolutionary change seem to have faded in the former socialist bloc? One explanation lies in the inevitable waning of exhilaration, as simplistic narratives of civic virtue have shown to be of limited plausibility or usefulness. Consider the basic civil society argument. According to this line of thinking, anticommunist dissidents, in their fight against communist regimes, managed to carve out an autonomous space in the public sphere that was freed from the control of the communist authorities; they gradually enlarged its scope and ultimately subverted the totalitarian state’s system of rule, which led to the state’s collapse. Moreover, with the demise of the party-state this alternative conception of society—embracing enhanced openness, societal pluralism, and democratic political participation—provided an overarching framework to shape societal transformation in the postcommunist countries.¹¹

Nevertheless, developments of the past decade in Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland have worryingly shown that these countries’ decision-makers and public spheres have difficulties dealing with pluralism, the rule of law, and democratic participation. From Riga to Sofia, from Warsaw to Bucharest, massive public demonstrations contesting the postsocialist establishment have rocked most of the countries in the region. These waves of protest can be

⁸ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Devil in History. Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*, Berkeley, London 2012, 202-203.

⁹ Tismaneanu, *The Devil in History*, 203.

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, No Answer (For the Economic Dynamism and Civic Freedoms of Post-WWII Europe), *East Central Europe* 40, No. 1-2 (2013), 174-182, 176.

¹¹ Constantin Iordachi, The Collapse of Communist Regimes. Civil Versus Uncivil Societies, *East Central Europe* 40, No. 1-2 (2013), 141-149.

tied to structural disruptions caused by the economic crisis, but they have also been characterized as manifestations of 'the frustration of the empowered'.¹²

Unsurprisingly, their political character can be read, from case to case, from year to year, in contrasting ways. On the one hand, civic mobilizations in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia have been profoundly antiliberal. Viktor Orbán's policies have become a model for a new authoritarianism based on the consolidation of an antidemocratic and ethnonationalist 'parallel polis'.¹³ On the other hand, more recent, student-based antigovernment demonstrations in Sofia, Bucharest, and Budapest are often presented as new forms of anti-politics that fundamentally reject the cronyism and corruption of their respective postsocialist political systems.¹⁴ The jury is still out as to whether this revival of civil society discourse will find more lasting political expression and imagine alternatives to the status quo and its political-economic fault lines. What these two strands in the interpretation of mass protests suggest is the fundamental ambiguity of civil society as a concept with which to understand change after 1989.

Present conditions, as well as the periodic tribulations of state socialism's aftermath over the last quarter-century, seem connected to what many authors have identified as the postcommunist polities' inability to make 1989 their founding moment. It seems that in these societies the pacted transition, one of the defining features of the *annus mirabilis*, was the crux of the problem. Even where there was violence, in the immediate aftermath the former regime's representatives negotiated with individuals who were either perceived as their anticommunist opponents or had come to the fore during the violent confrontations. For example, in Romania, one of the sources of legitimacy for the National Salvation Front—the self-proclaimed revolutionary successor to the Romanian Communist Party—was the idea that its leadership epitomized a national consensus.¹⁵

¹² Ivan Krastev, Why Bulgaria's Protests Stand Out in Europe, *The Guardian*, 30 July 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/30/bulgaria-protests-europe>.

¹³ Balázs Trencsényi, From Goulash-Communism to Goulash-Authoritarianism?, *Tr@nsit Online*, 2013, <http://www.iwm.at/read-listen-watch/transit-online/from-goulash-communism-to-goulash-authoritarianism/>.

¹⁴ Tom Junes, Students Take Bulgaria's Protests to the Next Level. Can They Break the Political Stalemate?, *Tr@nsit Online*, 2013, <http://www.iwm.at/read-listen-watch/transit-online/students-take-bulgarias-protests-to-the-next-level-why-the-student-protests-could-break-the-political-stalemate/>; Agnes Gagyi, Smartphones and the European Flag. The New Hungarian Demonstrations for Democracy, *LeftEast*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/smartphones-and-eu-flag-hungarian-demos-for-democracy/>; Agnes Gagyi, Social Movement Studies for East Central Europe? The Challenge of a Time-Space Bias on Postwar Western Societies, *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, No. 3 (2015), 16-36, http://intersections.tk.mta.hu/index.php/intersections/article/view/93/pdf_18.

¹⁵ Peter Siani-Davis, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*, Ithaca, London 2007, 206-207.

In other words, 1989 fell prey to its own success. As Jacques Rupnik put it, 'no one pines for communism to come back, but it is clear that democracy can no longer derive its legitimacy from 1989 and the overwhelming rejection of the old regime which that year witnessed'.¹⁶

Rupnik drives home his point:

'In Poland, the twentieth anniversary of the (nearly) free elections of 4 June 1989 was marked by three separate ceremonies held in three different cities. One featured President Lech Kaczyński, one was overseen by Premier Donald Tusk, and the third was held at parliament in Warsaw. In Hungary, the twentieth anniversary of the May 1989 opening of the border with Austria passed with a notable lack of public fervor and the conspicuous absence from any observance of the main opposition leader, Viktor Orbán.'¹⁷

As would be expected, the anniversaries of 1989's events in Romania are hardly joyous occasions because of the violence and bloodshed—1,104 dead, 3,352 wounded—that marked the toppling of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. Matters are further complicated by huge blank spots with regard to these victims: details are often unclear, as is the determination of those responsible for the casualties. Most (942 dead, 2,245 wounded) fell victim after 22 December, when Ceaușescu fled Bucharest, his apparatus in ruins.

Here is where the uncivil society explanation provides helpful insights. According to Stephen Kotkin, communism's demise was a collapse of the establishments across the former Soviet bloc, an implosion caused by three factors: the 'structural incompetence' of the regimes' elites; the chronic weakness of state socialisms as social systems when compared with the states of the West, which displayed tremendous economic and democratic success, especially from the 1970s onwards; and the inability of these polities to renew themselves.¹⁸ Kotkin has estimated that these illiberal elites, along with their families, represented around 5 to 7% of the population. To stress the widespread consciousness of moral bankruptcy and demoralization in these uncivil societies, he went so far as to state that 'they might have folded even without the people testing their mettle by demonstrating en masse'.¹⁹

But can the influence and presence of former nomenklatura members among new economic and political transitional elites explain the difficulties besetting democratic consolidation and pluralistic stability in Eastern European societies? Indeed, the early literature on elite conversion pointed to the reproduction of selection mechanisms based upon the preexisting networks of the former com-

¹⁶ Jacques Rupnik, Twenty Years of Postcommunism. In Search of a New Model, *Journal of Democracy* 21, No. 1 (January 2010), 106.

¹⁷ Rupnik, Twenty Years of Postcommunism, 105.

¹⁸ Stephen Kotkin, *The Uncivil Society. 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, New York 2009.

¹⁹ Kotkin, *No Answer*, 178.

munist parties.²⁰ At the same time, though, Victor Orbán was among the main figures of 1989 in Hungary. Robert Fico was a nonexistent character in the story of that year: in 2000, just as he was about to found Direction—Social Democracy (*Smer-sociálna demokracia*, Smer-SD), he notoriously remarked, 'I did not notice the revolution'.²¹ Former Romanian prime minister Victor Ponta was seventeen at the time. In Poland, the Kaczyński brothers were part of one faction within the wider Solidarity movement, but directed many of their attacks against Lech Wałęsa. The Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) has tried to delegitimize Wałęsa because of his position as symbol of the Round Table and 'founding father' of the Third Republic, which PiS rejects altogether.²² Generally speaking, behind the civil vs. uncivil society debate there lie more complex realities that both sides overlook.

Communism as Civilizational and National Reality

The communist historical experience has long been presented in Eastern European public discourse as either an interlude or a parenthesis. In both dissident and general narratives, the end of state socialism marked a 'return to Europe', which meant a return to normalcy. But the latter condition was also projected into the past. In this interpretative key, state socialism became

'a historical distortion, an interlude, an aberration from the supposed natural path of history [...]. The obvious advantage of this interlude theory is that depicting the whole period as the result of foreign interference somehow helps to exculpate both the ordinary citizen and the cultural and political elites from their responsibility for the communist dictatorship.'²³

²⁰ For example, the paradigmatic special issue by Ivan Szelényi and Szonja Szelényi, Circulation or Reproduction of Elites during the Postcommunist Transformation of Eastern Europe, *Theory and Society* 24, No. 5 (1995), 615-638, <https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1995-806-29-Szelenyi.pdf>; cf. also Mladen Lazić, ed, New Economic Elites in Serbia, special section in *Südosteuropa. Journal of Politics and Society* 63, No. 4 (2015).

²¹ Carol Skalnik Leff / Kevin Deegan-Krause / Sharon L. Wolchik, I Ignored Your Revolution, But You Forgot My Anniversary. Party Competition in Slovakia and the Construction of Recollection, in: Michael Bernhard / Jan Kubik, eds, *Twenty Years After Communism. The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford, New York 2014, 111.

²² Andrzej Paczkowski, Twenty-Five Years 'After' — The Ambivalence of Settling Accounts with Communism. The Polish Case, in: Vladimir Tismaneanu / Bogdan C. Iacob, eds, *Remembrance, History, and Justice. Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies*, New York, Budapest 2015, 239-256, 250-255.

²³ Michal Kopeček, In Search of 'National Memory'. The Politics of History, Nostalgia and the Historiography of Communism in the Czech Republic and East Central Europe, in: Michal Kopeček, ed, *Past in the Making. Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*, New York, Budapest 2008, 75-92, 75.

What such a reading ignores is that the social utopia institutionalized in the Soviet Union and then exported to Eastern Europe represented a new form of civilization, with its own alignment of property relations, political institutions, and culture. It was nothing less than a new way of life. Within this reality, socialist citizens were provided specific identities which could secure acceptance from the regime, and they themselves nurtured these identities. They were rooted in political practices that dovetailed with the state's interests and methods of rule.²⁴ This interpretation offers a conception of participatory (post)stalinism that strikes a balance between collective trauma and inclusive coexistence. It allows researchers to integrate into their analyses not only repression, the ubiquity of the party and of the secret police, and propaganda's societal pervasiveness, but also the emancipatory potential of socialist modernization, de-radicalization, and the nationalization of individual regimes, as well as their relative legitimacy.

Furthermore, within this narrative framework, the sovietization of Eastern Europe cannot simply be described as the transplantation or imposition of a set of policies that transformed satellite states. The Soviet bloc as it came to be was also the result of a civilizational transfer that 'acquired, in some cases, a life of its own'.²⁵ To take my point further, after 1956—that is, after Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality—'self-Sovietization'²⁶ morphed into an autochtonization of the local regimes, which often presupposed a hybrid form: the developmental objectives of individual state socialisms' were merged with re-appropriated pre-1945 indigenous traditions (political, cultural, economic, and social).

These two characterizations of the communist experience (as civilization and as autochtonization) radically alter how collective and individual identities between 1945/1948 and 1989 may be perceived. One can pinpoint four interconnected trajectories of identification with the party-state: 1) belief in communism as ideology; 2) legitimation through nationhood; 3) adaptation to a welfare dictatorship; 4) opportunism. These factors significantly burden the horizon

²⁴ Stephen Kotkin, *The Magnetic Mountain*, Berkeley/CA 1995, 225-237. For further commentary on this view, cf. also Astrid Hadin, *Stalinism as a Civilization. New Perspectives on Communist Regimes*, *Political Studies Review* 2, No. 2 (April 2004), 166-184, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1478-9299.2004.00006.x/pdf>.

²⁵ E. A. Rees, Introduction. *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe*, in: Balázs Apór / Péter Apór / A. E. Rees, eds, *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe. New Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, Washington/DC 2008, 1-28, 25. In the same volume also cf. Tarik Cyril Amar, *Sovietization as a Civilizing Mission in the West*, 29-45. On the nature of Sovietization cf. Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed, *Stalinism Revisited. The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, Budapest, New York, 2009.

²⁶ John Connelly, *Captive Universities. The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education 1945-1956*, Chapel Hill/N.C., London 2000, 45; also Norman Naimark, *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe*, in: Melvyn P. Leffler / Odd Arne Westad, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Vol. I: Origins*, Cambridge 2010, 175-197, 195-197.

of motivation for members of civil and uncivil societies alike. In fact, in these instances they reveal a mass, situated between those in the nomenklatura's top echelons and a small group of dissidents, isolated and always under heavy surveillance. From such a vantage point, this majority's potential motivations and socializations appear to be geared predominantly towards the system's reproduction rather than its destruction.

Nationalism

How does this 'discovery' of a mass that needs to be acknowledged and more thoroughly considered affect our understanding of 1989 and its aftermaths? Referring to the massive demonstrations in East Germany and Czechoslovakia during the fall of 1989, political scientist Valerie Bunce has argued that these protests were 'strongly influenced by the merger among nation, sovereignty, and regime change'.²⁷ The appeal of Solidarity in Poland, for example, 'reflected not just the unwillingness of both the Polish and the Soviet leaders to crack down on rebellious Poles and to impose hardline stalinization, but also the capacity of nationalism to forge Polish unity'.²⁸ The subtext of these two statements is the exhaustion, in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, of the four trajectories of identification and the possibility that systemic transformation in 1989 could revitalize resources for national and individual selves. And yet the forms of socialization under communism could not just disappear into thin air. Indeed, 'mental maps endure—inherited understandings of the essence of political justice, of how the world functions, of who is trying to exploit whom and how, do not disappear as rapidly as metaphors such as "collapse" seem to imply'.²⁹ A democratic 1989 was possible even without democrats, so it seems. However, the consolidation of what had been achieved presupposed a difficult equilibrium, because the political, economic, civic, and cultural starting points for any mode of postsocialism had already been determined by pre-1989 identity-building processes.³⁰ Moreover, if looking to history to (partially) explain postsocialism, one should adopt more of a *longue durée* perspective and turn one's eyes towards both pre- and post-1945 pasts.³¹

²⁷ Valerie Bunce, The National Idea. Imperial Legacies and Post-Communist Pathways in Eastern Europe, *East European Politics and Societies* 19, No. 3 (July 2005), 404-442, 434.

²⁸ Bunce, The National Idea, 435.

²⁹ Karen Dawisha / Venelin I. Ganey, The Role of Ideas in Post-Communist Politics. A Reevaluation, *East European Politics and Societies* 19, No. 3 (July 2005), 339-342, 342.

³⁰ Jody Laporte / Danielle N. Lussier, What is the Leninist Legacy? Assessing Twenty Years of Scholarship, *Slavic Review* 70, No. 3 (Fall 2011), 637-654.

³¹ Quantitative results along these lines of research are given in Grigore Pop-Eleches, Historical Legacies and Post-Communist Regime Change, *Journal of Politics* 69, No. 4 (November 2007), 908-926; Grigore Pop-Eleches / Joshua A. Tucker, Associated with the Past? Communist

In Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia the succession of disenchantments with social utopia in (depending on the country) 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1980-1981—Solidarity can be seen as the last attempt to hold a party to its promise of a workers' state—generated pragmatization, deideologization, and the pluralization of societies. Moreover, attempts at national-(post)stalinist syntheses in Central Europe ran into difficulties: in Poland such efforts collapsed with Gomulka's fall from power; in Kádár's Hungary and Husák's Czechoslovakia the regimes were not afraid to flex their nationalist muscles, but the events of 1956 and 1968 in these respective countries made legitimization via the nation secondary to legitimization via the economy. Despite a strong ethnic turn in the GDR, the narratives of *Heimat* and antifascism were more important and formative for the polity.

One author judiciously summarized these dialectics of identity: 'communist regimes did not burn their national flags but emblazoned them with communist symbols'.³² Most importantly, though, the building of socialism brought about homogenization. Put another way, "'communist nationalism" and "nationalism after communism" were very different from the nationalisms that existed before communist rule'.³³ I would stress here that the communist experience, far from being an interlude or a parenthesis, *created* the societies of Eastern Europe as we knew them in 1989. Thus their pre-1945 histories could hardly be recuperated in ignorance of the ways that they had filtered through the state socialism period.

A brief review of this issue in Southeastern Europe can be very telling. In Romania, the nation as a master symbol did not appear primarily as a result of a reenchantment with the past. It was presupposed by the assertion of the socialist nation-state's sovereignty. The utopia that was put into practice took on a national mantle. Regression into tradition was a welcome by-product and necessary corollary to the redefinition both of the civilizational agent (from the proletariat to the entire Romanian people) and of the identity of the polity undergoing socialist transformation (the socialist nation-state).³⁴

In Bulgaria, the 1971 constitution made no reference to minorities, and in 1974 its Communist Party introduced the term 'unified Bulgarian socialist nation'. Three years later it declared that Bulgaria consisted almost entirely 'of one eth-

Legacies and Civic Participation in Post-Communist Countries, *East European Politics and Societies* 27, No. 1 (February 2013), 45-68.

³² Martin Mevius, Reappraising Communism and Nationalism, in: Martin Mevius, ed, *The Communist Quest for National Legitimacy in Europe, 1918-1989*, London, New York 2011, 14.

³³ Tchavdar Marinov / Alexander Vezenkov, Communism and Nationalism in the Balkans. Marriage of Convenience or Mutual Attraction?, in: Roumen Daskalov / Diana Mishkova, eds, *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Vol. Two: Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, Leiden, Boston 2014, 470.

³⁴ Vladimir Tismaneanu / Bogdan C. Iacob, Revisiting the Nature and Legacies of the Ceaușescu Regime, in: Tismaneanu / Iacob, eds, *The End and the Beginning*, 331-362.

nic type and is heading towards complete homogeneity'.³⁵ By the 1980s, Todor Živkov attempted to 'bulgarize' the country's Muslim population in an effort to ethnically engineer the society to correspond to the ideological postulates that had been put in place. Similarly, the state-building project in communist Albania was an exercise in national integration. In 1984, Enver Hoxha declared that 'our people's state power and the monolithic unity of our people' were the two main achievements of Albania's Communist Party and of its socialist revolution.³⁶ Only the League of Yugoslav Communists sought to construct a supranational identity based on the 'brotherhood and unity' of the nation's peoples and on the founding narrative of partisan resistance during World War II. This was true until 1974, when the new constitution fundamentally transformed the republics into nationalizing entities within the framework of a multiethnic confederation. This development paved the way for a Serbian counter-reaction to affirm its hegemony as federal ethnic core and to Croatian and Slovene 'national revolutions'.³⁷

It is not as if nationalism had been locked away in a freezer when the events of 1989 began to unfold. On the contrary: nationalism was a formative instrument for each country in the region. Its intensity during the immediate aftermaths of the upheavals depended on the specificities of each former regime. During the regime-changing events it took a backseat for the most part, but almost immediately afterwards nationalist mobilizations reared their heads: there were Romanian-Hungarian and Turkish-Bulgarian clashes in 1990; Czechoslovakia collapsed in 1992 (albeit peacefully); anti-immigrant violence flared up in East Germany; and, of course, Yugoslavia descended into a maelstrom of interethnic bloodshed and destruction that outlasted the country itself and persisted through 2000 (2001, once one takes into account Macedonia). As the walls crumbled in Eastern Europe, they seemed always to fall on someone's head.³⁸

Everyday Identities

I would like to return briefly to the issue of social identity under state socialism in a conception that extends beyond the labels of civil and uncivil society, while keeping in mind the civilization feature of the historical experience itself. Borrowing François Furet's memorable dictum about the French Revolution, Marci Shore correctly emphasized that 'the communist period [...] had not been a ho-

³⁵ Quoted in Mark Biondich, *The Balkans. Revolution, War, and Political Violence since 1878*, Oxford, New York, 2011, 173-174.

³⁶ Biondich, *The Balkans*, 173-180.

³⁷ Cf. Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia. A State that Withered Away*, West Lafayette/In. 2009.

³⁸ Igor Štiks, 'The Berlin Wall Crumbled Down upon Our Heads! 1989 and Violence in the Former Socialist Multinational Federations', *Global Society* 24, No. 1 (January 2010), 91-110, DOI: 10.1080/13600820903432142.

mogenous bloc of time'.³⁹ During those years, lives were not only lost but also lived. Careers were not only unmade but also made. If we extend the temporal limits and include the various experiences of fascism and right-wing authoritarianism in the 1930s and early 1940s, people in 1989 had had enough time to be victimized twice and/or to become perpetrators or collaborators in distinct eras. The troubled pasts of the post-1989 period can be worked through only by telling the many truths of those whose lives have been affected by them.

Under communism, belonging, socialization, and recognition were the result of 'playing the identity game'.⁴⁰ Individuals could thus appropriate and use the rules of social identification enforced by the party-state to prove their creative and faithful contributions to the upholding of the socialist order. The area of individual autonomy in determining one's identity within (post)stalinist society consisted of what Mark Edele has called the 'internalization of Soviet [or local communist, B.I.] discourse as a method of thinking'.⁴¹ Transnational images and discourses that were supposed to create internationalist solidarities or bolster support for various decolonization struggles are interesting examples of the ambiguities inherent in official scripts. Indeed, 'heroic images of "progressive struggles" of the decolonizing world became an integral part of domestic mass culture' in Eastern Europe, even as they could also 'be used to construct a new political language through which alternative visions could be articulated — ones which critiqued existing state socialism'.⁴²

Citing the example of the GDR, the German historian Alf Lüdtke famously argued that state socialist society was *durchherrscht* — that is, it was thoroughly pervaded by practices of political authority. According to him, 'in a paradoxical inversion of Marx's utopian prophecy, it was rather society itself that had withered away during socialism, and not the state'.⁴³ The 'archival revolution' in former communist countries revealed that the communist regimes were extremely fluid, undergoing a permanent process of adaptation to both their own societies and to the outside world (either the 'world Leninist system' or the 'West'). However, when stagnation, sclerosis, and crisis hit, learnt trajectories of identity were lost or subverted. The didactic value of identification narratives

³⁹ Marci Shore, *The Taste of Ashes. The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe*, New York 2013, 32.

⁴⁰ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 151-152, also 223-225.

⁴¹ Mark Edele, *Soviet Society, Social Structure, and Everyday Life. Major Frameworks Reconsidered*, *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, No. 2 (Spring 2007), 349-373, DOI: 10.1353/kri.2007.0025.

⁴² James Mark / Péter Apor / Radina Vučetić / Piotr Oseka, 'We Are with You, Vietnam.' *Transnational Solidarities in Socialist Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia*, *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, No. 3 (2015), 439-464, 439-441.

⁴³ Geoff Eley discusses the concepts of *Eigen-Sinn* and *durchherrscht* in his review article *The Unease of History. Settling Accounts with the East German Past*, *History Workshop Journal* 57, No. 1 (Spring 2004), 175-201, 188-192, DOI: 10.1093/hwj/57.1.175.

within various communist regimes, surprisingly, took on a centrifugal quality. They could feed criticism against betrayed ideals—of socialism, the nation, or, more generally, of locally embedded visions of modernity. In this sense, in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania 1968 was pregnant with 1989 in more ways than one, to paraphrase Charles Maier.⁴⁴

Two fundamental topics emerge from such an interpretative framework: resistance and negotiation. One author remarked that 'the negotiating man was the new paradigm of Soviet subjectivity emerging from the revisionist years'.⁴⁵ The same can be said of Eastern European state socialisms. In this reading, resistance is not simply understood as anticommunist opposition. It is, rather, viewed as a prism that refracts and distils what might otherwise be opaque dimensions of the social, cultural, and political history of each of the bloc's societies.⁴⁶

In an insightful review of the historiography of the revolutions of 1989, Barbara Falk has insisted that 'there is no clear-cut line between resistance and dissent—it is more of a continuum or full spectrum'.⁴⁷ To further clarify how the intermediary, grey, majoritarian social categories reacted in the space created between the actions of illiberal elites and those of dissidents, we need to better understand how society was fused with the party-state. To put the matter differently, the post-1989 world was pregnant with a complex array of reactions against the '*ancien régime*':

'At one pole of resistance lie activities such as absenteeism, alcoholism or drug abuse, and the preference for personal travel and sporting activities rather than trade-union- or workplace- sponsored events. Closer to the middle would be private or family discussions on alternative historiography, listening to a banned radio broadcast, writing an essay "for the drawer", publicly telling jokes, or reading *samizdat*. Closer to the middle on the other side, toward the pole of dissent, would be activities taken in support or in the "grey zone"—agreeing with a petition, participating in a pilgrimage perhaps, or discussing with friends a particular broadcast or spreading news obtained there. Finally, at the "dissent" end of the continuum is the production and distribution of *samizdat*, public protest, active involvement in independent groups outside the control of the party-state—all of which risked regime persecution and/or imprisonment. One could also further differentiate between individual moral resistance or organized opposition—particularly by the

⁴⁴ Charles Maier, Conclusion. 1968—Did It Matter?, in: Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed, Promises of 1968. Crisis, Illusion and Utopia, New York, Budapest 2011, 413-439, 407.

⁴⁵ Anna Krylova, The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies, in: Michael David-Fox / Peter Holquist / Marshall Poe, eds, The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History, Bloomington 2003, 198.

⁴⁶ Lynne Viola, Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s. Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate, in: David-Fox / Holquist / Poe, eds, The Resistance Debate, 88.

⁴⁷ Barbara J. Falk, Resistance and Dissent in Central and Eastern Europe An Emerging Historiography, *East European Politics and Societies* 25, No. 2 (May 2011), 321.

late 1980s or in states such as Poland where the opposition was extremely well organized, expansive, and multidimensional.⁴⁸

These spaces of individual ambivalence in communist societies, combined with the presence of dissidents and the increasing identitarian disarray, generated the potential for spontaneous civic mobilization when elites began deserting their regimes and displayed their unwillingness to repress dissent. This dynamic made possible the massive public protests in Prague, Bucharest, and Leipzig in 1989. These demonstrations, after all, emulated earlier contestations with party-states in 1953, 1956, 1970, and 1980-1981, but they emerged within radically different domestic and international contexts. Anne Applebaum has stressed, in a review of Stephen Kotkin's *Uncivil Society*, that the potential for alternative forms of mobilization

'helped form the crowds and then helped the crowds create change (impelling Václav Havel to the presidency of the Czech Republic, for example). Maybe more importantly, they affected the midlevel bureaucrats, the people who had been following orders all along but, with the threat of a Soviet invasion withdrawn, no longer wanted to do so. People like the policeman who spontaneously opened the barrier at the Berlin Wall, just to take one famous example, were moved to switch sides by, yes, the civil society that had been growing around them.'⁴⁹

But the features of communist rule also provided a breeding ground for political populism. Cas Mudde has underlined that

"real existing socialism" created nihilist and atomized societies in which egalitarianism became mixed with deep social envy. This, combined with the stained reputation of the institutions of the state and the party [...] created a deeply felt dichotomy between "the moral non-Communist people" versus "the corrupt Communist elite" — incidentally, very similar, if not identical, to the dichotomy between (moral) "civil society" versus the (corrupt) state.⁵⁰

Such appetites, mixed with the perseverance of myths of national unity and homogeneity omnipresent before 1989, configured a far from benign potential lurking within Eastern Europe's much vaunted civil societies. The elation, expectations, spontaneity, and nonviolence of the year of wonders hid not only uncivil societies, but also sociocultural idiosyncrasies that would rapidly and repeatedly fuel democratic disenchantment and backsliding. Over the course of twenty-five years, civic and political actors have been constrained and empowered in equal measure by pre- and post-1945 pasts. Far from being a regional feature, Ekiert and Ziblatt have convincingly shown that

⁴⁸ Falk, *Resistance and Dissent*, 321-322.

⁴⁹ Anne Applebaum, 1989 and All That, *Anneapplebaum.com*, 9 November 2009, <http://www.anneapplebaum.com/2009/11/09/1989-and-all-that/>.

⁵⁰ Cas Mudde, In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People. Populisms in Eastern Europe, *East European Politics and Societies* 15, No. 1 (Winter 2000), 33-53, 45.

'the context specificity of European experience of democratization has played a major role in all transformations within the region, from southern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s to Eastern Europe in the 1990s'.⁵¹

The Trouble with the Past

What Tradition?

What initially appeared to be a straightforward path for post-1989 societies to follow—'all that was needed, it seemed, was to get rid of the false histories put forward by the communist regimes and restore the true pluralist histories of the various peoples of the region'⁵²—got bogged down in aggressive fantasies of salvation. These are the result of (at least) two factors. First, there are the historiographical and symbolic continuities with state socialism. Second, there are feverish post-1989 drives for a politics of history which supposedly substantiates redefinitions of national identity and citizenship, as well as the territorial, social, and cultural boundaries of post-1989 states.⁵³ These essentially compensatory discourses can be called 'legitimation from the past'.

The events of 1989 became a threshold that allowed a jump backward in time to join a supposedly pristine tradition. One aspect of this phenomenon was the search for so-called Golden Ages that would prove the European pedigree of the newly 'liberated' societies. Perhaps the most frequently appearing feature here was the glorification of the period between the two world wars. This era was described as a time of true development (as compared with the deficiencies of socialist modernity), the source of democratic potential in each of the post-communist countries. Its importance lies also in its being the time when many of the region's societies had achieved long-sought status as nation-states: unified Romania and Poland; Slovakia and Croatia during the war; even enlarged Hungary and Bulgaria after the 1940 Vienna arbitrages. However, such a view often overlooks the finer details of the historical realities in these countries. The region's democracies were somewhat functional while they lasted, but had significant blind spots in terms of citizen empowerment. A nation-state's consolidation often meant the repression of its minorities. These polities frequently backslid into autocratic and even fascist regimes by the end of the 1930s.

⁵¹ Grzegorz Ekiert / Daniel Ziblatt, Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe One Hundred Years On, *East European Politics and Societies* 27, No. 1 (February 2013), special section on 'Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The State of the Art', 90-107, 97.

⁵² Gale Stokes, Purposes of the Past, in: Tismaneanu / Iacob, eds, *The End and the Beginning*, 35-54, 40.

⁵³ Mikko Lagerspetz, Postsocialism as a Return. Notes on a Discursive Strategy, *East European Politics and Societies* 13, No. 2 (Spring 1999), 377-390, 381.

In most of them, antisemitism was rampant, and later their governments often collaborated with Nazi Germany in the perpetration of the Holocaust.

One of the defining topics for many of the post-1989 debates was a discussion about the interwar period's flourishing cultural and intellectual life. Unsurprisingly, these debates became relevant in the assessment of the influence of radical, extremist ideologies in the region. The trap here has been that there was indeed extensive synchronization with European-wide phenomena of the first half of the past century. But such development took place concurrently with the ideological storms that ravaged the continent. That is, what appeared to be a vibrant intellectual scene was also a milieu that had internalized the self-destructive appetites of the times. One historian noted that

'as the cultural flourishing of the interwar period was followed by the communist takeover, the anti-modernist patterns of thought became retrospectively framed as constitutive elements of the "European" cultural canon of these countries and this led in turn to the rather uncritical revival of many of these discourses after 1989.'⁵⁴

What makes the feverish appeal to tradition even more questionable is my earlier point about the autochtonization of state socialisms. For example, historian Victor Neumann remarked in 2013 that within Romanian historiography, many continue to endorse

'a romantic view of Romanian history, an approach which is opposed to critical analysis, methodological renewal, and conceptual progress, and which is not willing to tear itself away from past structures of thought and promote, instead, Western norms'.⁵⁵

Though the idea of embracing 'Western norms' might appear as self-orientalization, the coinage stands in for the principle of critical historicization. In Romania, because of only partial (public and scholarly) examination of the national-Stalinist experience, the charismatic nationalism that made the latter possible is still firmly entrenched in identity narratives and in collectivist political visions. Local communism was a textbook case of conjoined autochtonization, both from the top and from below. Intellectuals functioned as experts serving the national agenda as well as dignitaries of the regime's cultural diplomacy. Subsequently, the various traditions and trends from the pre-1945 period that had been appropriated within the system experienced a process of hybridization with Marxist-Leninist eschatology and cultural-historical determinism.

⁵⁴ Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of 'National Character'. A Study in Interwar East European Thought*, London, New York 2012, 184.

⁵⁵ Victor Neumann, *Is Rewriting Romanian History Useful? The Evolution of Socio-Political Concepts and Alternative Interpretations*, in: Victor Neumann / Armin Heinen, eds, *Key Concepts of Romanian History. Alternative Approaches to Socio-Political Languages*, Budapest, New York, 2013, 13.

Symbolic Retribution

The second direction assumed by the grappling with the past after 1989 came by way of policies such as lustration or the granting of access to the former regime's secret police files. The post-1989 period is rife with vicious polemics on who, how, and why to purge, determinations based on involvement with the power structures of the now-defunct socialist states. Many times, however, those involved in these public skirmishes or the scholars themselves forget that participation in the socialist modernization project was all-pervasive. It went much deeper than most who take part in these debates have been (and are) prepared to accept. Commenting on the uproar caused in Poland by the country's 2007 lustration law, historian Marci Shore rightly remarked that, taking into account the specific clauses and formulations of the legislation, one could very well conclude that 'it was safer now—as it had been then [before 1989]—to have been one of Havel's greengrocers'.⁵⁶ In similar fashion, political scientist Lavinia Stan emphasized that compromise was the defining feature of life during communism. People turned

'a blind eye to injustice on relatives, neighbors, and friends, downgrading their life expectations, living parallel solitudes that often drew little support from within and outside immediate family, and even silently rejoicing when their enemies and rivals got in trouble with authorities'.⁵⁷

But the ambiguities of state socialist societies and the rather successful legitimization of some party leaderships at various points during the regimes' existences have created contradictory attitudes among the postcommunist populations. One can point to two poles in the discourse about the socialist past: condemnation, so that 'one side judges before making sufficient effort to assess', and acquittal, where 'the other aims to assess in order not to judge'.⁵⁸ But the realities of communism as a lived system placed most of the population in a representational limbo: when individuals talk about this past as a phenomenon from the outside, they often agree to castigate it; but when they describe their own lives, and thus speak about an internalized history, the account is often positive if not glowing (reflecting self-realization). This creates a situation described by one historian as 'confused (inconsistent) and opportunistic'. It reflects, among post-1989 members of civil societies, a 'dual need (to defend and to give up)' in relation to the dictatorial past.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Shore, *The Taste of Ashes*, 320.

⁵⁷ Lavinia Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania. The Politics of Memory*, Cambridge, New York 2013, 7-8.

⁵⁸ Stan, *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania*, 8.

⁵⁹ Ferenc Laczó, *The Many Moralists and the Few Communists. Approaching Morality and Politics in Post-Communist Hungary*, in: Kopeček, ed, *Past in the Making*, 145-165, 156-158.

Eastern Europe's troubles with the past have produced results that fall into two categories. First, there is a clash of nostalgias. There is, on the one hand, *ostalgia*:

'The living memory of a tranquil and predictable way of life contrasts sharply with the sometimes wild capitalist conditions that neo-liberal free-market transformation has created since 1989 and, simultaneously, with the dark vision of the totalitarian hell of the Stalinist kind dominant in the public discourse.'⁶⁰

And on the other hand there is a stubborn push for a state-sponsored, politically instrumentalized politics of history, which contends that 'the national heritage should be thoroughly reconstructed on the basis of a "true and correct understanding of history" stripped of communist lies'.⁶¹ Ironically, both nostalgias face the same danger: concentrating only on positive, self-legitimizing histories and displaying utter ignorance or stubborn avoidance of individual or collective complicities, complexes, and fantasies with regard to the past. Here, to paraphrase Irena Grudzinska-Gross, the very active work of memory becomes strikingly similar to partial amnesia.⁶²

Second, these societies still struggle with competing martyrologies. The phenomenon is most obvious on two interrelated levels: the relationship between the Holocaust and the Gulag, as well as the assessment of the official description for the mass murder and repression (i.e. the crimes) committed by the communist regimes. The unifying concept here is that of genocide. In both legal and historical narratives, 'genocide' has largely been used across the former socialist bloc and Soviet realm to enhance the traumatic pedigree of various stories of national suffering. It is tempting to employ the term because it refers to the most heinous category of atrocity in the hierarchy of political crimes. It is a very useful tool to wield in the politics of international recognition. But its use relies on two grievous fallacies: on the one hand, it externalizes guilt—responsibility lies outside of the body of the nation; on the other, 'it is a very efficient mechanism to brush aside demands to confront injustices and crimes committed by members of the "suffering nation"'.⁶³

⁶⁰ Kopeček, In Search of 'National Memory', 86.

⁶¹ Kopeček, In Search of 'National Memory', 83.

⁶² Irena Grudzinska-Gross, The Backsliding, *East European Politics and Societies* 28, No. 4 (November 2014), 664-668. The role of a usable past in the former socialist bloc is discussed in Constantin Iordachi / Balázs Trencsényi, In Search of a Usable Past. The Question of National Identity in Romanian Studies, 1990-2000, *East European Politics and Societies* 17, No. 3 (August 2003), 415-453.

⁶³ Evgeny Finkel, In Search of Lost Genocide. Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe, *Global Society* 24, No. 1 (2010), 51-70, 54, DOI:10.1080/13600820903432027. I have discussed the uses of genocide in Romanian debates about the past in Bogdan C. Iacob, The Communist Regime in Romania. Interpretation or Condemnation?, *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen* 54, No. 2 (2014), 44-61.

The practice is quite widespread across the former communist domain. Azerbaijan, Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia and its successor states (especially during the 1990s, when Croats, Serbs, and Albanians were engaged in a symbolic arms race over historical genocides that would seemingly justify ethnic cleansing or discrimination) have put forth this narrative extensively. It inevitably creates a picture in which the legacy and remembering of the Holocaust—which had been pushed to the outskirts of national discourses throughout the socialist period—comes into conflict with the national traumas experienced during state socialism. The inflation of genocide-talk left the impression that one corpus of memory could not coexist with the other. The outcome was that along the way, in Timothy Snyder's words, 'history is removed, numbers go upward and memories go inward, to all our peril'. The competitive martyrology released 'millions of ghosts released into local culture' but did not create more meaning. Rather, it consolidated resentment.⁶⁴

One resilient theme in public discourse across the region is the view that the communist traumas of Eastern Europe are putatively not accepted in the memory house of contemporary (Western) Europe. An interesting extension of this narrative is the attitude of the region's countries towards the current wave of refugees from the Middle East and elsewhere. Croatian intellectual Slavenka Drakulić has powerfully contended that one of the explanations for the region's response is that 'the victims of Communism now have serious competitors: war refugees arriving from the Middle East and Africa'.⁶⁵ In this reading, the 'new victims, mostly Muslims arriving in frighteningly high numbers' do not trigger significant acknowledgments of responsibility among Eastern Europeans. How could they feel this way: 'when they finally have their own states, they are expected to renounce their victimhood and national homogeneity in order to show solidarity?'⁶⁶ Of course, postsocialist societies are not alone in their opposition to admitting refugees to their countries. Western Europeans are often reluctant as well (of course, some differentiation is necessary here, as various elites in European countries have different attitudes on the issue, while the general situation is in flux given the ongoing crisis). Stemming from different reasons, the parochialisms of East and West find ways to synchronize. I do find statements such as those of the esteemed historian André Liebich to be rather self-congratulatory and slightly disconnected from the complexity of the reactions to the refugee crisis across the EU:

⁶⁴ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010, 406.

⁶⁵ Slavenka Drakulić, *Competing for Victimhood. Why Eastern Europe Says No to Refugees?*, *Eurozine*, 4 November 2015, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2015-11-04-drakulic-en.html>.

⁶⁶ Drakulić, *Competing for Victimhood*.

'Absent for fifty years, the ex-communist countries were excluded too long from the process of European construction to embrace its principles. They have thus come to resent rather than to share its secular and pacifist ethos which prides itself on its modernity or post-modernity and on its unrestricted tolerance.'⁶⁷

What do these troubles with the past point to in relation to 1989? One author correctly remarked that twenty-five years removed from 1989, first-order geographical and political divisions appear to have been largely overcome. But

'breaking walls, opening borders, and holding elections proved to be substantially easier than constructing identities congruent with the euphoric and unifying spirit of the first post-communist days'.⁶⁸

The various myths of return help notions of 'revolution betrayed' or of alleged 'Golden Ages' retain their staying power. They reflect the ambiguities and specificities of individual communist regimes and societies, rather than various favourable or unpropitious combinations of civil and uncivil societies within the postcommunist nations. They indicate the persistence of restorative nationalisms, whose danger lies in its fuelling of ethnopopulisms.

An extreme example, though far from isolated, is the political program of *Jobbik*, the extreme-right party in Hungary that in 2014 secured just over 20% of the vote in the Hungarian parliamentary elections. In 2009, *Jobbik*'s English-language website stated that 'in order to survive globalization people have to know their true history, otherwise [they will] lose their histories as the global elite has been conducting a clandestine war on national cultures'.⁶⁹

Writing about Romania and Hungary, historian Balázs Trencsényi observes that

'national essentialism functions as the collective 'subconscious' of these political cultures, a potential grey zone of unspoken but intended connotations and a set of references that can be activated in conflicting situations'.⁷⁰

And much of these parochialisms in East European cultures is inextricably connected with communism's legacies. Once the challenges of the contemporary European crisis and democratic fatigue combine with historical resentments rooted in troubles with the past, then extremism and populism are likely to come to the fore.

⁶⁷ André Liebich, Central Europe and the Refugees, *Tr@nsit Online*, 2 November 2015, <http://www.iwm.at/read-listen-watch/transit-online/central-europe-refugees/>.

⁶⁸ Finkel, *In Search of Lost Genocide*, 69.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Stokes, *Purposes of the Past*, 47.

⁷⁰ Balázs Trencsényi, *Afterlife or Reinvention? 'National Essentialism' in Romania and Hungary after 1945*, in: Anders Blomqvist / Constantin Iordachi / Balázs Trencsényi, eds, *Hungary and Romania Beyond National Narratives. Comparisons and Entanglements*, Berlin, Wien 2013, 568.

Simultaneously, though, one can say that such an outcome is hardly predetermined. An interesting phenomenon of the past three or four years is the emergence of a revolutionary politics without an ideology or a specific project—the explosions of moral indignation directed against the fallacies of postsocialism. Beyond the constraints of past parochialisms, citizens in Sofia, Bucharest, and Budapest have all taken to the streets ‘not with the hope of putting a better government in power but merely to establish the borders that no government should cross’.⁷¹ As noted, the exact social and political outcomes of this new form of civic mobilization remain to be seen.

Conclusion

The British diplomat Robert Cooper once wrote that ‘the year 1989 divides the past from the future almost as clearly as the Berlin Wall divided the East from the West’.⁷² As I hope to have shown, such a statement is problematic. The past is very much still with us twenty-seven years after 1989—because the year of wonders is still significant for the prospect of civic renewal and empowerment in the former Soviet bloc, and because the structural realities of the *anciens régimes*, uncivil societies included, have exerted a lasting presence. But also, I would add, because of the spectre of the communist past itself: as lived experience, as trauma and responsibility, and as still resilient, communism-mediated fantasies of salvation. Despite statements to the contrary made a few years ago, it is doubtful that the ‘Leninist legacies’ have truly been overcome.⁷³

We should approach with lucidity and restraint teleological readings of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and the triumphalist claims that the past can be made okay. Trauma must be worked through, authoritarian legacies should be confronted, guilt and responsibility ought to be processed within frameworks of accountability. Remembrance and contrition counterbalance possible relapses into problematic pasts or contemporary forms of left- or right-wing extremism.

In recent years, 1989 has been associated with the search for alternatives as exemplified by youth protests across Eastern Europe. In 2009, students reenacted in the Czech Republic the logic of the antipolitics characteristic of the Velvet Revolution. These civil society groups argued that 1989’s success ‘ended the

⁷¹ Ivan Krastev, *The Global Politics of Protest*, *Tr@nsit Online*, 18 August 2014, 4, http://www.iwm.at/files/IWMpost_113.pdf.

⁷² As quoted in Ivan Krastev, *Twenty Years of Postcommunism. Deeping Dissatisfaction*, *Journal of Democracy* 21, No. 1 (January 2010), 113–119, 113, DOI: 10.1353/jod.0.0149.

⁷³ The resilience of ‘Leninist legacies’ in contemporary times has been debated by Vladimir Tismaneanu and Ivo Banac in Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Understanding 1989. The Revolutionary Tradition Revisited*; and Ivo Banac, *Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, *East European Politics and Societies* 28, No. 4 (November 2014), 644–656.

engaged, moral philosophy of public life that had made it possible'.⁷⁴ This form of commemoration prompted the late Václav Havel to remark:

'For a week already, I've been going from one setting to another, and everywhere there are calls for the future, for the outlook ahead. Everywhere people are reflecting on the present in all of its ambiguity and this is hugely encouraging.'⁷⁵

Along similar lines, the student movement behind the occupy protest in Sofia organized a national 'March of Justice' on 10 November 2013.⁷⁶ The ouster of Todor Živkov on the same day fourteen years earlier was tied to calls for responsible and participatory democratic rule.

These examples, along with others from the recent revival of civic mobilization, point to a search for nonauthoritarian alternatives. Jakub Dymek, editor of *Krytyka Polityczna* (Political Critique), a leftist journal in Poland, stated that 'we were born into the world of TINA: in Poland, "there is no alternative" became not only the slogan but a very palpable reality during the post-1989 economic transition'. But the moral and social contestation of postsocialist political establishments, seemingly taking 1989 as one potential model, did generate 'the juvenile energy and potential for more rebellious, progressive, and non-conformist thinking'.⁷⁷ Of course, even here a spectre looms: the reactivation among members of new generations of the 'unfinished revolution' topos, which has justified many of the manipulations of the past in the last quarter-century.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, the lasting lesson of 1989 remains one of civic pluralism. So far so that our explanations of the events themselves should be embedded in the plurality of existing vantage points. As Timothy Garton Ash declared, 'there is nothing wrong with such a plurality of perspectives. Each illuminates a different part of the elephant, or views the whole beast from a different angle.'⁷⁹ This is where the civil society, uncivil society, and Leninist legacy arguments complete rather than exclude one another. Political scientist Jeffrey Isaac has warned that the 'we' who celebrate the 'velvet revolutions' of 1989 ought to do so with circumspection and with a sense of self-limitation because of the complexities

⁷⁴ Conor O'Dwyer, *Remembering, Not Commemorating, 1989. The Twenty-Year Anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic*, in: Bernhard / Kubik, eds, *Twenty Years after Communism*, 172.

⁷⁵ O'Dwyer, *Remembering, Not Commemorating, 1989*, 172-173 and 189-190.

⁷⁶ Junes, *Students Take Bulgaria's Protests to the Next Level*.

⁷⁷ Jakub Dymek, *A New Solidarity for the New Poland*, *Dissent*, 5 May 2014, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/polands-children-of-tina>.

⁷⁸ James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, New Haven, London 2010.

⁷⁹ Timothy Garton Ash, *1989!*, *New York Review of Books*, 5 November 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/11/05/1989/>.

behind the 'normality' of postcommunist societies.⁸⁰ Rather than describing an irrepressible liberal triumph, this article has shown that 1989, and the time before it as well as its aftermath, remain symbolic territories claimed by many political colourings and numerous social actors. The cumulative effect of these pasts subverts simple dualities of civil and uncivil societies. Such notions appear too ambiguous and slippery in the light of my historically informed attempt to tie pre- and post-1989 timeframes together. Therefore, it is up to us to continue clearing history's debris strewn before and after the *annus mirabilis* so that we can fully realize who 'we' are who claim, contest, or (increasingly seldom) celebrate the democratic revolutions which brought about state socialism's collapse.

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⁸⁰ Jeffrey C. Isaac, Conclusion. *Shades of Gray. Revisiting the Meanings of 1989*, in: Tismaneanu / Iacob, eds, *The End and the Beginning*, 572.