



Anniversary Symposium, “1989 at 30 years”

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Anniversary Symposium, “1989 at 30 years”

The thirtieth anniversary of the fall of communism and the onset of democratisation across Eastern Europe and parts of the former Soviet Union represents a significant milestone. Democratic institutions and processes have now had sufficient time to mature, stagnate, degenerate, or be dismantled. Three decades provide sufficient time for fine-grained comparative analysis of post-communist countries. A decade or so ago, from the perspective of Orbán’s Hungary or Kaczyński’s Poland, the distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’ looked to be more pronounced than ever. Today, the rise of the radical right and populism in Central and Eastern Europe show the extent to which parties in the region have been able to ‘catch up’ with the rest of Europe. At the time of writing, populist parties single-handedly or cumulatively gained above 30% of the vote in the last national elections in Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic, peaking above 60% in Hungary.

However, the impact of the migrant crisis or economic austerity on the quality of democracy, on public policy, the stability of political parties and manifestations of protest within the former communist states is invariably distinct. Hardly surprising perhaps given that their transitions to liberal democracy, market economies, and their accession to the EU have all occurred under pretty unique circumstances, barely resembling that experienced by their western neighbours. However, the days of viewing these countries as laggards, locked into a perennial process of catch-up, has long since passed. As article after article in this journal has charted, events occurring in the countries of Eastern Europe are likely to represent a precursor for what is to follow further west; an extreme reaction at the periphery or a more rapid and far-reaching impact amongst countries that are more vulnerable to economic crisis or other existential threats. Whereas once we assumed the party systems of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were on a western trajectory, or that Bulgarian civil society or Romanian elections would function like their western counterparts, no such assertions are now made. Indeed, over the past decade the opposite has appeared to be the case.

The four articles in our Anniversary Symposium capture the breadth of such a prolonged evolution. Our intention as editors was to use the anniversary as a pretext to provide space for scholarly reflection and for think-pieces on various topics related to post-communist politics, written by scholars that have been related to *East European Politics*. We were blessed to secure contributions from these five names. From various different perspectives they chart the specificity of what being ‘post-communist’ means today. They capture how the legacies of communism, post-communism, Europeanisation and the so-called ‘illiberal turn’ have cultivated civil societies that barely resemble their western counterparts, and political processes and institutions that function in ways that defy notions of transition or even hybridity.

Three contributions to our Anniversary Symposium provide a broader comparative perspective on the region. Milada Vachudova’s essay “**Ethnopolitism and democratic backsliding in Central Europe**” presents a top-down view of populism: a strategy to concentrate and expand power. A crucial element of ethnopolitism is flexibility in the hands of elites to define the “enemies of the people”. Vachudova highlights unexpected outcomes of democratic transitions. The standard bearers of democracy: Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic

spearheaded democratic backsliding in the region. Vachudova proposes some novel answers to address this puzzle: ethnic homogeneity, fast paced economic liberalisation and the vanishing role of the European Union in fostering liberal democracy. Populist leaders in Central Europe tweak institutions in such innovative ways that they are able to weaken accountability and preserve the façade of liberal democracy at the same time.

Michael Bernhard's essay "**What do we know about civil society and regime change thirty years after 1989?**" outlines four critical modalities of civil society in post-communist Europe: insurgent, institutionalised, uncivil, and firewall civil society. Insurgent and institutionalised civil societies are associated with social transformation and democratic beginnings. The uncivil society and firewall civil society indicate that liberal democracy is in tension with alternative forms of representation and governance. The uncivil society represents socially conservative and illiberal forces that give voice to those who oppose minority accommodation and prefer majoritarian democracies. Moreover, uncivil society can be weaponized to undermine accountability mechanisms. While the insurgent civil society was instrumental in shaping the patterns of party competition after 1989, the firewall civil society can be the last man standing in defending mechanisms of democratic accountability. While the insurgent and institutionalised civil societies proceeded historically in sequence, the uncivil and firewall civil societies emerged simultaneously. Their tension and intensity may well provide us with a key to understanding the patterns of democratic erosion across countries. Both Vachudova and Bernhard suggest that "firewall" civil society may be a crucial bulwark against democratic decay.

Zsolt Enyedi's essay "**Right-wing authoritarian innovations in Central and Eastern Europe**" focuses on ideological innovations employed by political actors in order to transform mainstream political discourse in an authoritarian direction. Similar to Vachudova, Enyedi emphasises the role of political entrepreneurs in explaining the authoritarian turn in the region. However, rather than highlighting the role of structural factors like economic liberalisation or ethnic composition, his explanation for the illiberal turn emphasises the role of ideas and ideology. He also uses a different term – paternalist populism – to describe a new overarching ideological frame and innovations that new autocrats in Central Europe employ to stay in power. He specifically highlights the victim mentality and resentment against the West, delegitimisation of civil society, return to the ideas of a strong protective state, and the resurrection of Christian identity, as some of the key ideological elements in the "populist establishment" discourse displacing liberalism.

The final contribution in our Anniversary Symposium focuses on one of the biggest illiberal innovators in the region: Poland. Stanley Bill and Ben Stanley's essay "**Whose Poland is it to be? The struggle between monism and pluralism in contemporary Poland**" is an unorthodox and original interpretation of current Polish democracy. They argue that Polish society is not divided by policy disagreements but by a new post-transition schism that threatens the very legitimacy of past and current elites is at stake. Bill and Stanley depict a society caught in a post-ideological space where the Law and Justice (PiS) party strives for "mono-power" that would allow it to 'redeem' Poland thirty years after the fall of communism. In the wake of one of the most divisive presidential elections to date, we believe that Bill and Stanley's contribution has the ability to capture the essence of recent power reconfigurations and anticipate developments that will shortly follow.

The thirty-year mark is also a significant moment for *East European Politics*. Under its new title since 2012 the journal has positioned itself as one of the primary repositories for comparative analysis of the government, politics, and societies of the post-communist space. The appointment to the editorial team in 2018 of **Lenka Bustikova** and **Andrea Pirro**, leading scholars in voting behaviour and elections, party politics and movements, and the far right signalled the journal's commitment to expanding its coverage within these particular sub-fields,

but also to reach beyond established academic and disciplinary networks. Whilst building on a tradition of pluralism within the social sciences, our overarching aim is to capture cutting-edge analysis of the institutions and processes within post-communist countries; to explore and challenge notions of 'democratic backsliding' from different perspectives, through comparative analysis, and via the deployment of sound conceptualisations as well as innovative and sophisticated methodologies.

We thank our current and past contributors. We also thank our reviewers and members of the editorial board, whose selfless efforts allow us to maintain a fast and rigorous peer-review process we, as a journal, aim to provide to our authors. As a journal, we are prepared to grow and evolve. Much of our internal discussions have recently revolved around the issues of diversity. We strive to be inclusive in terms of gender, regional diversity, and academic ranks. As editorial team we have also been taking some measures to enhance diversity, both in the composition of the journal's editorial board, as well as in the scholarship we publish. We look forward to receiving contributions that represent a great variety of voices in the study of *East European Politics*.

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