Was it worth the fight?

A scholar of the post-communist transition evaluates the state of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe 15 years after the end of communism.

by Vladimir Tismaneanu

Fifteen years ago, who could have imagined that countries belonging to the Warsaw Pact would become NATO members? Who could have dreamt that these countries would enter the European Union? And yet these things have happened as a result of the events that led to the collapse of Leninist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the demise of the USSR in 1991. The following years of post-communist transition were marked by high expectations and noble dreams of justice, equality and freedom—as well as anxieties, frustrations and deep disappointments. Nevertheless, what was once behind the Iron Curtain has become a region of democratic change and potential, one that saw the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" and the end of the Iliescu era in Romania in the last months of 2004.

Since 1989, free and fair elections have taken place in all Central and Eastern European countries, but the results have been mixed. Some countries have instituted robust democratic practices and institutions. Others have lagged behind, their leaders relying on authoritarian methods and tolerating high levels of political and economic corruption. On the whole, the democratic picture is encouraging. However, it is also complex and contradictory.

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On the positive side, popular sovereignty has replaced the monopolistic dictatorship of self-appointed "proletarian vanguards." Enforced ideological unanimity has vanished. Journalists, in most of these countries, are free and outspoken. The rule of law has been established, albeit imperfectly, and is now intertwined with the everyday life of these societies. While in some countries, liberal parties had moved worryingly toward populist nationalism, this movement—which threatened some democracies in the early 1990s—seems to have subsided. For the most part, the new democracies of the post-communist transition have managed to contain illiberal movements and forces—although recently the latter have resurfaced in opposition to membership with the European Union (e.g., the "self-defense" movement in Poland).

Despite these grand political accomplishments, there have nevertheless been significant setbacks and disappointments. After the initial joy and euphoria of a major historical cleavage—and the revolutions of 1989 were indeed such a phenomenon—some people feel despondent or betrayed during the slow work of building a new political order. As political thinker Ralf Dahrendorf has noted, "The revolution of 1989, like other revolutions before it, was bound to disappoint those who entered it with extravagant hopes for a new world of unconstrained discourse, equality and fundamental democracy."

While democracy in form and style definitely exists in Central and Eastern Europe, the existence of democratic values, indeed the democratic ethos, remains questionable. The political landscape in post-communist countries remains haunted by pre-modern political specters such as tribal collectivism, clerical fundamentalism and ethnocentric populism, which produce suspicion and intolerance of the fundamental democratic value of political pluralism. In some countries, while pluralist values were exalted early on during the transition, collectivist fantasies and frequent outbursts of xenophobic intolerance (anti-Semitism, anti-Roma, anti-minorities in general) have unfortunately followed.

Post-communist societies undergoing transition have also been plagued by the familiar challenges of graft, cynicism and loss of citizen momentum. Privatization, initially seen as a magic solution to all economic hardship, was too often used as a smoke screen by new (and not-so-new) predatory elites who plundered resources and imposed personal economic hegemony (primarily, but not exclusively, in collusion with foreign capital). Cynicism and contempt for intellectual critique are rampant, while narratives of self-pity and self-glorification remain disturbingly present. The initially vibrant civil societies of these countries have lost much of their impetus, the former dissidents have become increasingly marginalized, and former Communist Party *apparatchiks* have managed to preserve political prominence in countries like Poland, Romania and, to some extent, Hungary. In other words, the battle for democracy continues, and in some places the post-communist landscape is one of uncertainty, disarray and ongoing struggle between friends and foes of an open society.

Despite these mixed results, we should avoid the temptation to describe the post-communist transition as an utter failure in some countries and an unmitigated success in others. No transition has been completely smooth, and differences in the speed and scope of democratization should not be unexpected. In fact, the Central and Eastern European experiences illustrate two types of transition from ideological Leninist party rule to open societies.

The first type of transition characterizes the experiences of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, which have achieved considerable democratic success. Each has built a relatively predictable party system and has developed a widespread constitutional consensus that stands against onslaughts from the radical extremes of the left and right. In these countries, democratic procedure is widely accepted as the only game in town. The second type of transition is found in Romania, Bulgaria, the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and Albania, where democratic consolidation has been more difficult to achieve. But even in these countries, the trend has been towards stronger democratic institutions, in spite of occasional, yet disquieting, government attempts to limit the freedom of the media and the independence of the judiciary.

Many scholars and journalists point to allegedly "civilizing" fault lines to explain the differences in these two types of democratic transition. In each case, they link the nature of transition to historical legacies, cultural factors and institutional memories. To illustrate, Central and Eastern Europe, with its Hapsburgian legacies of the rule of law, civil society and Western-style institutions (such as parliaments), is often contrasted with the Balkans, which had fewer comparable institutions under Ottoman rule or afterwards. Whatever oversimplification this historical comparison yields, it is hard to deny that democratic traditions do matter and that—in societies without them—democratic values and institutions have proven to be more vulnerable and beleaguered. This is particularly true in places where ethnic nationalism historically has been a political religion. However, change is always possible. Democratic invention is an ongoing process and societies that may appear doomed by apathy can suddenly rediscover the formidable potential of pluralism, as in the case of Serbia after Milosevic or Romania after the December 2004 presidential election of Traian Băsescu.

In reflecting on the post-communist period, we have an opportunity to revisit our illusions regarding revolutions and transitions. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say today that the unrestrained exaltation of the market and the celebration of party politics made many of us oblivious to the economic, moral and psychological realities of these societies. While corruption has been the major plague afflicting democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe, enormous socioeconomic disparities have also played a critical role in undermining consolidation. Those living in significantly poorer economic circumstances now (as compared to 15 years ago) might argue that the empty idealism of communism was in fact replaced by the sordid materialism of naked self-interest, or, more ominously, by populist demagoguery. Was it worth the fight?

I must answer yes. The simple fact that such issues are now freely debated in all formerly communist societies is the most convincing argument for a positive assessment of the post-communist era since 1989. Whatever the ugly features of what Václav Havel once diagnosed as the post-communist nightmare, one thing is certain: the times of regimented unanimity and forced acceptance of the Communist Party-dictated concept of human happiness are over.

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