

Citizens Volunteer Program, including:

- Derek Bok, President Emeritus of Harvard University, who has made two trips to Hungary to assess its higher education system, and who recently advised the Hungarian Par-

liament on aspects of its higher education reform legislation.

- Harvey Sloane, former mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, who helped the mayor of Bucharest, Romania, to assess how he could better direct municipal services.

- Doug Fair, a consultant for non-profit organizations, who helped the School for International Management and Business Administration in Sofia, Bulgaria, improve its management practices.

The Premature Senility of the New Democracies: The Hungarian Experience

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Since the 1989 “revolutions,” the democratizations in the East Central European countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary) have shown premature signs of aging. A short survey of contradictions could explain this “medical report.”

The Heterogeneity of Regions

During the Cold War, Eastern Europe was thought of homogeneously united by a shared “totalitarian” system. Since the 1989 revolutions, this false unit has divided into three markedly different parts: East-Central Europe (ECE), South Eastern Europe (SEE), and Eastern Europe proper (EE), the western republics of the former Soviet Union. These three subregions differ now more than ever in their history. It is the awkward Western strategy of crisis management that tries to handle them as a more or less homogeneous region with identical problems.

Three Regions—Three Stages

Using Rostow’s model of systemic change, Eastern Europe (SEE and EE) is in the stage of the initial or pretransition crisis; they have not reached the point of no return in systemic change. Indeed, some countries like Serbia or Romania show a newly emerging model of national communism. The ECE countries are in the second stage, in the genuine democratic transition, a “creative chaos” combining the features of

both old and new systems. The present transition period is the most difficult, so the coming three to five years will be decisive for the fate of the Central European democratizations. Finally, the Southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, and Greece) have arrived at the third stage, the consolidation period.

No Great Leap— No Return to the Past

There are two theoretical as well as practical blind alleys in systemic change. The euphoria of the 1989 revolutions held promise of a quick and easy transition, a Great Leap Forward from East European misery to West European paradise. Disappointments over later developments have provoked the opposite extremist concept, a Great Leap Back—Return to the Past model. This explanation links the contradictions of the systemic change with a complete return to the situations after World War I and II. Both of the views and the political strategies they give rise to are simplistic and counterproductive.

The perspectives of politicians and political scientists are themselves in the stage of “initial crisis.” They have not broken through to understanding the new condition, which is neither a copy of the West, nor the revival of the past. Now, there is also a new variant of the Great Leap Back model: the Third World model which simply adds all former socialist

countries to the list of the developing countries without any regional specifications.

Cycles of (Re-)Democratizations

The best heuristic model for the Age of State Socialism is the theory of long waves with its half a century long Kondratieff cycle beginning after World War II and ending with the 1989 revolutions. According to this global framework, the last fifty years until 1989 brought a long period of easternization or de-Europeanization for ECE. ECE had its short cycles as well. These ten-year cycles were reform cycles, in which ECE countries tried to leave the political structure forced upon them by the Yalta system. These short cycles of reform began with smaller reforms in the workings of the given regime of state socialism but were extended more and more, from economic to social reforms. When they reached the sphere of politics and threatened the distribution of political power, conservative forces inside and outside reacted with counter-attack, the so-called normalizations or conservative rearrangements. Consequently in the ECE countries there were a series of eruptions of popular discontent (1956, 1968, 1981). These “revolutions” expressed contradictions between some socioeconomic liberalizations and the missing genuine democratizations. In the 1989 revolutions these

tensions reached their upper limits, the external and internal resources of state socialism were exhausted completely. In 1989 a new short cycle did not start in ECE as most Western observers expected, but a new long cycle began in the whole world—with a new short cycle within—that of the systemic change in the ECE countries. The real question is whether this change will bring a genuine breakthrough towards a consolidated democracy or it will again last only some years.

Systemic Change as a Threefold Process

Systemic change cannot and should not be reduced to the political transition or transformation, the power transition between the old and new governments and elites. Systemic change is a very complex process, embracing at least two other dimensions, i.e., the economic and the social transitions or transformations, but one could extend it to cultural and ideological changes as well. The most teasing problem for theory as well as practice comes from the interrelationship of these three processes. After decades of deadlocked democratization, no doubt, political change, which has priority, has to proceed in harmony with economic and social changes, in order to promote the political changes and consolidate results. The biggest danger threatening systemic change is disharmony among these essential processes, which in extreme forms can lead to their contradiction and confrontation; basically, this happens when political change is pursued at the expense of social and economic changes. “Selfish” politics neglects the socioeconomic transformation, provoking in this way a crisis situation; the resulting popular discontent may erode or even sweep away political democratization.

Predominance of Politics in Transition

The choice between political systems dominates politics in the initial crisis. Politics as the political systemic change should play an important role even later, at the

mesochoice, i.e., at the choice between the major political forms, parliamentary or presidential, of the new political system. But it cannot be a “tyranny” of politics that neglects the other spheres of society. More and more politics should develop towards a series of microchoices; deciding the concrete, particular structure of the polity by legislation, and politics should be in the service of other systemic changes. What happens to the ECE countries is, in fact, just the contrary. Politics abuses its lead in the initial crisis and it does not release its grip on society. It starts a life of its own pushing other systemic transformations aside or to the background. The continued dominance of politics is not a sign of strength, but that of weakness. Politics proceeds slowly and painfully with its own internal transformation; it tries to monopolize the attention and energies of the society. Politics tries to keep its grasp on the other fields and actors in society, because it feels too weak to grant them autonomy. In such a way, politics with its tyranny or monopolization of transformation becomes enemy No. 1 of society, and people are alienated more and more from politics.

Internal Contradictions of Politics

The overpoliticization of society appears also in the internal contradictions of politics. The most important processes are **overparliamentarization** (the parliament has been not just the central place for politics but almost the only one where parties and other political actors have appeared) and **overpartization** (the parties have tried to push out all the other social and political actors from public life, and they have concentrated only on themselves and on the interparty ideological struggles). In the transition period there has been only lopsided democratization leading to an elite democracy. The construction of the new democratic system, of necessity, began two to three years ago from above. First, the macrostructure had to come into being: the major institutions (as the parliament, the government, and the

presidency) and the major actors (the political parties). But the political transformations have stopped here, at the macrolevel, or at least they have slowed down. Anyway, they have not yet reached the political mesosystem (functional democracy as the sphere of organized interest) and the political microsystem (direct and local democracy as the civil society associations).

Politics has hindered this deepening and widening process of democratization in many ways. The civil society associations had vigorous activities before and during the initial crisis, but they have been at least partially paralyzed by the centralizing efforts of the new government and the overextension of the parties to all walks of life, while parties and government have attracted all their talented personalities. The situation has been much worse with organized interests. The parties consider them as the major enemies, the most important rivals in the power and influence game on one side, and they have not been able to achieve their own internal systemic change so far on the other. This applies not only to the trade unions, which are fragmented and mutually delegitimize themselves, but also to the employers' organizations, which are also fragmented and not accepted by the government as partners in the decision-making process. The national Council for the Interest Concertation has been a showcase of social dialogue for the government, but it has not become the venue for real negotiations. Because of these internal contradictions of politics, there have been so far but half-democratizations, always with the danger of major crisis, since democracy has not acquired yet a solid and broad popular and institutional foundation.

Threat of the Breakdown of Democracy

The choice between parliamentary and presidential systems has a particular relevance for the choice that can reemerge between democracy and authoritarian rule. Namely, the structural issue of the difference between the parliamentary and presidential

systems in the consolidated, working democracies has to be separated to a great extent from the dynamic issue of the democratic transitions. The advantages and disadvantages of the two systems have been manifested so far by the Latin American and South European transitions in a marked way. The presidential system has been better equipped to trigger, to guide, and to orchestrate the opening, in the initial crisis because of its concentrated and uncontrolled powers. It turns, however, into a disadvantage in the later periods, since there have been no "checks and balances" or meta-institutions against this power concentration. Therefore, the presidential power can also lead back to authoritarian rule with ease. Parliamentary systems may move slower in the initial crisis, but they display much more dynamism in the transition and consolidation periods. At least they provide a better safeguard against sliding back into dictatorship, and they foster consensus more than the presidential system with its "winner takes all" approach. All ECE countries have opted for some kind of parliamentary system, according to the European standard, most of all Hungary, where the German system of non-confidence vote (i.e., a very strong prime ministerial system with all of its burdens of relative power concentration for the young democracies) has contributed to political stability. In spite of the relative stability in Hungary, the threat to the democratic system looms large, since extremist, rightist forces are on the march, exploiting the illnesses and weaknesses of the young democracy.

Emergence of the Extreme Right and Nationalism

In all former socialist countries, communism has been replaced by nationalism as the leading ideology. This nationalism has an emotional and a militant form; it has been interwoven with communism to become an ideology of the paternalistic state. Although the ECE countries are not exempt from this contamination of nationalism, they have been much less so than the SEE and EE countries. What is characteristic here, in ECE, compared to the survivalist, national communist regimes, has been the reorganization of the center right in power with the revival of the traditionalist political classes claiming historical legitimation for themselves and the direct representation of the national interest. The traditionalist, conservative mentality of the new-old political classes has reproduced to some extent the inter-war political ideas and patterns, which has been the major obstacle to democratization and europeanization. This traditional conservatism, in general, has been the prime mover behind the internal contradictions, limitations, and illnesses of politics described above.

This swing to the right in politics with the center-right governments and their drive to full powers has facilitated the emergence and organization of the extreme right. The ruling circles have not been ready to distinguish themselves from the extreme right; they have tolerated its actions and public performance and have given it a tacit or cautious legitimation in political and public

life. In fact, in Hungary it is very difficult nowadays to see in the right wing populist movement (with primitive anticapitalism, loud antiliberalism, and anti-europeanism) the distinction between the government forces and the extreme right, outside the governing parties. Populism with aggressive social demagoguery has appeared not in the opposition, against the government, but in and around the ruling parties themselves.

This combination of nationalism, populism, and right-wing extremism is the biggest threat to democracy in the ECE countries now, including Hungary, where parliamentary and multiparty democracy seems to be the most stable in the region. No doubt, the ECE countries, first of all Hungary, will soon recover from this early senility of the young democracies. This region can enter after the period of creative crisis the next period of the consolidation of democracy in the late 1990s. Hungary, resisting even now very well the "disease" by preserving political stability, can start full recovery right after the 1994 elections.

About the Author

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