

The Baltics of the Early 1990s. Between Democracy and Authoritarianism¹

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ABSTRACT

There are three alternative routes for the political development of the post-Communist countries. Firstly, there may be a gradual transition to pluralist democracy; secondly, there may be a new kind of authoritarian regime; and thirdly, there may be continuous tension and ambivalence between democracy and authoritarianism.

Democracy in newly restored small nation states suffers from double pressure. These states tend to give a higher priority to national independence than to democracy. On the other hand, the great economic powers tend to perceive these small states more as potential markets where not so much democracy but political stability matters.

But democracy is a late-grown and tender plant even in its European home (The Economist Feb 22nd—28th 1992, p. 21).

Limits and Choices in Post-Communist Countries

The peoples of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are caught in a process of broad historical significance — the emergence of a new phenomenon — post-Communism. One of the critical questions here, as pointed out by Zbigniew Brzezinski, is whether the transition from Marxist-Leninist dictatorships will gradually lead to pluralist democracy or to some form of nationalistic authoritarianism (Brzezinski 1989, 252). According to Brzezinski, the most probable successive stages in the retreat from Communism are: Communist Totalitarianism

(CT), Communist Authoritarianism (CA), Post-Communist Authoritarianism (PCA) and Post-Communist Pluralism (PCP). Schematically it can be presented as follows:

CT → CA → PCA → PCP

Brzezinski does not entirely exclude the possibility of a post-Communist transition directly to democracy, but, as he notes, there is little encouragement that the historical record can offer for this alternative.

Thus, in the case of post-Communism we seem to be confronted with a basic political choice: democracy or authoritarianism. In effect, this choice can hardly be imposed on a society from above by subjective decision-making. Rather, it will emerge as an aggregate result of a complex constellation of both subjective and objective prerequisites, conditions and opportunities in various realms of a society and its political, cultural and economic environment.

The question we should ask here is about the limits of that choice. Can we freely choose be-

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tween different options, or are there only forced moves that we have to take? It is the old question of how much man can influence his own history, asked in the new context of post-Communism. Given a certain constellation of internal and external factors, subjective and objective conditions, can a country quickly pass through Post-Communist Authoritarianism, or even skip it and proceed directly to Post-Communist Pluralism?

As there exist no absolute measurements of these conditions, the only way towards the answer, however tentative, to this question requires assessments of societies with comparable historical, political, cultural and social circumstances.

History shows that in the development of a society, as in any other process of development, there are critical periods when broad and sudden changes are taking place, and/or crucial decisions should be made. What makes these periods critical is that certain conditions must exist or be created at the right time. Otherwise, chances for change may be lost and the nature of the ensuing development will be different from what it could have been. The emergence of post-Communism is one of these critical periods of change.

Three Ways Out of Communism

In theory, looking at an individual post-Communist country's transition from totalitarianism to democracy during a definite period of time (e.g. one generation) after the establishment of formal independence (FI), we have three basic options, which should be viewed as ideal cases.

1. *Post-Communist Authoritarianism sets in after the establishment of formal independence (FI) and then evolves into Post-Communist Pluralism.*

CT → CA → FI — PCA → PCP

This option reflects a situation in which there is no democratic tradition to speak of and most of the institutions and other components of the democratic process still need to be created. This occurs during a period of transition, with hopes for democratization in the future. This is a probable, mainstream option for any country that enters post-Communism. As is generally believed, it may take a whole generation or more to establish democracy and stabilize it. (See Vanhanen 1984, 129—136).

2. *Post-Communist Pluralism comes first and then evolves into some form of authoritarianism.*

CT → CA → FI — PCP → PCA

This option describes a situation in which a democratic tradition does exist, but the democratic forces are not strong enough to restore democracy fully. Here, they fail to stabilize under the pressure of the authoritarian legacy. By authoritarian legacy, I mean not only a certain mode of political thinking or type of personality, but also the structure of group interests shaped by the centralized distributive state, a type of economy, and a way of life established under these conditions.

3. *A situation emerges in which the above-mentioned two schemes operate simultaneously, creating a tense atmosphere of prolonged choice (x) between democracy and authoritarianism for a long period.*

CT → CA → FI — X $\begin{cases} \nearrow \text{PCP} \\ \searrow \text{PCA} \end{cases}$

This third option designates a relatively weak democratic tradition and/or democratic forces that cannot immediately surpass the resistance of authoritarianism and are forced to fight a long battle to achieve democratic goals.

From Communism to Pluralist Democracy

A country that is tending to follow the first option and approach democracy, if at all, through Post-Communist Authoritarianism, is Russia. Usually mentioned among the factors responsible for this tendency are the following: lack of democratic experience in the past, size of the country, strong legacy of centralized authoritarian rule, legal nihilism of citizens, dangers of aggravating nationality relations, break-down of the economy and massive social unrest. Behind all of these lurks the danger of losing control over an army with nuclear weapons.

These are predominantly the internal factors, both subjective and objective, of Russia. The bigger the country, the more its internal conditions matter. External factors can only slightly modify them, if at all. The main concern of the West seems to be the security of nuclear weapons in Russia. Therefore, for Western people, the stabi-

lity of the Russian political system is more important than ideas of democracy.

Russia has long been a security problem for the rest of the world. Historically, it was mainly military security that was concern. Today, the problems of the Russian economy, tensions in inter-ethnic relations and environmental problems, all interlinked with military security, are added to the list of concerns. As a result, the West is seriously motivated to support the stabilization of Russia almost at any cost that Russia regards proper.

From Communism to Post-Communist Authoritarianism

The second option implies a non-gradual sequence of events. It consists of a powerful attempt to leap into Post-Communist Pluralism, i.e. democracy, directly from Communist Authoritarianism. In this case, a living memory of democracy must exist that makes it possible to perceive democracy as a positive value related to national identity. Relatively strong democratic forces supported by popular aspirations must also be present. However, what follows is a gradual retreat from democracy toward authoritarianism under various scarcities and pressures. Such a degradation of democracy is likely to happen when the existing preconditions of democracy are overestimated and important obstacles to and prerequisites for democracy are underestimated.

A telling example here is Ukraine, which, according to both left-wing and right-wing politicians, is doomed to a new authoritarianism or even totalitarianism. The Zaporozhye republic of the 16th and 17th centuries, one of the early democracies in Europe, seems to be already too remote to influence the present situation (Ruban 1992). Some Russian experts maintain that Russia also belongs to this type of development, in which democracy is only a brief, volatile episode on a country's way from one form of authoritarianism to another (Filatov and Furman 1992, 9).

The formerly socialist countries of Central Europe may, perhaps, also cast some light on this option. For instance, in Poland, a freely elected parliament was so weak that the president claimed more power. An initial rapid advance of democracy in these countries was facilitated by the existence of nation states, which, it is hoped, creates better prospects for democratic recovery than in any other part of the Post-Communist world.

Between Democracy and Authoritarianism

It is my estimation that the Baltic states represent the third option — a prolonged choice between democracy and authoritarianism. Why is this so? A short answer would be, because all the relevant dispositions, conditions and people's interests are of a mixed ambivalent nature.

Let us consider the broadest possible socio-political and economic context of the Baltics today. From one perspective one could say that there is practically no choice at all for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Either they become integrated into the world economy (through EC or otherwise), subjecting themselves to the rules of the game and sticking to traditional Western values, or they are doomed to exist in isolation, outside the mainstream of world civilization, which seems a highly unrealistic option in this era of global interdependence. Internally, there exists a broad consensus in these countries to become more European economically, culturally and politically. Being more European now also means being a democracy.

At the same time, the great economic powers of the West tend to perceive these small states as potential markets where political stability matters more than experiments with democracy. So, the signals that the Baltics are getting from the West are contradictory. They evoke mixed responses because the smaller the country, the more sensitive to the signals from outside it has to be.

Let us consider the internal conditions of the Baltics. First of all, in the Baltics, authoritarianism lasted longer than in the formerly socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Additionally, they lost their state independence in 1940. On the other hand, the Baltics have experienced democracy in the past. In the mass consciousness this memory has produced several illusions and simplified conceptions related to democracy.

Distortions of the Idea of Democracy

Democracy as a concept and democracy in practice are both of a complex nature, as is reflected in the long history of classic democracies. This history remains largely unexperienced in the so-called new democracies, which began to emerge with the democratization of Portugal after 1974, but especially in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics, which joined this process of democratization only by the end of the 1980s. This obvious difference between the old and the new,

would-be, democracies manifests itself in two interrelated distortions of the perception of democracy that can be observed in the Baltics now.

First, in the new democracies there exists a strong temptation to expect too much from democracy as such and regard it as a universal solution to all the different problems of society — political, social, economic, administrative and cultural. But, as Schmitter and Karl remind us, all good things do not necessarily go together. Democratization will not necessarily bring in its wake economic growth, social peace, administrative efficiency, political harmony, free markets, or the end of ideology (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 85—87).

The most fundamental difficulty for the new democracies is that many basic social relations, which have taken centuries to mature in classic democracies and liberal market economies, are lacking and should somehow be very quickly created during the transition to political democracy and market economy. New hierarchies must be established based, in the first place, on ownership and income. When time is short the only way to force people into these new hierarchies, while breaking the old ones, lies through political means.

For instance, the legislature can decide to carry out a rapid privatization. However, such a task might destroy democracy, because there will be no end to the attempts of some factions to decide such vital issues as ownership and income in their own interest (See Usher 1981). However, these theoretical warnings have been largely ignored by post-Communist countries, and faith in the omnipotence of democracy has prevailed. As a result, ownership reforms have not produced the desired results, creating political disagreement instead.

Second, in the former Communist countries the idea of democracy tends to become oversimplified, promising miraculous solutions to all the problems at one stroke. The basic methodological fallacy here is that classic democracies and new democracies are tacitly assumed to be similar in that the balance between politics and economics achieved in classic democracies is taken as a norm for the initial stage of a new democracy. On the level of mass consciousness, the oversimplification of democracy is manifested by the spread of illusions. Here I would like to mention three of them.

Illusions

The *first illusion* is that democracy is freedom

from the rules, laws etc. that were established under socialism. In other words, due to the specific character of post-Soviet circumstances, democracy is perceived merely as negative freedom, the freedom 'from'.

In ex-communist countries, democracy has been idealised and treated as a miraculous tool for radical change of political life not as something to be created over generations. Every negative aspect of societal life under communist regimes has paradoxically contributed to this idealistic perception of democracy. In effect, every social constraint upon the individual was interpreted as originating from the Communist regime.

There were good reasons to think and feel so, because the claims of Communist regimes were all-encompassing. These regimes claimed that they would take care of every single aspect of what was happening in society. The paternalistic element, another side of social control, was very strong.

This brought mixed consequences. Living under such paternalism, people inevitably developed the so-called learned helplessness: they did not show initiative themselves, waiting for the authorities to take over or move first. On the other hand, the restrictive side of paternalism unconsciously added to what might be called latent rebelliousness against anything associated with social organization of any kind or scope.

People in a situation like this failed to discriminate between regime-related and civilization-related constraints on his or her individual existence. Escape from these distressing limitations was envisaged as an ideal picture of democracy; one that would bring total liberation from any coercion.

In practice, among other things, this idealized perception of democracy justified the dismissal of state control bodies and set the stage for unrestrained embezzlement, speculation in state manufactured goods, and further deterioration of public morals.

The *second illusion* is that democracy brings the market economy along with it and makes everybody better off.

The reason for this illusion is twofold. The political regime in communist countries inhibited production by undermining people's incentives to work. In people's minds, the lack of democracy became very firmly associated with poor economic performance and a low standard of living. On the other hand, almost all the developed (and rich) countries are political democracies, and they all,

of course, have market economies.

In the 1980s, of the 20 countries with the highest GNP, as many as 15 were democracies (See Dahl 1991, 19). From this the Balts infer the conclusion that democracy makes you rich. In this case the relationship between democracy and the market economy has been oversimplified.

In fact, political democracy is not necessary for a market economy to exist. Moreover, some market economy institutions are rather authoritarian. To organize people's work efficiently requires types, conditions, and amounts of labour that people would never choose in a state of freedom. This promotes social inequality (Lummis 1991, 32—34). Not everybody can be rich. Some must stay, or become poor. This inequality must be maintained to discipline people and keep the economy efficient. There have been countries where a market economy existed but democracy could hardly be found. In many others, however, democracy and market economy could be viewed as complementary to each other.

The *third illusion* is that independence and democracy go together.

It is true that in the late 1980s the Baltic states were very explicitly determined to establish independence and democracy in their countries. A number of steps were taken that released the initiative of the people. Expectations were high both at home and abroad.

However, after independent Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were internationally recognized in August—September 1991, the mood among the Baltic peoples about their home-made democracies became hesitant and more complex. Concerns were expressed both at home and abroad about the nature of these newly created polities, and doubts were voiced over some patterns of their evolution. Some politicians and public figures in the Baltics and beyond warned against the danger of emerging authoritarianism and human rights violations in these countries. Others, on the contrary, were in favour of a strong presidency to save the country, for instance, Lithuania, from a non-right-wing takeover.

Although democracy was used as a powerful incentive to give an additional momentum to the independence movement, it is clear from what we now know that whenever there is a need to make a choice between independence and democracy, independence is given a higher priority than democracy, especially in countries that have just achieved or restored their independence. Such a

stance seems justified if the long and hard road to independence is taken into account. Probably nobody wants to give up something that has just been achieved at a very high price. Neither do the Baltic states want to give up their independence. However, this created tension in the national consciousness »between the universalistic value orientations of democracy and the rule of law, on the one hand, and the particularism of a nation demarcating itself off from the outside world, on the other» (Habermas 1988, 6). If there are stumbling-blocks on the Baltic way to democracy, then this tension is one of them; perhaps not the greatest, but, certainly, the most recurrent and annoying.

The Soviet Heritage

One more aspect of a simplified understanding of democracy should be mentioned. Under the Soviet regime it was systematically emphasized that socialist democracy was majority rule (power of the people). At the same time, nothing was said about the protection of minorities. In effect, political minorities (such as fractions in the Communist Party in the first place) were officially banned at the 10th Party Congress in 1921.

A popular understanding was created in the Soviet Union that minorities have virtually no rights if they try to have their own way in areas where the majority does not allegedly approve of them, especially in political matters. According to this popular understanding, repression could be used against minorities if they refused to agree with the majority and stubbornly followed their own course of action.

The people in power carefully avoided any public acknowledgement of what the majority, or any social group, really wanted or was thinking. Such information could have seriously endangered the legitimacy of the regime, which was allegedly always supported by the people, i.e. the majority, and which always justified its actions, however brutal, by allegedly fulfilling the will of the toiling masses.

Hence the difficulties of establishing sociology in the Soviet Union and in the Baltics because the sociologists threatened to become the first group of professionals able to learn even more about society than those in ruling positions. Everyone who criticized the views of the political leadership risked ending up in a political minority and facing repression. Political tolerance was practically non-existent.

The restoration of political independence did not change overnight the political culture of the people. When the Estonians felt themselves a political majority again after spending 50 years as a minority, they tended to resort to the socialist concept of democracy, which lacks the idea of protection of minorities. Some of the roots of the problems with large Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia may well stem from this.

Another principle of democracy definitely lost during the Soviet period is that of division of powers. Authoritarianism, most naturally, preferred to centralize all powers in one center.

Thanks to the free media we have learned a lot about the power struggle at the top, especially between Baltic parliaments and cabinets. But Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are not unique here. The principle of the division of powers is gaining practical recognition with extreme difficulty not only in the Baltics but also in other Post-Communist societies accustomed to the concentration of power.

In Estonia, a political struggle between legislative and executive power was very open in 1990—1991. Neither Parliament nor the Cabinet, appointed in 1990, behaved in ways that one would expect from democratic procedures. Parliament systematically rejected draft laws proposed by the Cabinet, while the latter did not execute laws adopted by the former. Such »cooperation» produced a virtual deadlock where no major problem could be resolved.

A situation like this can hardly be labelled democracy. But it is not authoritarianism either. In fact, what we have had and probably still have is an odd mixture of Communism and Post-Communism, authoritarianism and democracy, disillusionment and mysticism, fear and hope in people's minds, behavior and their social environment.

Back to Pre-Communist Era

The movement towards political democracy and market economy in the Baltics has been accompanied by a specific phenomenon — an excessive restoration of various associations, societal structures and networks that came into existence during the pre-war years and were destroyed after the Soviet takeover in 1940. This, unfortunately, adds to the ambiguities of the transition.

This restoration has been carried out in the name of undoing historic injustice, especially where ownership rights are concerned. Neverthe-

less, it is a controversial enterprise. Revitalization of various networks of cultural and socio-political activities can, in general, be evaluated positively because of their contribution to civil society and national identity. Restoration of pre-war economic structures, however, leads to serious problems because these structures cannot meet the requirements of a contemporary market economy.

For instance, in Estonia, the 1939 distribution of private farms by size is re-emerging when these farms are being started anew today. Data from the developed agricultural regions of Europe suggest that Estonian private farms should use from three to five times more land to be economically successful (Mets 1992, 9). For political and legal reasons, the sizes of the farms will not be different from those of 1939 because Parliament has decided to return the farms to their pre-war owners who were arbitrarily deprived of their property mainly in 1949, or to their descendants.

This decision brings along the pre-war structure of land ownership in its wake. Historic injustice is undone at the price of creating a large number of economically unviable private farms and putting their owners in a disadvantageous situation.

Tensions Between Democratic and Authoritarian Forces

Looking at the situation in the Baltics, we can see a near balance of pro-democracy and pro-authoritarian forces, which is reflected in the ongoing debate on democratic vs authoritarian tradition. Exploring the arguments in this debate, it can be seen that they are often simply different interpretations of the same basic historical facts. For instance, one of the main arguments allegedly supporting the democratic option is that the Baltic countries have had democratic governments in the past, while Russia, for instance, never has. The very same fact, however, is also interpreted as meaning just the opposite by pointing out that these democratic experiences were short-lived, suffered from instability and ended up with authoritarian regimes in the 1930s or even earlier.

Another pair of conflicting interpretations stems from the brutal nature of the Stalinist regime and subsequent authoritarianism. The partisans of democracy argue that, in the eyes of most people who lived and suffered under such regimes, democracy must have gained a very high value. Again, it can also be argued that Stalinist repressions provoked massive, die-hard dissatisfaction

and hatred, which now pushes people to seek full compensation or even revenge. Obviously, authoritarianism would provide better outlets for these aspirations than democracy.

Evaluation of the impact of Soviet ideological indoctrination brings us to controversial interpretations again. On the one hand, it can be maintained that this indoctrination was in effect counter-productive because the Communist ideology was discredited by the failure of its practical realization, especially economic. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the feelings of intolerance consciously or unconsciously accumulated in people's minds as an inevitable by-product of the indoctrination, which was based heavily on class-hatred and primitively understood equality. Now, when differences in incomes and ownership begin to obtrusively manifest themselves in former »egalitarian» socialist societies, this intolerance is being fuelled abundantly.

As one survey revealed, young people from the former GDR show higher authoritarianism scores than youngsters in West Germany (Lederer and Schmidt 1991, 4). We should keep in mind that the existence of intolerance and other negative attitudes in the society is an important precondition and resource for a new authoritarian rule.

In a recent Estonian poll, 28 per cent of Estonians agreed that during the transition period it is legitimate to concentrate the power in the hands of one individual or a small group of people (Einasto 1992, 45).

The Baltic experience so far seems to verify the observation made elsewhere that the new democracies must live in »compressed time» with an astonishing variety of parties, interests and movements all simultaneously seeking political influence, challenging the polity in ways unknown in earlier processes of democratization (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 80). The inability of the new polity to manage this complex situation and reconcile the conflicting interests of the population may give rise to a political, economic and legislative crisis.

The restoration of formal state independence could not automatically bring democracy to the Baltic states. The impression that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are already democratic countries is too optimistic. The illusion of a democratic Baltics is mainly based on five factors: (1) the emergence of the free media after the ideological controls were released; (2) the first free elections in more than 50 years; (3) favorable comparison with

less democratic, or distinctly undemocratic regions of the former Soviet Union; (4) references to episodes of democracy in the past; and (5) wishful thinking.

Conclusion

Democracy in newly restored small nation states suffers from double pressure. These states tend to give a higher priority to national independence than to democracy. On the other hand, the great economic powers tend to perceive these small states more as potential markets where not so much democracy but political stability matters.

Expectations from abroad and the pressure of international law standards do not make it easier for the Baltics to solve their internal problems, but there is no other way than to push even harder to get on to the tracks of democracy. Besides, the Balts must hurry to get this job done before democracy becomes universally obsolete because of its sluggishness in responding to global environmental challenges as a recent report to the Club of Rome prognosticated.

In short, whatever happened to people under Communist rule, the consequences for the future seem to be fraught with ambivalence as far as the democracy vs authoritarianism issue in a Post-Communist society is concerned. While Communist authoritarianism was undermining both the objective and subjective conditions of its existence in the long run, it, nevertheless, was simultaneously reproducing and reinforcing them in the short run by its mere functioning on a daily basis. A society that is leaving Communism behind has built-in ambivalence. It is divided over the issues of authoritarianism and democracy, and is doomed to a long internal struggle of making painful choices between them each time it ventures forward.

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