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**SHARED PASTS IN CENTRAL
AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE,
17TH–21ST CENTURIES:
HUNGARIAN AND BULGARIAN
APPROACHES**

Editors

Gábor Demeter
Penka Peykovska

SOFIA–BUDAPEST
2015

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Remembering the Changes in 1989 – a General Approach

Valery Stoyanov

Institute for Historical Studies – BAS

A quarter of century after the collapse of the Communist system is a sufficient time for an evaluation of the changes and the nature of the transition, the lost opportunities and hence – the price, which the Bulgarian society had to pay for alteration of the political paradigm. The positives are visible – Bulgaria today is a member of NATO and the European Union. This determines its position in the new world order and allows finding a support for its needs of modernizing. If only the new elite really wants it. Because the ruling class of today is a product of some *reduplication* patterns, typical of Russia and the Ukraine, and not of the *circulation* practices known in Central Europe. This explains the peculiarities of the Bulgarian transition, which in other times and other places would have different dimensions.

Two hundred years after the French Revolution, which blazed the trail for the real New Time, Europe became again a witness to the collapse of a system that seemed to be unshakable. The active revolutionary period in France took place over one decade – with the end of the *Directoire exécutif* (November, 10th 1799) began the rise of Napoleon, the future Emperor of France. The intensive transition time in post-communist Europe lasted also for ten years – in 1999 the NATO bombing in sovereign Serbia put the end of the bloody fight reshaping the political map of the Balkans after the Yugoslav breakup. It was at that time that Vladimir Putin replaced Yeltsin as president of Russia and started the new course, characterized by return to the Russian old imperial idea. But if

two centuries ago the events in France have played the role of social catalyst that corrected the evolution of the human society, those at the end of the 20th century seemed rather as an attempt to return to one condition, considered by many people as a “normal”. Then what actually was 1989 – the year in which like domino tiles collapsed the Communist regimes in Europe?

The unforced mastering of power in Czechoslovakia through peaceful protests allowed the change of system there to be defined as a *Gentle Revolution*. Later this term was adopted also for the changes in other countries of Eastern Europe. The Czechs are known as a quiet people with a melodious language. But they erupted in the “Prague Spring” 1968, as the attempt to build of socialism “with a human face” was crushed by the Warsaw Pact forces and this postponed the *Perestroika* with two decades. What happened at the end of the 1960s was a part of the chain of events, followed the process of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Bloc – with the “thaw” in the East–West relations and the cultural changes in the Western societies. As if the “loosening” of the system in the East influenced the social movements in the West and proved that all people are related, despite existing differences – an early presentiment of the coming world globalization.

The 1980s were in many respects an antipode of the 1960s. The world became much more pragmatic. Instead of rebels and dreamers the new generation was dominated by the fixed on the practical success young people – success now and at any cost. At that time the balance between the two superpowers was already broken. Although expected, the death of Brezhnev 1982 shook the Soviet society. In the same way like Beria took for a short time after Stalin’s decease the helm of the state apparatus, to be in his turn offset with N. Khrushchev, who carried out “the first Soviet *Perestroika*,” the power now was given to Yuri Andropov – the boss of the Russian KGB, bypassing K. Chernenko. The new “first man” tried to reform the rotting society (by enforcing the labor discipline, struggle against the corruption and imple-

mentation of a kind of “dry mode”), but only to strengthen the “neo-Stalinism”. The atmosphere of insecurity and fear became visible when the the South Korean passenger plane was shot down in the USSR in 1983 that killed 269 people. At this time Andropov was already chronically ill. Three months later, in February 1984, his position was occupied by Konstantin Chernenko, in order to be vacated again “naturally” a year later. This quadrille of the authorities, under which within three years the Soviet Union changed three top leaders, was a sign of the deeper political, economic and moral crisis. It was influenced also by the rise of the conservative powers in the Anglo-American world. The “Strategic Defense Initiative,” announced by Ronald Reagan, together with the increase of defense expenditure, the measures to limit the Russian access to high technologies and the support of anti-Soviet forces in the global scope (the “*Solidarity*” movement in Poland, the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, etc.) contribute to the economic erosion of the USSR.

The internal weakness of the country and the pressure used by the USA forced the Soviets to seek a younger leader, who could ensure the stabilization of the rule, offering new solutions for the long-lasting problems. The choice of Mikhail Gorbachev was – according to some interpretations – suggested by the KGB, where the project of *perestroika* has started already in Andropov’s time. Gorbachev was one of Andropov’s reliable people. This is evident from his first steps as a new secretary-general, who also attempted to reduce the alcoholism with raised prices and prohibition of spirits in public places. Later the concept of *glasnost* was added that reminds of the Khrushchev’s disclosure of the crimes, committed by the Stalin’s regime. “*Glasnost* and *perestroika*” [publicity and restructuring] – this was the motto of the Gorbachev’s time or the idea of transparency by managing the reforms in the Communist system. The *glasnost* was however selective – days passed before Kremlin decided to confess the nuclear accident of Chernobyl, and the *perestroika* seemed not to be driven by any clear concept. The impression was rather, as one

gropes after the way on the principle of “trial and error” and then adjusts to the results. However, the *glasnost* created prerequisites for the broader public support to the *perestroika* – a motion of spirit that was stronger and more embracing as that in the post-Stalin’s period. The way taken by the new Soviet leadership reminded the politics of Khrushchev, sharply criticized by Mao Zedong as retreat of the Marxism – “*this is not a Communism, but revisionism, in which the Communist party and its functionaries start to play the role of the bourgeoisie, which has an interest in restoring the capitalist society.*” The subsequent events confirmed his words and support the thesis that the totalitarian Communism was destroyed intentionally by the high nomenclature in the Eastern Bloc countries. The development has been encouraged (if not directed) also by relevant forces in the West. These common efforts from both sides of the “Iron curtain” have led to that moment, in which – according to the Theory of chaos – the accumulated sand cone collapses and gives the start of a new construction.

Its determination is very contradictory. In view of the turn ensuing 1989 in Eastern Europe this was a *revolution* that changed the commanding administrative system to multi-party governance and a market economy. As far as, however, people who took an advantage of the new conditions had had by then some key positions in the society, the turn was more of “*alteration.*” And by taking into consideration the struggle between the two systems that lasted for decades, the end of the Cold War was marked with the *capitulation* of the Communist Bloc that stamped its further development. In this sense, 1989 marks also the beginning of the *recovery* of a system, which in many respects was considered to be overcome.

Then was it agreed the *restoration of the capitalism* that started in Eastern Europe after the Gentle Revolutions? Reliable data allow us to answer this question with more certainty are still missing. But they could help to understand the differences in the way to overcome the totalitarian past. In any case, one gets the impression of the recurrence of used forms, methods and tactics

when the changes occurred in particular countries. As if this overall transition was “directed” by two opposite centers that continued in a new way the struggle for dominance in the already modified conditions. From ideological aspects, this was a fight between the *neo-liberalism* in its conservative type and the *communism* being forced to reforms that through the “socialism with a human face”, the “democratic socialism” and the classical social democracy found asylum in the left wing of liberalism, that allowed the ruling elite to achieve one smoother metamorphosis. Such was the evolution of M. Gorbachev, who at various times defined himself as a Communist–Leninist, as a social democrat or as a liberal. The same path is passed also by his followers, in particular by the head of the Bulgarian opposition at the beginning of the 1990s – the first president of the country, Dr. Zheliu Zhelev.

Probably, in the other countries of the former Eastern Bloc there was also such a rethinking of values in the spirit of the wind from Moscow. But this affected mainly the ex-Communists ruling by then, as the so called reformers renamed the party – instead of “communist” it became, for example, the “socialist” party in Bulgaria, the party of “democratic socialism” in the GDR, etc. In the most Eastern countries, however, there were long traditions of resistance (Hungarian uprising in 1956, the “Prague Spring” in 1968, the Polish *Solidarność* since 1980, etc.), around which united the efforts of the democratic opposition. It was connected in some places with a national[istic] “flavor” – the first mass demonstration against the regime in the Czechoslovakia, for example, took place on 25th March 1988 not in Prague but in Bratislava and this was a harbinger of the future separation of the Federation. On September 11th the same year 300.000 people demonstrated for independence of Estonia, and it made the national Supreme Council to declare on November 16th Estonia for a sovereign state. On 23rd August 1989, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, two million people formed a human chain of 600 km from Tallinn and Riga

till Vilnius with the request for a full sovereignty of the Baltic States. Already in the early February 1989 in Poland started to sit the so-called Round Table, on which the conditions for the transition period were agreed, and in September was made there the first non-communist government. The requests in Hungary for free elections and a multiparty system in February in the same year led to a policy of opening to the West. On 27th June the foreign ministers of Hungary and Austria removed symbolically the “Iron curtain” by cutting the wire enclosure on the frontier near the city of Sopron. In the early September, the Hungarian authorities allowed citizens of the GDR to leave the country on the path to West Germany, and on 23rd October (the anniversary of the uprising in 1956) Hungary was already declared as an independent democratic Republic. From Poland and Hungary the events were transferred to countries with more conservative regimes. The seeming refusal of Kremlin from interference in the internal Affairs of the satellite states contributed to changes in these countries, which, in turn, put pressure on the slowed down Soviet *perestroika*. A month after the celebration of the 40th jubilee of the GDR, during which Gorbachev warned his German comrades, that the “life penalizes the latecomers”, resigned Erich Honecker. On the 9th September as a result of alleged “lack of co-ordination” or “rashness” fell the Berlin Wall – the most emotional event in this “year of miracles”. It outshined the news about overthrowing one day later of Todor Zhivkov, the doyen of the Communist dictators in Eastern Europe, whose removal was apparently agreed with the Soviet ambassador in Sofia Viktor Sharapov. In the following month a change in power took place in Czechoslovakia, and in the second half of December unrests broke out in Rumania, the result of which was 1104 killed people inclusive the “first family,” Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu.

So, at the turn of the 1990s Eastern Europe strikes out in a new direction. A period of transformation began. The transition was different in the particular countries. After few attempts at

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reforms, the *GDR* ceased to exist, attached to the unified Germany. There, it was not necessary to make experiments, because the powerful German economy supported the integration of the Eastern provinces, although at the price of slowdown in its own growth. Moscow received 13 billion DM for its consent to the reunification of Germany and for the early return of its armed forces while the five “new lands” within the Federal Republic became a part of the territory of NATO and the EU. The other countries of the former Eastern Bloc have had a different development. It was faster or slower, depending on the proximity or remoteness to the “Old Europe” and in unison with the German interests. The states of Central Eastern Europe – *Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic* and *Slovakia* – were able to quickly overcome the initial problems and have built over time a well-functioned market economy, attracting foreign capitals. Similar was the development in the Baltic States – the traditional German influence there prevailed over the Russian neighborhood to such an extent that *Estonia, Latvia* and *Lithuania* separated from the USSR turned out to be more prepared for the EU admission than *Bulgaria* and *Rumania*, which started earlier the transition process. In both countries the “new socialists” succeeded to retain for a longer time their position in the society, adapting elements from the Russian model to the Balkan cultural milieu. The most difficult was the change in *Russia* itself – there one needed to initiate a *coup d’etat*, to achieve the public catharsis, allowed the introduction of such an order, which the “reformer” Gorbachev was not even dared to offer. The collapse of the USSR was a logical consequence of the inability to manage a situation with already exhausted methods and tools. But the problems arisen in some successor states could not endanger the general course of development in the post-Soviet space. Although the democracy remained to a great extend a façade, and the “appropriation” of the national wealth by handful of chosen people created one rather oligarchic type of rule, the transition there has reached also such a stage, in which there is no way back.

What have the people won and what have they lost in the next two decades? The profit is clear – they were released from an imposed system, which under the veil of Marxism served to the imperial goals of a foreign country. They acquired the opportunity to determine their own future. Just as the “glasnost” preceded the “perestroika,” the democratization was *conditio sine qua non* for implementation of economic reforms. But unlike the experience with overcoming totalitarian past in Spain and Germany, the transition from a planned state economy to a market one had no precedent. Hence – the problems of choice. Shall it happen quickly or smoothly, whether on the basis of the neo-liberal economic rules or of experiences with the social state, shall the removing of state property be through “cash” or “mass” privatization – the dispute went over this in the struggle for power between the reformed left- and right-wing political forces, claimed to be a “face of change.”

A certain role was played also by the historical continuity and the political culture in the particular countries. It was because of this that nations, united once in the Austria-Hungary, “drew” faster forward in their development, while those of the European South-East have had major problems. Bulgaria offers a typical example as a country, puzzling between three historically impacts of the oriental Balkan heritage (from South), the Russian cultural penetration (from North-East) and the European impetus for modernization (from West). These influenced its specific development in the whole transitory period. A few strokes:

While the experiments with the introduction of a market economy followed the movement of the “political pendulum,” the national wealth changed its owner – the state enterprises, brought to bankruptcy through a drain of funds, were sold for symbolical prices, and agriculture lands were fragmented to be returned “in real borders” without engaging with their cultivation. This affected the economy (many industry branches collapsed),

whose focus was shifted on the tourist business. The health care reform made the health more expensive but not improved, and in the education the process has led to the closure of schools and kindergartens. Art and culture have been left on self-help; the intentional support of the oriental “pub” folk-music caused changes in the mentality of a whole generation. The development of the science has ceased to be a state priority, despite all words in its support. Fill funds in elite sport has not stopped its decline. Smuggling of drugs and growth of the prostitution – phenomena, patronized by representatives of the executive power – additionally ruined the public morality. With the mimicry of the nomenclature, that transformed its political power into economic one, the success of the transition in Bulgaria is more and more questionable. Although incorporated in the EU, it will be long to overcome some deficits, which root in the way of life and mentality of a people, formed in the struggle for survival and inherited unaltered to the present.

Following blindly foreign models, all forces ruled till now are responsible for the situation, in which the “state” is seen in the grown administration, but not in its effectiveness, the country becomes more and more a territory of corruption and impunity, and the ageing nation continues to melt, also because of the “leaking” abroad of its young potential. The transition in Bulgaria destroyed the old system of values, forming a kind of society, comparable rather with those in Latin America than in Europe. This contradicts to its primary purpose and raises serious questions about the prospects of that country in the new world order.