POST-COMMUNIST POLITICS

Democratic Prospects in Russia and Eastern Europe

BY MICHAEL MCFAUL

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Foreword

The story of the fall of communism and its replacement by a pluralist order can be told with children's-book simplicity. Once there was one of everything: one party, one television network, one news agency, one writers' union, one airline, one tourist bureaucracy, one manufacturer of cigarette filters. Then, as the very term *pluralism* suggests, one-of-everything began to give way to many-of-everything. The collapse of the old order was marked by a wild profusion of new institutions: newspapers and magazines, trade unions, commercial banks, commodity exchanges, professional schools, mystical sects, and so on. Not only is there now more than one writers' union in Moscow, there is also more than one Communist Party—and even more than one KGB.

The process of multiplication has been visible at every level. Czechoslovakia has become 2 countries; the Soviet Union, 15; in the case of Yugoslavia, the count is still under way. And it is not only the institutions of the old order that have disintegrated. With fragmentation taking place in every sector of society, the splintering of the democratic opposition movements that brought down communism was also inevitable. Solidarity, Civic Forum, Democratic Russia—almost all of the broad anti-Communist umbrella groups have yielded to new parties, movements, and other political organizations of the most extreme diversity. Had they not done so, it would be hard to say with conviction that they had created a truly pluralist order.

Westerners approach the emergence of post-Communist society with a mixture of confidence and incomprehension. Many parts of the process are bound to follow patterns with which we are relatively familiar. If the subject is de-monopolization of cigarette filter manufacturing, for example, there is little uncertainty about the ultimate goal nor fear that matters can go terribly awry. If too many new factories spring up, the worst that is likely to happen is that some will have to close down. Resources will be wasted and those who are involved in the new ventures may have to find a new livelihood, but apart from these costs the social impact of any "mistakes" is clearly bearable. In due course, supply and

demand will come into balance. Once they do, post-Communist manufacturing—of cigarette filters or anything else—is unlikely to be very different from any other kind.

In politics, by contrast, uncertainty about the process of creating new institutions—and about the end result—is far greater. Success depends on cooperation among a much larger group of actors, the mechanisms of self-correction are much weaker, and mistakes can be much more lasting. In light of the extreme centralization of the ancien régime, the political fragmentation that has followed the revolution is both necessary and desirable, but it can also make coherent government impossible. Without parliamentary majorities able to deal with the difficulties of post-Communist society, popular dissatisfaction with the democratic experiment itself may quickly grow. It is such political disarray that makes the economic transition from central planning to a market especially hard to manage.

In *Post-Communist Politics*, Michael McFaul examines the chaotic new political systems that have emerged since the revolutions of 1989 brought down Communist governments across Eastern Europe. His assessment of the prospects for continued democratic consolidation in this region represents an important antidote to the pessimism that has often pervaded Western analysis. In particular, he shows that there is not just one route beyond the political monopoly of the Communist Party. Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia had very different prerevolutionary political environments, very different revolutions, and now have quite different political party systems. None of these countries has been able to avoid recurrent political crises; each crisis has, in fact, been viewed routinely as proof that the entire post-Communist enterprise was collapsing at last. And yet all the new democracies have survived (even if Czechoslovakia did not survive as a country).

Political developments in Eastern Europe since 1989 suggest the sturdiness of post-Communist democracy, but they hardly prove that democracy will succeed everywhere. The largest question mark is, of course, Russia. Dr. McFaul provides evidence for both hopeful and despairing readings of Russia's likely future. The most negative indicator is this: In contrast to the new political systems of Eastern Europe, Russia still has no party system to speak of. As a consequence, it is still experiencing the politics of frag-

mentation; no governing majority has emerged. It is in part because of this fragmentation that many Russians believe their country needs a strong presidential system, but the Russian presidency is not yet such an office. Boris Yeltsin's power initially had a charismatic rather than an institutional basis and as such has been more easily challenged as the afterglow of the revolution begins to fade.

In these institutional terms, Russia has made the least progress of the countries examined in this book. Yet Dr. McFaul's argument, by assigning such importance to institutions, has its hopeful side: The record of Eastern Europe suggests that the holding of elections is the decisive spur to party development. By putting early elections on Russia's political agenda, both Boris Yeltsin and his opponents have identified the mechanism by which to regain the ground that has been lost since the coup of August 1991. Nothing is likely to help Russian democracy as much as early elections; by the same token, nothing could be more damaging than their cancellation.

Michael McFaul's careful comparative study of the new politics of Russia and Eastern Europe is the fourth and final book in a series published by the CSIS Russian and Eurasian studies program under the general rubric *Creating the Post-Communist Order*. The aim of the series has been to identify general conclusions that will help both participants and observers to understand better the revolution that is still unfolding around us.

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Stephen Sestanovich
Director of Russian and Eurasian Studies, CSIS
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Introduction

Few events in the history of the modern world rival the revolutionary changes that erupted in Eastern Europe in 1989 and culminated in the breakdown of Soviet communism in August 1991. In two short years, the entire Soviet bloc collapsed, permanently recasting the international balance of power and the domestic politics of all the countries of the former Warsaw Pact and former Soviet Union.

With amazing uniformity, each new government emerging from Communist rule has aspired to reconstruct both state and society according to an identical set of ideas and institutions. Democracy is the ordering political principle, and capitalism is the coveted economic system.

Has the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union ushered in a new era of liberal capitalism? Or will the East European transitions have other outcomes? Do different kinds of transitions lead to different kinds of democracies? No study can answer these questions conclusively, for the post-Communist transition in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has only just begun. Nevertheless, a comparison of the political evolution of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Russia to date suggests important provisional conclusions. Such a comparison can help identify the factors that influence the transition from totalitarian rule, the forces that affected the emergence of democratic politics, and the relationship between these two sets of variables.

The Nature of Revolutionary Transitions

The transitions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are true revolutions, comparable to other great historical turning points. They involve "a sweeping, fundamental change in political organization, social structure, economic property control and the predominant myth of social order, thus indicating a major break in the continuity of development."[1] None of the countries of Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union has completed this simultaneous change in the polity and economy, but most new leaders in

the former Communist world strive to achieve such a revolutionary outcome.[2]

The difficulties of post-Communist transitions are more acute in many ways than those of democratic transitions in capitalist countries. Unlike recent democratizations in Latin America or Southern Europe, "soft-liners" in the ancien régimes of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union did not always initiate liberalization, nor did they seek to negotiate agreement between the old ruling classes and the new challengers.[3] In Hungary and the Soviet Union, reformers in the Communist Party indeed began the process of liberalization from above, while pacts between the Communist regime and democratic challengers initially regulated the pace and process of change in Poland and Hungary. In none of these anti-Communist revolutions, however, did strategies initiated by the Communist Party or bargains cut during the transition protect the property rights of the old rulers or define the parameters of the new polity.

The relationship between state and society is also a source of difficulty in post-Communist revolutions. Civil society is often "resurrected" in democratic transitions in capitalist countries, but in post-Communist transitions it must be created almost from nothing. Independent associations had formed in Poland and Hungary and had begun to develop in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. These nascent civil societies erected within Communist systems did not, however, produce the kinds of social organizations and civic units necessary to support a democratic polity in a capitalist economic system.

Nonrevolutionary transitions can be mapped along known paths. True revolutions demand a blind leap from the old order to something new, with few institutional trusses or historical braces to guide the jump. The more change in socioeconomic structure and state institutions needed to create a capitalist democracy, the wider the gap between the old order and the new consolidated democracy.[4]

The size of these gaps has varied throughout East Central Europe and Russia. In Hungary, Janos Kadar's relatively liberal regime opened up space for independent economic and political activity, allowing a "second society" to develop outside the state. This cordial relationship between the state and society estab-

lished a propitious context for an evolutionary transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. The combination of Hungary's liberal political and socioeconomic system under communism and the evolutionary transition from authoritarian rule, in turn, lessened the degree of revolutionary change necessary for the construction of a post-Communist democratic polity and capitalist economy.

The stages of transition in Poland and Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic and Slovakia) were not so orderly. Neither regime promoted political or economic liberalization until right before its collapse, creating polarized situations in both states. At the outset, Poland's transition was less tumultuous, based on "roundtable" talks and then catalyzed by elections, while Czechoslovakia's revolution was decided in the streets. Once Communist rule collapsed, this relationship was reversed: Poland's socioeconomic transformation has required more revolutionary action than the attainment of similar objectives in the Czech Republic.

Russia's move from authoritarian rule to democratic governance has been, and will remain, the roughest and most revolutionary. Of all the countries considered here, Russia started reform with the most entrenched state-run command economy and also with little or no historical experience with capitalism or democracy. Although initiated from above by Mikhail Gorbachev, Russia's transition to democracy became extremely polarized, culminating in the collapse of one system and the birth of another.

The collapse of the one side in this polarized transition was not total, however, as the new Russian state did not seize the opportunity to dismantle Soviet institutions and organizations after the coup attempt in August 1991. These holdovers from the Soviet ancien régime, be it the system of soviets or even the Communist Party, began to reassert themselves once the initial euphoria of the "democratic" victory in August 1991 eroded. Unlike similar legacies from the Communist past in East Central Europe, these structures in Russia are still deeply entrenched. Consequently, the task of constructing a new democratic polity in Russia while at the same time promoting transformation of the economic system (and overseeing the collapse of an empire) is qualitatively greater than in any East Central European country.

This striking contrast between East Central Europe and Russia underscores both the likelihood of success for democracy in the former and the fragility of its prospects in the latter.

The Mechanics of Transition

New political leaders are not simply prisoners of history. Critical strategic decisions can enhance, or harm, the consolidation of a democratic polity. In all post-Communist states the timing, sequence, and rules of elections have determined whether political parties coalesce and establish stable intermediaries between the state and society.[5] Elections held before the total collapse of the Communist system tend to polarize political forces into two camps: Communist and anti-Communist. These situations are highly volatile and do not establish the social or institutional basis for a stable democracy. Once the Communist system folds, however, the sooner new elections are conducted—the sooner a "founding" election is held—the better the chances for the emergence of consolidated political parties upon which a stable democratic polity can be grounded.[6]

The countries in this study handled this problem in very different ways. Hungary convened the first and most successful founding election, in which political parties, not social movements or charismatic individuals, defined the menu of choices for voters. The timing of this election, held right after the collapse of communism but well before the beginning of economic reform, facilitated the development of political parties as the intermediaries between state and society. Hungary's electoral law also discouraged fringe parties and encouraged cooperation between like-minded individuals and social groups. Consolidated political parties, proportional representation, and the relatively smooth process of economic transformation have diminished the need for a strong executive.

Poland was the first Communist country to hold elections but the last to have a free and fair election based on political parties. The first Polish vote for a limited number of parliamentary seats armed Solidarity with a mandate for change but did not stimulate the formation of post-Communist political parties. The vote produced a polarized parliament that did not represent Polish society and could not govern effectively. This condition gave impetus for

Poland's second election, a vote to create a presidency and a referendum on Lech Walesa. Walesa's victory affirmed his personal authority and established a presidential political system but did little to consolidate political parties. Poland's third election was the first in which the ballot was controlled by political parties. By the time of this election, however, both major political parties to emerge from Solidarity were associated with and blamed for the severe hardship caused by economic reform, providing political ammunition for new opposition parties. Low thresholds in Poland's electoral law also provided opportunities for small parties to gain parliamentary seats. As a result, Poland's founding election produced a weak and factionalized parliament.

The collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia was confrontational, chaotic, and sudden. The timing and sequence of Czech and Slovak elections, however, helped shape smooth transitions in each republic. Because founding elections were held after the Communist collapse, neither parliament has been paralyzed by struggles over fundamental issues.[7] Parties, not personalities or movements, also assumed center stage in these founding elections, even if these parties had poorly defined social bases. Electoral laws emphasizing proportional representation and promoting multiparty systems (not two-party systems) have impeded the development of strong presidential offices in both republics. The sequence of elections also fostered the peaceful split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The timing and sequence of elections in Russia as it began to make the transition from communism were worse than in all the other countries considered here. Russia's first election, in March 1990, produced a parliament polarized between "democrats" and "Communists." Political parties had only begun to appear and did not play any role in this election.[8] As in Poland, paralysis of parliament prompted a campaign to create a presidency. Elections for this new office in June 1991, however, were not based on parties. Rather, Boris Yeltsin, supported by the democrats, ran against everyone else.

Since the collapse of communism, Russia has not held a major election. Parties with new social bases have not developed, while Russia's parliament has remained fractured and polarized, unable to decide basic questions about a new political order. Because

economic reform has been particularly harsh in Russia, the current government is reluctant to call elections for fear of backlash. This situation has resulted in a very volatile transition in which democratic institutions such as regular elections or political parties have yet to play a role. As finally recognized by Russian leaders during the March 1993 crisis in government, convoking a founding election is necessary, although not sufficient, if Russia's transition to democracy is to continue.[9]

The timing and sequence of elections do not by themselves settle the course of post-Communist transitions. Historical legacies, ethnicity, even geography, remain crucial. The reform process in Poland, for instance, is eased by the extraordinary degree of national, cultural, and religious unity and the lack of disputes about borders or ethnic minorities.[10] Prospects for Russian democracy, at the other extreme, are threatened by secessionist minority movements within Russia and poorly defined borders between Russia and the other new nations of the former Soviet Union.

Geography also plays a role in democratization. Because of their location, Hungary and the Czech Republic experience the pull of the democratic West with much greater intensity than does Russia (let alone Uzbekistan or Tajikistan). By the same token, a democratic political system has become a precondition for "joining" the West, but some countries are more willing to pay the admission fee than others. Few Poles would doubt that Poland is in the heart of Europe. Whether Russia is in the West, in the East, or somewhere else is an ancient, yet ongoing, debate.

East Central Europe versus Russia

Democratic consolidation has proceeded much more rapidly in East Central Europe than in Russia. Polities in East Central Europe have evolved along different trajectories, among them both the creation (the Polish presidency) and dissolution (the Czechoslovak federation) of government institutions. Despite tremendous obstacles, all of these transitions from authoritarian rule in East Central Europe appear to be moving toward greater consolidation of democratic governments.

Russia's path is more ambiguous. The scale of revolutionary transformation required to create a capitalist democracy in Russia

dwarfs all others. Russia's democratic project is complicated by thorny issues of state borders, secessionist movements, and poorly sequenced elections. Democracy is not preordained to fail, but the obstacles to consolidating democracy are much greater in Russia than in East Central Europe.

The heart of this study is the comparative context for the Russian transition, which is laid out in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 discusses the origins and development of that transition, culminating with the August 1991 coup attempt. Chapter 4 analyzes the formation and consolidation of Russia's post-Soviet state, focusing on territorial integrity and the division of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government and among its different levels. Chapter 5 evaluates the reconstitution of Russian social movements, political parties, and civil society since the August coup. Chapter 6 concludes with a comparison of transitions from Communist rule to democratic governance in East Central Europe and Russia.

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