

The Collapse of Communist Regimes and the Role of International Factors (1985–1992)

János Simon

Abstract

Most of the literature regarding regime change in Central Europe has focused on domestic political life, while little attention has been paid to the landslide changes that took place in the international arena in relation to the great powers. Study has analyzed the collapse of one of the poles in the bipolar world order, the Soviet Union, which made it possible to rearrange the lines of power and to liberate and democratize the Central European countries. Among the liberated countries in Central Europe, this study takes an in-depth look at Hungary. The success of the Reagan doctrine was based on the following five strategic principles: (1) the war in Afghanistan; (2) Star Wars plans; (3) the introduction of an embargo on the COCOM list; (4) the fall in world oil prices; and (5) the return to dollar and gold settlements. The study further distinguishes three technical types of exercise of power by the state socialist regime's politics: (1) deficit-oriented policies; (2) social welfare-oriented policies; and (3) consumption-oriented policies, which defined the character of the authoritarian systems whose effects are still felt today in the behavior of citizens.

Keywords: Bipolar world, complex transition, democratization, geopolitics, regime change, state socialism.

The following study seeks to provide a methodological background on how to approach post-communist regime change and interpret the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the region. Most of the literature on regime change in Central Europe has focused on domestic political life (actors, interest groups, institutions), much of which has drawn the erroneous conclusion that the changes within the systems themselves triggered the collapse (as a “domino effect”) and democratization of communist regimes.¹ Little attention

János Simon is a Research Professor at the National University of Public Service, Budapest, and Professor and the Director of the Institute of Contemporary Democracy at the University of Kodolanyi, Budapest, Hungary. <janosimon11@gmail.com>

¹ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 479.

has been paid to the landslide changes that took place in the international arena in relation to the great powers, so the background variables and related systems that resulted from the changes in the international arena have remained essentially hidden.² This essay maintains that the collapse of one of the poles in the bipolar world order, the Soviet Union, made it possible to rearrange the lines of power and to liberate and democratize Central Europe.

After the Second World War, the region of Central Europe was free until it faced domination and political repression by puppet regimes, during which time the region was part of Eastern Europe. It was only after the departure of the Russians that the countries of the region became free Central Europe again. Researchers who highlight the role of actors in the process believe that the regime changes in the region were initiated from within, whether by government reformers or by persons in positions in the opposition.³ However, these opinions do not, or only tangentially, take the transformation of international power relations and geopolitical rearrangements into account.

Domestic political tensions were present throughout the communist, state-socialist regimes formed by the post-World War II Soviet-Russian occupation, and at times cyclically appeared in the political sphere. It is enough to refer to these resistance attempts only by date: Berlin, 1953; Warsaw and Budapest, 1956; Prague, 1968; and Warsaw, 1980–1982.⁴ All the national struggles for freedom in the region and the attempts to realize democratization were broken under the threat of Russian tanks or the weight of the tanks, because the essence of the problem was Soviet occupation and repression. They are what had to be eliminated. However, the occupation was created by an agreement between the great powers at the Yalta Conference, and it was in the interests of both great powers to make it lasting. The Soviet and American sides sought to maintain a balance of power. One learns from János Harsányi's game theory that such a situation (that is, maintaining the status quo) always favors the weaker party.⁵ The occupation lasted until one of the poles of the bipolar world system, the Soviet Union, collapsed (1985–1990).

It must be pointed out that any change in the Central European region can be understood only in terms of the above process. No matter how heroic the nation-states' struggle for independence with their self-sacrificing leaders was, the war of independence could succeed only because of the breakdown

² Laszlo Bogar, "The Unknown Protagonist: Regime Change," *Central European Political Science Review* 21, no. 81 (2020), 87–98.

³ Samuel H. Barnes and János Simon, eds., *The Postcommunist Citizen*, 2nd ed. (Washington, Budapest: Erasmus Foundation and Institute for Political Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1999), 272.

⁴ János Simon, ed., *1956 újragondolása. Megszállás, megtorlás, menekülés, befogadás* [Rethinking 1956: Occupation, retaliation, escape, reception] (Budapest: CEPoliti Press, 2017), 439.

⁵ John C. Harsanyi, "Rational Choice Models of Political Behavior vs. Functionalist and Conformist Theories," *World Politics* 21 (1969): 513–538.

of the “Big Brother.” Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union shattered: first only militarily, then financially, economically, and finally politically and morally. Only the breakdown of the balance of power and the collapse of the Soviet empire allowed Central European countries to become independent and democratic.⁶ The main goal of this study is to describe the changes that took place in international relations and to present their role in the regime change.

What Needs to Be Discarded

Above all, what had to be transformed and eliminated in occupied communist Eastern Europe for it to become free Central Europe again? For the countries of the region to return to the path of organic development, they had to expel the Russians, on the one hand, and the entire model of social reproduction they had forced upon Central Europeans, on the other, meanwhile ending the internal violence that sustained it all. The first question is: What was the essence of the old communist regimes on a systemic level? The answer is provided by the description and analysis of historical processes.

On the “inorganic complex” societies and diverse cultures of Central Europe that had developed over a half century, the Soviets had forced a foreign, monolithic, Asiatic mode of production, building on, but shattering, a European-type free market economy. That was the point of the so-called “Soviet system.” This system severely limited the market economy and private ownership and established a central redistribution system (1948–1950). The Soviets shattered the former structures and institutions of society and, above all, the political system that had governed them. The new system (through the state party, the one-party system, the concentration of powers, and the establishment of a council system) abolished the former autonomy of social subsystems and alternative paths, which in turn led to a high degree of anti-innovation and anti-modernization. The communist system was fundamentally foreign to the historical structure of society, creating an inorganic formation instead of organic development, which could be maintained only by violent means (from 1948 onward). The Soviet-dominated government was served by violent organizations, the intertwining branches of power, and the entire dictatorial legal system. This was the essence of the so-called communist dictatorship.

Both the Hungarian Rákosi government (1949–1956) and the Kádár-system (1956–1988) were dictatorships, even though there were significant differences in the methods of exercising power. Hungary also had tougher (1948–1953, 1956–1968) and softer (1980s) dictatorships, but the Soviet

⁶ János Simon, “The Pillars of [the] Reagan Doctrine and [Their] Effect [on the] Collapse of [the] Communist World System,” paper presented at the University of Cluj, Romania, November 12, 2018, 17.

system itself in Hungary was clearly an authoritarian regime, dictatorship throughout, with, at most, differences in the methods of exercising power.⁷

Time stood still for almost half a century in the countries of Eastern Europe. If one compares the countries burdened by the communist past in terms of development, it can be said that the advantage of Kádárism was that the institutions and values of the market economy were less shattered in Hungary than in Czechoslovakia or Romania, but the country and future generations became much more indebted. Overall, the entire post-communist region lags behind the development of free countries in Western Europe by almost half a century in terms of economic and social development.

The countries of the region suffered from a lack of political pluralism and a viable alternative, which was manifested in the defects of political culture, dissatisfaction, protests, and rebellions. Such a system could be maintained only through repression, which severely harmed the interests of broad sections of society.⁸ The cyclical crises in some countries manifested themselves in anti-establishment organizations and resistance. However, attempts to change the regime were doomed to failure, as all “rebellions” (would have) found themselves against Russian tanks. Decades of experience of resistance to the communist system made it clear that the condition to achieve fundamental change (freedom and democracy) was the weakening or disintegration of the Soviet empire.⁹

The amount of material explored by social scientists and the recognition of causal relations allows political scientists to conduct synthesis studies.¹⁰ This study provides a brief overview of the operation and transformation of international forces that caused change.

The Four Main Dimensions of “Complex” Post-Communist Transition

One assumes that regime change is not simply a transition from dictatorship to democracy, such as the transitions in South America or Southeast Asia, but instead a series of much more complex processes that are not necessarily evident. Transition often shows stagnation and reorganization, and the process frequently is delta-flowing, not replicating liberal democracies but reinforcing the diversity of types of democracy with their peculiarities.¹¹ Compared to

⁷ János Simon, “The Unfinished Post-Communist Transition: Short Notes on the State of Post-Communist Transformations,” *Central European Political Science Review*, no. 27 (2007): 17-26.

⁸ Laurence Whitehead, “Twenty-five Years of Freedom, and Various Shades of Grey,” *Central European Political Science Review* 17, no. 63 (2016): 11-30.

⁹ Simon, “The Unfinished Post-Communist Transition.”

¹⁰ Barnes and Simon, eds., *The Postcommunist Citizen*; Leonardo Morlino, “Analysing Democratic Qualities,” *Central European Political Science Review* 12, no. 44 (1999): 9-45; and Laurence Whitehead, “Twenty-five Years of Freedom, and Various Shades of Grey.”

¹¹ Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5-21.

the democratic regime changes in South America or Southeast Asia, there was much more to transition in Central Europe. It would be more appropriate to use the term “complex transition” or “transformation” rather than post-communist transition. If one wants to understand the changes that have taken place in the post-communist Central European region, one also needs to understand the main matrices of the transformation, because they show the essence of the social changes between 1988 and 1990.

This study maintains that the political dimensions of the post-communist *complex transition* were formed by four major matrices that together formed the system of transformation. At the same time, but always in different proportions and forces, they influenced the dismantling of the one-dimensional state socialist system and the construction of a world of freedom. The four main dimensions of the complex transition are:

1. Democratization of the political system
(During the transition: building a system of rights, institutions, and guarantees)
In all countries of Central Europe (1988–1994).
2. Modernization of the economic system
(Building a market economy, strengthening private property, privatization, and development of a banking system)
In all countries of Central Europe (1993–1999).
3. Integration of the society
(Struggles of occupational groups, social classes, and trade unions)
Poland (1992–1995); Hungary (1993–1998); Slovakia (1994–1999).
4. Integration and reintegration of the state
(National independence, ensuring the territorial integrity of the country, effective operation of symbolic and repressive apparatus)
East-Germany (1990–1991); Czechoslovakia (1993–1994); Member States of Yugoslavia (1992–1996); Moldova (1990–1992).

All changes, collective actions and activities, and political processes in the post-communist region can be understood only through knowledge about the changes that have or are taking place in these dimensions. The proportions and roles of the four components vary from country to country. In Central Europe, the first period was the so-called political transition, which took place between 1988 and 1993. The old and new elites fought for positions of power,

and at the same time, new political, judicial, and institutional systems of democracy emerged.

In the second period, the social embeddedness of the new elite in power was strengthened, resulting in national aspirations, the quest for independence, and sovereignty (Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, ex-Yugoslavia). The second period was the so-called economic transition, which took place at different rates (1993–1999). This was a period of privatization of socialist state property owned by the communists. Due to the privatization and reprivatization of state property and the decline of state involvement, social tensions surfaced, reinforcing the rift between the right and the left. There were the “new rich” (owners and entrepreneurs) and the “new dispossessed” (wage workers, day laborers, and the unemployed) who faced a series of conflicts. The unions and the institutions of the entrepreneurs providing the work were elevated to new positions and roles. Finally, the third period can be considered the period of consolidation and stabilization of the democracies, during which social integration had a smaller role than modernization.

Approaches of Researchers Regarding Regime Change

Researchers approach the processes that initiate a “complex transition” in several ways. Their starting point, as a type of hypothetical deductive method, determines their conclusions, and can be considered a choice among the explanatory reasons. The most common approaches to interpreting the forces generating regime change have been: (1) actor-centric; (2) economy-centric; (3) ideology-centric; (4) national identity-centric; and (5) society-centric. Compared to these approaches, this study formulates a sixth approach: a geopolitics-centric one. A closer look at the possible interpretations is warranted.

1. *Actor-centric*: The forces that generated change are seen as political actors, and the researchers examine their statements and actions. Accordingly, they have focused either on the activities of reformers attached to the state-socialist system, critical intellectuals, or opposition leaders outside the system. The opposition represented several ideological types, identifying themselves along different principles (e.g., nation-building opposition, democratic opposition, liberal opposition, reformist opposition, radical opposition, anarchist opposition, and so on). However, historical facts have shown that all those who wanted democratic change, whether pro-government or opposition, always turned their eyes toward Moscow and Gorbachev as they advocated for their cause.

2. *Economy-centric*: The consequences of the economic crisis in the Soviet Union were partly borne by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) countries. From 1985 onward, the prices of oil, natural gas, and electricity in Hungary rose sharply, which the government charged to the population. This led to a crisis, a deficit economy (Romania, Poland), or inflation and indebtedness (Hungary, Czechoslovakia), and social tensions induced mass movements to which the authorities responded by increasing repression (Romania, Bulgaria) or allowing pluralization (Hungary).
3. *Ideology-centric*: The researchers emphasize that, by the 1980s, the ideology of communist superiority, or Marxism-Leninism, which had been proclaimed for decades, had completely eroded. The ideal of the ethically exalted communist type of man became unbelievable and disintegrated because of harsh realities. Neither *Glasnost*,¹² nor *Perestroika*¹³ could reverse the process; the communist regimes entered a crisis of legitimacy, and new ideologies emerged, leading to partisanship and the political pluralization of the regime.
4. *National identity-centric*: In countries where tensions were strong and sentient intellectual groups felt the disintegration of the empire, such groups became increasingly courageous. The strengthening of national identities led to resistance to occupying forces and autonomy, followed by secession (artificial states: Soviet Union, Baltic States, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia).
5. *Society-centric*: Many researchers think that the source of change was the intensification of social conflict. They assume that when increasing social tensions (poverty, food shortages) united the atomized mass into a conscious and coherent social group, the potential for protest strengthened and the system collapsed as the protests became more massive (German Democratic Republic [GDR], Poland, Romania, Bulgaria).

¹² The meaning of *Glasnost* was clarity, a spiritual current that proclaimed honest speech, transparency, and accountability as a principle.

¹³ The meaning of *Perestroika* was transformation, an intellectual flow, which as a principle sought to resolve the closedness and centralization of the political system.

6. *Geopolitics-centric*: According to this study's interpretation, the essence of regime change in Central Europe was the change in international power relations, which led to the collapse of the Yalta system with the declaration of nonintervention by the Soviets. The liberation of Central Europe had begun, and the countries of the region regained their freedom. An important stage in this was when Mikhail Gorbachev himself confirmed to George H. W. Bush that he did not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of the Warsaw Pact countries (Gorbachev: Berlin, October 5, 1989; Malta, December 2–3, 1989; then the continued withdrawal of Soviet troops from Central Europe).

The sixth factor, which this study has formulated, highlights the importance of the new geopolitical system, the fact that international power relations had changed, and that the Yalta system had collapsed. Research and analysis so far have paid very little attention to this, so it is addressed in more detail below. The analysis basically focuses on international relations, and the related explanation concerns the relationship between the two great powers. One of the most important conditions for the success of any actual attempt at transformation in the region was an external factor, that is, to restore the sovereignty of the countries. There were several attempts to do so from 1945 to 1988 (Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, Warsaw 1981), but the breakthrough did not happen because the Soviet tanks and their champions intervened. But after 1989, a new life began. Why? What factors had to change in order for state sovereignty to be restored, in whole or in part, after 1989?

Let us ask at the very beginning the basic question of what factors caused the collapse of the Polish, the Hungarian, and the East German communist party-state system and the collapse of the international state socialist world system? Where should we look for the reasons?

The Reagan Doctrine: The Concept of Exhaustion

In the following, let us look at the connections explained above in their own historical reality. During the last thirty years, there have been few attempts to interpret international power relations and events and to explore their implications.¹⁴ The aim of the present study, among other things, is to further the understanding of the history of Central Europe in the twentieth century.

¹⁴ Antoaneta Dimitrova and Geoffrey Pridham, "International Actors and Democracy Promotion in Central and Eastern Europe: The Integration Model and Its Limits," *Democratization* 5 (2004): 91-112, and Hendrik Hertzberg and David Remnick, *Politics: Observations and Arguments 1966–2004* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 681.

What led to the economic collapse of communism? The five-pillar Reagan strategy, which can be called a coherent Reagan doctrine, led to the downfall. In the study of the Hungarian democratic transition between 1987 and 1990, many essays have been devoted to documenting the events and phenomena of democratization, but much less attention has been paid to the interpretation of content and meaning. Ronald Reagan was president of the United States for two terms (1981–1989), the most successful focus of his administration being international politics. Relying on Zbigniew Brzezinski, among others, who was well acquainted with the Central European region, he relaunched the arms race. His strategic goal was to exhaust and collapse the communist adversary, and he wanted to achieve this with a sudden expansion of the arms race, based on the five pillars of the Reagan doctrine.

What forces overthrew the communist regime? To answer this cardinal question, one needs to consider the Reagan era that dominated the 1980s (1980–1988) as a whole. The marked foreign policy formulated by Ronald Reagan’s government, the so-called Reagan doctrine, “bankrupted” the Soviet Union and thus the entire communist system. What was its essence? There were five strategic principles followed by the administration of the fortieth president of the United States which essentially defined the U.S.-Soviet relationship. They were almost carved-in-stone rules to which the U.S. adhered in its relations with the Soviet Union.

The success of the Reagan doctrine was based on the following five strategic principles: (1) the war in Afghanistan; (2) Star Wars plans; (3) the introduction of an embargo on the COCOM list; (4) the fall in world oil prices; and (5) a return to dollar and gold settlements.

1. *The war in Afghanistan*: The Americans lured the Russians inside the rocky interior of Afghanistan, then, by arming the patriots waging the guerrilla warfare, the forces of the occupiers were exhausted and driven out of the area. Reagan undertook to provide the military with state-of-the-art weapons (e.g., automatic handguns, reconnaissance locator systems, and shoulder-to-air missiles). As a result, the resisting Afghans caused enormous damage to the occupying Soviet regular forces in human life, easily shooting down their most modern helicopters and planes. Replacing weapons cost the Soviets enormously, and it also morally exhausted the Soviet military leadership, giving Gorbachev a chance to change generations in the general faculty. The Soviet Union had found its own Vietnam.
2. *Star Wars plans*: Reagan announced a “Star Wars plan” aimed at controlling the Soviet Union force from space

and, if necessary, delivering a first blow to it. The emerging system required huge sums from the country's budget, significantly increased military spending, and again gave impetus to the arms race between the two great powers. The Russians were forced to spend on the military beyond their economic power, spending a much larger percentage of their GDP on "meaningless" things, which deprived them of considerable development capital for production. This accelerated the country's economic turmoil.

3. *Introduction of the COCOM list embargo:* The announcement of an international economic embargo on the Soviet Union and its allies, the so-called COCOM list, blocked high technology, credit, and development opportunities for the Soviets and their allies. As a result, gigantic investments were halted, such as the construction of the Siberian gas pipelines. The exploration of oil and gas fields was suspended, for which huge loans had been arranged in the past and repayment had become urgent. Due to severe difficulties in the extraction of Siberian oil, natural gas, and many other raw materials, export revenues fell sharply, and shortages of raw materials and money plunged the country into economic bankruptcy. It was almost a stab in the heart of the Soviet economy.
4. *Reduction of the world oil price:* Americans had drastically slashed world oil prices since the 1980s. They decided not to buy Soviet oil at \$8–9 per barrel, and instead began extracting Arab oil (mostly cheap Saudi Arabian oil) for barely \$3–4 per barrel. This was achieved by exploring new oil fields in Saudi Arabia and, in cooperation with the Saudis, U.S. companies had begun to extract cheap but good quality oil, reducing previously high prices. It was around this time that the extracts from the Arabian Gulf began to peak.
5. *Returning to dollar and gold settlements:* Reagan announced that the U.S. no longer would be willing to take the ruble in trade relations (e.g., wheat sales) from the Soviets, only dollars and gold. Thus, America kept pumping the gold and currency reserves of the Soviet economy, triggering unprecedented inflation in the country; the ruble was essentially devalued.

The creator of the Reagan doctrine is considered by many to have been Zbigniew Brzezinski, of Polish descent, President Carter's chief national security adviser, and Ede Teller, of Hungarian descent, is said to have been the theoretician of the so-called "Star Wars" doctrine.¹⁵ The Reagan doctrine not only weakened the Soviet state, but also constantly weakened its strength and shattered the entire communist system by the early 1990s: first the Soviet military industry, oil extraction, and mining, and then the entire economy. The doctrine initiated irreversible social processes, such as impoverishment, declassification, and fermentation in the deep strata of society, and influenced the politics and the federal system of the entire Soviet state. Between 1989 and 1992, the Soviet empire disintegrated, and Russia could begin to rebuild itself with far fewer resources. To deal with tensions, the Soviet system concentrated resources in the center of power, in Moscow and Leningrad. At the same time, tensions in the interior of the Soviet Union, the semi-periphery, and the periphery increased even more, especially in the already active Baltic states and countries with a South-Southeast Asian culture. In regional societies, centrifugal forces were organized primarily around national identity, and the strengthening of resurgent healthy nationalism led to the proclamation of the independence of the republics. This was only one consequence of the weakening of the Soviet empire, which ended in 1993.

Reagan is most often quoted regarding a message addressed to Gorbachev in the summer of 1987, as he walked on the west side of the Brandenburg Gate: "Mr. Gorbachev! Open this gate!" The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, made it clear that the collapse of communism in Central Europe was only a matter of time, and that this clock was in the hands of the Soviet leadership. Following the Maltese summit of December 2–3, 1989, Moscow was willing to denounce the Pact of Interests and undertook to no longer interfere in the internal affairs of Central European countries. This news reached the liberal anti-regime forces in Hungary sooner than the party-state or reformist forces. Gorbachev publicly confirmed this when he spoke at the United Nations on December 7 about the creation of a "new world order"; refrain from the use of armed violence; and a new system "based on political freedom, the right to self-determination, and the principles of non-interference."¹⁶ This was essentially the end of the history of the interdependent bipolar world system, and the beginning of a new era for Central Europe. The road had been opened to free, multiparty elections.

¹⁵ Simon, "The Pillars of [the] Reagan Doctrine and [Their] Effect [on the] Collapse of [the] Communist World System," 17.

¹⁶ See also Hertzberg and Remnick, *Politics: Observations and Arguments 1966–2004*.

Geopolitical Change: Eastern Europe Became Central Europe Again

The Americans consistently adhered to Reagan's proclaimed strategic principles. Within the Soviet Union, the economy began to deteriorate, followed by a "period of stagnation," as the Russians called it, followed by a deficit economy and bankruptcy. The central distribution system was ruined because there was so little to distribute. Oil production had stopped, shortages of raw materials and goods had arisen, and the Treasury's foreign exchange reserves had declined significantly and continued to do so steadily. This had foreseeable consequences for production, food supply, as well as living standards and there was a dramatic increase in crowd dissatisfaction. At the ideological level, belief in the supremacy of communism and legitimacy eroded rapidly. The society had been atomized, and everyone strived for individual survival, as people were vulnerable due to state centralization and market shortages. Then, after a while, following intellectual groups and religious leaders, the people began to organize into groups according to their own national and religious identities. On the fringes of the empire, the nationalities perceived that the center of power, which did not take care of them anyway, had weakened considerably, thus strengthening national identities, increasing the desire for independence and separation from Moscow; one after another, the republics left the empire.

What was the situation like in the Western fringes of the empire? At that time, Central Europe was called Eastern Europe in terms of geopolitics. However, by the end of 1989, the Soviet Union had neither the interest nor the strength to keep the Central European countries occupied, and, by the autumn of 1989, it was clear that it would withdraw its military interests in the countries of the region, from the GDR to Hungary. Gorbachev's most important opening step to this reversal of Soviet control was to withdraw his support from the communist party-state forces in the region, leaving it to the internal political forces of each country to decide on power in a party race.

The last pillar of the empire, the army, was demoralized and collapsed. At first, only the Central European states announced the abolition of the one-party system, which was essentially the Soviet's means of power over the locals, and held free, democratic, multiparty elections, demanding the departure of Soviet soldiers. Later, the Soviet member states seceded one after the other, eliminating about a quarter of the Soviet Union's territory. By the 1990s, Soviet soldiers were "tired and exhausted." The end of the process was their complete withdrawal from the countries of the region (1991–1994); there was neither resistance nor nostalgia.

Hard and Soft Authoritarian Regimes of the Party-States of Central Europe

When one considers hybrid regimes, the character of earlier eras in which these systems are partly or completely rooted must be considered.¹⁷ What was the essence of the abolition of communist regimes?

First, the party had to be “scraped” from the state and then, if possible, disbanded or banned (based on its past and/or dictatorial tendencies). During the Second World War, the occupying communists deployed an Asiatic-type, despotically functioning, one-party political formation on the relatively developed social structure of the occupied countries in the region. The party controlled from outside and above, occupied the state, and made the organizational and operational system of the societies monolithic. This is how the party-state system was created, which was kept alive only by the occupying forces and their servers.

When the Soviet agony began, resistance from Central European societies was expressed at a political level. It appeared first in intellectual organizations, then in reform calls for freedom, in publications, in discussion forums, rallies, reform proposals, programs, party platforms, then in party-like formations, and finally in smaller and bigger parties. When partisanship gained momentum, the legal recognition of parties, the dissolution of the one-party system, and the separation of the Communist Party from the state became necessities. Media freedom and the possibility of financial independence became requirements at the same time as party competition with legal guarantees.¹⁸

It is instructive to review the types of systems developed to exercise power in state socialist (communist) countries during the decades of Soviet occupation. Some practiced the use of force (i.e., the strength of repression and the narrow autonomy of social subsystems determined the inflexibility of the system, so that overthrowing it was most likely possible only by force—Romania, GDR, Czechoslovakia), while more flexible systems provided a chance for a negotiated settlement. As emphasized before, the communist systems were dictatorships everywhere, so the individual branches of power were not separate; the party monopoly dominated both the institutions (their operation and their operators) and the legal system they created. This essay considers only hard and soft dictatorships, at most, according to the extent to which the authorities used force to retain power. In terms of the way in which power was exercised, there were systems that used overwhelming means of force, while there were governments and periods when softer means—the symbolic sphere—were given a greater role.

¹⁷ Morlino, “Analysing Democratic Qualities,” and Leonardo Morlino, *Changes for Democracy: Actors, Structures, Processes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State* (London: AEI Press, 1994).

Comparison and summarization of the tables below seek to answer the extent to which a dictatorship relied on its own repressive apparatus of violence or instead depended on the perceived or real power of the symbolic sphere. The way power was exercised is shown on a four-point scale (1–4) so that it can be used in international comparisons. One half of the scale points in a more dictatorial direction (1) and the other half in a more democratic direction (4). Summarizing the intensities, one can gain a picture of the extent to which the communist system of power operated its repressive apparatus in each period and country. Particularly instructive is the data series of the 1980s, Gorbachev’s period of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*, which significantly determined the nature of the transition.

This study was able to distinguish three technical types of exercise of power by the state socialist systems, or, if you prefer, “party-state” politics (see tables 1 and 2): (1) deficit-oriented policy; (2) social welfare-oriented policy; and (3) consumption-oriented policy. What the policies mean follows.

1. *Deficit-oriented policy* was an unintended consequence of one type of communist system; it actually stemmed from its operation. Because the society consumed more than it produced, in the absence of borrowing (like Romania) or because of its huge indebtedness (like Poland), it was able to produce nothing but a constantly growing shortage of products and thus was challenged by supply disruptions. The straightforward technical consequence of this was that the party-state operated mainly violence organizations and repression apparatus: its police, secret police, homeland security network, and prisons. Of course, both the legislature and the judiciary were subject to them, serving them (not the truth).

2. *Social welfare-oriented policy* represented another type of communist system that sought to gain social legitimacy for the deprived system by handouts through the state’s redistribution system (social housing, free union transfers, child, family, and pension benefits). In doing so, it sought to compensate not only for the lack or restriction of collective political rights, but also for the scarcity of material goods. It could also be said that it was a kind of strange system-building bridge between the two nonexistent shores (political rights and consumption). In exchange for its loyalty, it gave a kind of well-being based on such benefits to a society forced into servility. This created a type of paternalistic citizen.

3. *Consumption-oriented policy* also sought to compensate for the lack of freedom and to provide support for the system

through a relatively abundant market of goods. The best example of this is Hungary. Compared to other countries, this system relied less on a central redistribution system and to a greater extent on a market economy system, albeit a subdued one, which could be called a “limited market economy.” By means of this, Hungary formed the so-called “compared-to-country” concept to generate a sense of success characteristic of the Kádár regime: Hungary still had the best living conditions compared to other communist countries, the greatest degree of freedom, and an abundance of goods compared to others. Hungarians lived well compared to others, so many confessed that “we had something to lose.” The system legitimized by consumption was called “fridge communism” or “goulash socialism” in the West.

The other extreme was seen in Romania, which struggled with a lack of consumer goods, deprivation, and poverty. Tensions were dealt with by force. The wielders of power had no need for any other form of “popular legitimacy” than that built solely by creating fear and engaging in oppression.

If one compiles the characteristics of the Hungarian state socialist exercise of power in the 1980s based on the data that have been provided, one can describe the political space of the period between 1985 and 1990, in which the political transition from dictatorship to democracy took place. The political system of the late Kádár era, as indicated, was undoubtedly a dictatorship in its organizational structure and functioning, but a more permissive type, which operated under much softer procedures and legitimacy mechanisms than both during its initial period (1956–1966) and other socialist countries. Ordinary police terror did not appear directly in Hungary, or only softer, “finer” forms. In addition, Hungary was better in terms of liability, as the market played a larger role than in other countries and the supply of consumer goods was greater.¹⁹

In Conclusion

There are five important points to be drawn from this study. First, there was a transformation of the geopolitical situation: the upset of the American–Soviet balance. It became clear that the change in American–Soviet relations, the strengthening of America, and the continued weakening of the Soviet Union inspired the opposition forces and then weakened the reformist communist forces. This, in turn, accelerated and facilitated partisanship as well as the path to free elections in all Central European countries.

¹⁹ Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens—Global Support for Democratic Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Table 1. Orientation of the Policy of the Dictatorial System in Relation to Provision to the Population (1980–1989)

	Deficit-oriented policy	Social welfare-oriented policy	Consumption-oriented policy
Soviet Union	X		
Romania	X		
Bulgaria	X		
GDR		X	
Czech Republic		X	
Poland	X		
Hungary			X

Table 2. The Way in Which Power Was Exercised in Communist Regimes (by country, between 1956 and 1989; 1 more dictatorial, 4 more democratic)

	After 1956	After 1968	After 1978	After 1982	Total
Romania	1	3	1	1	6
Bulgaria	1	1	2	2	6
Czech Republic	2	3	2	2	9
Poland	2	3	1	4	10
Hungary	1	3	3	4	11

Note: See also János Simon, “Post-Paternalist Political Culture in Hungary during the ‘Melancholic Revolution’ (1989–1991),” *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 26, no. 2 (June 1993): 226-238, and id., “Freedom or Well-fare in Central Europe and in Hungary,” *Central European Political Science Review* 14, no. 29 (2013): 53, 50-78.

Second, during the regime change in Hungary, compared to the other communist countries, the masses remained silent. They were apathetic and ready to follow, because after 1956 they were silenced by violence and terror, and then consumer socialism made the masses apolitical.

Third, in Hungary, the bargaining processes of political elite groups played a prominent role in the dismantling of the dictatorship. In the working groups formed by the National Round Table (NRT), there was usually a bargaining between the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) and the Opposition Round Table (ORT), at the end of which in most cases an agreement was reached between the negotiating partners.

Fourth, the logic of the National Round Table negotiations was “legitimacy for legitimacy,” that is, the opposition was legalized by the government, and, in return, the opposition gave post-legitimacy to party-state power, which it had not had since 1956 (or even 1948).

Fifth and finally, the study has tried to identify the great differences in the world of people's experiences, consciousnesses, and political cultures among the countries belonging to the Soviet sphere of interest. The character of the old dictatorship influenced the regime change in the countries as well as the pace of the stabilization of democracy. The memory of the old, authoritarian system, through family socializations, still lives on in people today and influences their political orientations.

