

IN SEARCH *of* standards

While post-communist countries have made great progress in the past 15 years, one political scientist argues that they have not yet developed adequate standards to govern political life and guard against corruption.

by Marcin Walecki

While both the experience of practitioners and the scholarly literature suggest that there is no simple path to democracy, dismantling communist regimes has been particularly complex because it required the simultaneous transition of political and economic systems. Over the past 15 years, some post-communist states have evolved towards democracy, others towards renewed authoritarianism, and still others towards a perplexing mix of democracy, arbitrary governance and kleptocracy. The results have been a series of hybrid polities with both democratic and anti-democratic characteristics. While these countries have successfully begun the transition, they fall short of democratic consolidation in important ways, in part because they have not yet established standards of transparency and accountability adequate to govern political society or political finance.

According to political scientists Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, a consolidated democracy requires—alongside civil society, rule of law, a functioning state bureaucracy and institutions of economic society—an autonomous political society that includes political leaders (and managers) and political parties, both of which participate in elections to a legislature. The last 15 years have made clear that the poor quality of political society in general and political leadership in particular, has slowed the pace of democratization in post-communist societies. Members of political society have been neither transparent in their actions nor accountable to the voting public. This presents a significant barrier to transition, as scholars such as Archie Brown consider accountability “as decisive a feature as any distinguishing democracy from varied forms of authoritarian rule.”

A large part of the problem stems from the fact that, in every post-communist country, a significant number of political actors come from the previous regimes, which were characterized by unchallenged hegemony, rampant corruption and a lack of political accountability. Only recently have some post-communist governments begun to concern themselves with the quality of their political societies, and some have undertaken measures to improve governance. Some governments have also created special anti-corruption bodies and adopted anti-corruption laws (though with insufficient consideration for implementation and enforcement).

To further hamper progress, state bureaucracies have not benefited from the development of political management in the form of a professional civil service. Clearly, the quality of these people’s work is of prime importance to the democratization process, and unchecked corruption on their part can seriously damage that process. Low expectations and corruption were endemic in communist administrations, and unfortunately—according to Transparency International’s annual corruption indices—most post-communist countries continue to have a medium or high level of bureaucratic corruption. The small-time bribery, extortion of applicants for state services and use of public office to further private financial interests that was common in communist times was only aggravated by the rapid economic growth that accompanied privatization.

The situation has been further complicated by the incomplete process of political and economic liberalization in many post-communist countries, where powerful oligarchic elites have often maintained their privileged political and/or economic positions. Though these countries have

introduced the basic elements of democratic elections and political competition, these measures are undercut by a lack of accountability on the part of both political leaders and political managers. Political accountability is a relatively new concept in these countries, and it is set against decades of experience in which a position of political leadership or in the civil service was often seen as a “party property” or a sinecure—not a public office. Many politicians suffer from the political version of the deadly illness called AIDS (Additional Income Deposited in Switzerland) and there have been a number of high-profile cases, ranging from simple embezzlement to corruption in political financing. Too often politicians have made national parliaments and local city council into their own business clubs, where they spend their time lobbying to further their business interests. In addition, for many countries in the region, politics has become a rich man’s game: the only way elected representatives can accumulate the funds they need to pay for their campaigns is by taking a percentage on secret commissions and accepting bribes.

Democracy should bring accountability to this scenario: every election cycle, politicians answer to the electorate for their performance on the job. However, looking back at the transition period, such accountability was rarely achieved because widespread and publicly recognized corruption led people to distrust political leaders. If all politicians are involved in system-wide corruption, voters see that little change will come through the voting booth. If the ballot does not offer voters any real choices, democratic ideas are devalued and political apathy among voters increases.

Political parties in post-communist coun-



tries were developed on the ruins of the discredited former communist parties and have generally gained only limited legitimacy. Most newly established parties—or even old re-formed parties—tend to lack autonomy from the party in power, be loosely organized and have limited membership (generally a narrow coterie of patrons and clients). Corrupt financial practices by the party hierarchy fatally weaken the membership base. Their actions may generate only a limited ideological commitment on the part of members, who are loyal only to the money rather than the party; or, the parties' image as ineffective or corrupt may make people hesitant to associate with them.

The anti-party feeling among post-communist populations presents a serious obstacle to institutionalizing the party system and full democratic consolidation. According to surveys in Poland (conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center, or CBOS, in 2003) and Ukraine (conducted by IFES in 2003), the majority of voters in both countries do not trust political parties. Such a system—one in which voters have little faith in corrupt parties and in which the political elite thereby functions without an organization to connect it to the voters—challenges the concept of representation that lies at the heart of representative democracy.

Competitive elections often mark the beginning of a democratic transition in most post-communist regimes, and the degree to which elections are free and fair is significant for the evaluation of a country's democratic progress. Unfor-

tunately, old-style patronage politics still plays an important role in elections. Recent examples from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine show that government officials often distribute welfare and social funds among disadvantaged ethnic or social groups in order to collect their signatures in support of a candidate. Some governments also give their supporters rewards in the form of pension increases, jobs or public contracts. In addition, some state companies, as well as state-supported businesses, institutions and NGOs, provide voters with services and goods and organize special events, such as concerts and festivals, with free food and alcohol (paid for by the city councils).

Political finance corruption (like that described above) has created a growing cynicism and apathy among voters. More than a decade after transition began, instead of a political system based on democratic principles, post-communist political life has become a façade for hybrid regimes and corrupt practices. In some post-Soviet regimes, these practices have become so pervasive that the process of democratization has broken down. In more democratized countries, even those that recently joined the European Union, the public's participation in the political process is undergoing a serious crisis.

Given this situation, post-communist societies must establish standards in public life that force transition regimes to promote greater transparency and accountability within political society. These societies must place greater emphasis on

promoting ethics in public office, developing a professional nonpartisan civil service, democratizing political party structures, developing a candidate selection process that allows for greater participation by women and youth, and establishing transparent and accountable political finance. Public officials and institutions are much more open and transparent today than they were 15 years ago, and the evolution must continue.

Improving the quality of political society—political managers, political parties and elections—is essential for further democratic development in the region. In some countries, it took almost 15 years for democracy to become “the only game in town.” This final stage of democratization—consolidation—has proved particularly problematic for political society in most post-communist countries, and most political actors are still learning the rules of this game. It might take another 15 years to create political accountability, informed voters who do not expect personal favors, freedom of information, distribution of economic resources, and respect for political human rights. But even the most successful post-communist democracies must continue to address these problems. Only this will allow them to become mature democracies. 

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