



MAPPING TRANSITION IN EASTERN EUROPE:

EXPERIENCE OF CHANGE AFTER
THE END OF COMMUNISM

Edited by Louisa Slávková

The Transition Dialogue Network is funded by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and managed by German Russian Exchange (DRA e.v.).



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ABOUT THE TRANSITION DIALOGUE NETWORK

In all the states of the former Eastern Bloc, almost everyone has their own personal experience of transformation from communism to some form of democracy. For some, this was in their adolescence, for others it was at a later stage of their life. Yet others had just graduated and had just started their first jobs, expecting the next stage of life to happen, but it never materialised. This was a time of disruptions and controversies, of breakdowns and new beginnings, of poverty and an abundance of goods, of new role models and banned old ones, of lasting confusion and insecurity. Walls were demolished and borders were opened, but many people never got rid of the feeling that newly erected borders had been created, just elsewhere in their societies.

WHO WE ARE

We are interested in these experiences of transformation, in all the little stories and how they, too, can help us understand what is at stake in our societies in transition.

Two years ago, we came together as a network of practitioners in civic education, and called the network: "Transition Dialogue: Mapping a Generation". We are members of civil society organisations from Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Romania, Russia and Ukraine. We are interested in the impact transition has on individuals: How do people deal with the complexity of transformation? How did transition shape their thinking about the past and the present? How did transition impact them as citizens and do they feel like active members of society? If not, what needs to change in order to motivate them to become active citizens and drivers of change?

WHY ARE WE EXAMINING TRANSITION EXPERIENCES?

As different as the six countries are, what unites all of our citizens is the challenge of having to adjust to a new society that has been changed in every respect – politically, economically, and culturally. The social

architecture and welfare systems have changed. Citizens had to find their way in a time when most of what had become common social norms, ways of being and orientation marks had, almost overnight, become invalid and useless. This also resulted in the role of the parent generation as guide to living in society becoming devalued. Relationships of power had to be, often painfully, rethought.

After 2014, the discussion of different views about transformation and the revolutions of 1989/1991 in Eastern Europe became even more relevant in the face of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the deep crisis of trust, especially between Russia and most of European countries. This also reflects a clash of ideas of society, political values, and state-citizen relationships, as well as the feeling some citizens have of being betrayed. In 2015, the rise of populist and nationalist politics following the refugee crisis brought about further questions about whether there is a link between past legacies and people's current attitudes towards migration and how much diversity societies can bear.

WHAT WE DO

We take a snapshot of the variety of civic approaches and the experiences citizens have had when dealing with transition in Europe and have tried to outline the common essence. When talking about civic approaches, we mean civic action carried by a spirit of pluralism, openness, and mutual respect. Transition Dialogue aims to become a sustainable platform, which brings together people and organisations working on, with and in transition.

In the previous two years, we have undertaken research, have held events and discussions, and have met with researchers, activists, and politicians. The network group met four times (in Sofia, Berlin, Kyiv and Zagreb) to get an insight in the different countries' transition histories and to meet representatives of NGOs and think tanks, government officials, and scientists. The network organised six panel-discussions (one in Sofia and one in Moscow, two in Kyiv and two in Berlin), and presented research at international conferences in Vienna and Thessaloniki.

ANALYSIS TO READ AND STORIES TO FOLLOW

All our network members have undertaken research on transition experience. In all the participating countries, we spoke with dozens of people about how they remember the time of transition. We were interested in the thinking, values, and experiences that unfold from anecdotes being told. We wanted to learn how people remember transition and how they act on their memory. The country reports in this book are based on these interviews.

Our collection of essays, blog posts and interviews goes beyond the scope of this publication and is available at www.transition-dialogue.com. Follow us on our journey to places of transition - Berlin, Kyiv, Sofia, and Zagreb. Watch our videos of panel discussions and workshops held by the network. Further, our partners from Ukraine and Romania edited video interviews to short transition stories that focus on the many different faces of change; the dramatic days, memories and sometimes funny episodes that occurred due to the transitions people experienced.

This book gives an idea of how transition is perceived in Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Romania, Russia and Ukraine. It formulates recommendations for civic education and for the empowerment of citizens to become drivers of change. The members of the network team are: Christine Wetzel (coordinator), Louisa Slavkova, Iva Kopraleva, Rafaela Tripalo, Judith Enders, Mandy Schulze, Dörte Grimm, Johanna Sievers, Irina Ilisei, Polina Filipova and Olena Pravylo.

Christine Wetzel for the Transition Dialogue Network, January 2017

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Introduction

2014 marked the 25th anniversary of the end of communism and the fall of the Berlin wall. This was closely followed in 2016 by the 25th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What had seemed to be a closed chapter in European history constantly reminds us of its legacies in one way or another: through people yearning for an idealised version of the socialist past, the backsliding of democratic institutions, the high level of disengagement among the young and old, the rise of political forces with authoritarian tendencies and the revival of historical hostilities.

One of the most-referenced frameworks to think of post-socialist Europe is transition - to democracy, to open societies, to a free market economy. Much emphasis has been put on the process of transformation of policies, institutions, and laws. But as it turns out, little attention has been paid to people's culture, to what Václav Havel called "the culture of everyday life or civility"¹. Change cannot be achieved without fostering civic culture. Institutions do not get reformed on their own and policies do not get enacted without the people behind them. Social transformation requires a large-scale shift, both personally and societally. Without this, systems cannot be reformed.

While democracy indisputably knocked on the door of post-socialist Europe, it is a subject of debate whether it got an entry passe everywhere and to what extent. Lead by these questions and dilemmas, a network of organisations and practitioners in civic education from different countries in post-communist Europe came together to discuss the ways transition impacted their societies. Specifically, we looked at the generations who went through transition and what they think about the world we live in.

¹ V. Havel, *Politics, Morality & Civility*, (The Trinity Forum, 1996), p. 29, http://winchesteru.ac.uk/documents/TFR_44_Politics_Morality_and_Civility__2_.pdf

The communist past, cultures of remembrance, competing memories, construction and deconstruction of narratives, dialogue between generations and between old and new elites, justice, a culture of consensus, the rule of law, the state of civil society, public spaces – this is just a glimpse of the topics we analysed through our practical and interdisciplinary approach. Most importantly, we looked into societal issues of today, trying to link them to the years of transition. For this project, we talked to both experts and citizens about transition and how it impacted them on a personal and a societal level.

There are two main criteria that we share as a group – each partner is a self-defined member of the generation of transition, and we all are citizens of post-communist countries. While there is a shared understanding about what transition is, it proved to be challenging to define and compare the generations of transition in each country. What was a clear-cut definition for the German participants, marked by the third generation of Eastern Germans, born between 1975 and 1985, became an artificial and problematic marker for other countries. Many Bulgarians, who consciously experienced the transition to democracy between 1989 and 2007 perceive themselves as belonging to the generation of transition – including the generations born between 1960 and 1995. For Russians, transition lasted only for a very short period of time in the early 90s, whereas for Ukrainians transition is happening as we speak. And in Croatia transition is strongly associated with the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Despite these differences, we were able to identify a set of commonalities that build on the experience of an authoritarian, communist regime, the collapse of that regime and the subsequent period of change. Even though not all of our countries were part of the Soviet Union, we all deal with issues relating to its legacies. And even though we do not define transition in quite the same way, our societies experienced drastic changes to their entire political and societal setups.

Our network is convinced that experiences of the past greatly determine the challenges of today and the way we respond to them. Five to seven decades of authoritarian rule had a lasting impact on citizens' understanding of values and institutions.

These days populism is on the rise in Europe and it is only too tempting to look for the same solution to it for every country. Our understanding is that Eastern Europe needs a different approach, which begins with a closer look into both communist and transitional Eastern European experiences of the past.

The following volume does not claim to be exhaustive, but instead offers glimpses into several post-socialist countries and how the organisations participating in the project address what they consider to be pertinent issues related to their own transition. We also make no claim of theoretical and methodological exhaustion. When the subject of examination is the present, like in our case, studying it through stories and interviews speaks to our intuitions as practitioners. We are aware of the singularity of story-telling, but also of the fact that stories depict problems, which traditional approaches tend to oversimplify. Stories can do what other sets of data cannot - make complicated issues accessible to every reader. As we found in our research, listening and understanding these stories becomes crucial to understanding the difficulties of transition.

The country profiles give a brief insight into the challenges each country faces as a result of communism and their transitions to democracy. They focus on a set or sets of issues and offer means to overcome them using the toolbox of civic education². As the countries face a variety of challenges each organisation deals with different ones, ranging from lack of knowledge about the communist past and nostalgia (Bulgaria), brain-drain (Croatia), the loss of a community spirit and space (Germany), missed opportunities in minority politics (Romania), conservative and authoritarian resurgence (Russia) or

² For the purpose of consistency, this publication uses the definition for civic education of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, namely providing information on political issues to all people with the goal to promote awareness for democracy and participation in politics through a broad range of educational activities. The terms civic education and citizenship education are used interchangeably.

left-over Soviet legacies (Ukraine). We hope that with this publication we will be able to contribute to a broader discussion about the role of civic education in countries in transition. We aim to demonstrate that unless the political culture of the citizens at large becomes a centrepiece of the efforts in countries in transformation, transition itself will be continuously perceived by many citizens as a failure. Institutions and elites usually take priority in countries in transition, but unless attention is paid to the society at large, legacies of the past will loom in the present, opening space for illiberal and populist forces to determine the future of democracy.

Louisa Slavkova for the Transition Dialogue Network, January 2017

Comparing Transitions: Challenges and Lessons for Civic Education

Louisa Slavkova

Looking at the bumpy transitions of the post-communist countries in this publication, it is easy to see that each case is unique. There was the reunification of Germany, a war in Croatia, uncertainty in Bulgaria, a transformation reset in Ukraine, a long communist shadow in Romania, and an authoritarian setback in Russia. However, there are parallels as well, particularly when it comes to the societal experience of change, memory and, recently, nostalgia. A lot has been said and written on the big picture, both in regards to the region and each country, but what, for us, practitioners of civic education, can be revealed in personal stories and personal experiences of transition? What is the added value of zooming in on people's life as opposed to, studying policies or institutions? What do the personal stories of transition tell us about the post-communist civic culture of today and what can we do to empower disenchanting citizens who are susceptible to populism, to become active architects of their civic lives again?

Common Challenges

Post-communist countries and societies are unique in their political, economic and social development. But the similarities are striking enough to make a comparison possible and to be able to work out a set of common challenges.

Reading history

The oppressive nature of the communist regimes has left a deep scar in Eastern Europe. Countries in the region still struggle to overcome the legacy of the past and to agree on a coherent narrative that unequivocally condemns communism, both as a political system and an ideology. The lack of consensus when evaluating the communist period is often quoted as a source of confusion, frustration and division in our societies. On the other hand, many of the key participants of the events before 1989/1991 are still active members of political life, which hinders coming to terms with the past.

Public institutions as a communist legacy

Communist legacies remaining unchallenged are, therefore, a key factor, which stifles the success of transition. They are especially durable in public institutions, where certain patterns of behaviour have proved to be resistant to change. Attitudes instilled by communism are being passed on to a new generation of public officials and bureaucrats, by virtue of socialisation within unreformed administrative frameworks. The newly democratised institutions, apart from Germany's, are often ineffective in tackling large-scale corruption and create the perception of a façade democracy, where transparency is lacking³. These institutional inadequacies create an atmosphere of uncertainty, unpredictability and have adverse effects on the economic situation and investment climate of Eastern Europe.

Open borders allow people to leave their home countries and to pursue a higher standard of living elsewhere. Thus, unsurprisingly, the slow progress and insufficient reforms have resulted in a brain drain (see Croatia: How to keep Talent at Home). The long-term consequences of this can be severe for Eastern European countries.

³ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, <http://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/>, (retrieved 2017)

The fallacy of perception

An alarming side-effect of the difficulties of transition is that democracy, rather than communism, is blamed for people's hardships. This is especially true among people who suffered the social and economic consequences of the end of communism. Job security, which existed before, disappeared when factories shut down and unemployment rose. With proactivity being largely suppressed under communism, many found themselves unprepared for the rapid change. Hence, they bear fewer positive personal memories connected to the beginning of the democratic transition. These consequences unavoidably lead many to blame the transition to democracy for their hardship, as opposed to communism, and to remember "the good old days" with nostalgia. Myths and misconceptions about communist times have been propagated as a consequence of this.

These sentiments are also fuelled by the unrealistically high expectations that many had about the democratisation process. Democracy was regarded as an ideal, in the name of which people were prepared to endure hardship and painful reforms. However, this conviction lasted only for a limited amount of time. After the initial enthusiasm was gone, disillusionment set in.

In no one we trust

The totalitarian nature of communism damaged trust in the elites and among people. The steps to restore that trust using traditional or transitional justice in many places were hesitant at best. As mentioned above, institutions are perceived as ineffective and corrupt, serving the interests of power groups, instead of serving the public interest. Even though many human rights and individual freedoms were regained after 1989/1991, and despite progress being made towards economic growth, distrust towards political elites persists.

Eastern European anti-establishment sentiments might seem similar to those in parts of Western Europe and the US. However, it is important to note that in many places in Eastern Europe the elites today are at least partly related to the previous nomenclature.

There were communists who turned into democrats overnight. The blatant hypocrisy of this act further eroded people's trust in politics and convinced many citizens that elites never change and that democracy was rigged before it even took root.

“ A failure to invest in a political culture at large, not dealing with the legacies of a communist past, and rising economic inequality in the newly established market economies are some of the key reasons for the rise of illiberalism today. Notably populist parties, with extreme views, are gaining ground in Eastern Europe and are happily reaping the “benefits” of the failures of transition.

The Transition Continuum

It is nonetheless important to note, that albeit common, these problems and challenges exist in the different countries to varying degrees. In this sense, the success of transition, if the end goal is a consolidated democracy (which is, in itself a never-ending process), can be seen as a continuum in which the different countries score differently.

In many ways, Russia and Germany can be placed at the opposite ends of this continuum. On the one hand, Russia was the centre of the Soviet Union that fell apart in 1991, triggering the dissolution of the bipolar world order. Twenty-six years later, Russia is becoming increasingly authoritarian and conservative. Russians distrust of liberal values and are disillusioned with democracy. Notions like democracy, liberalism and free market economy are not associated with rights and freedoms. Instead, they have become synonyms for the powerlessness and poverty of the majority, as opposed to the omnipotence and excessive wealth of a small minority. Elites have become completely detached from the public good (see Russia: Authoritarian Resurgence).

On the other end of the spectrum is Germany, which is a unique case because of the reunification of two German states after the end of the Cold War and its very short 11-month transition. For many years, united Germany was considered to be a textbook example of transformation and consolidation of democracy. However, recent events like the rise of extreme political views and attitudes, especially in the former German Democratic Republic, ring alarm bells.

The transition process occurred too quickly for Eastern German citizens to be able to actively shape it, adjust to it and internalise it. What mattered was not people's life before 1989, but rather how quickly they were able to adapt (see Germany: A Tale of Two Generations). East Germans felt they were deprived of their agency in transition, while West Germans complained about paying the bill for the adjustments. Both have built up frustrations as a result.

Croatia's transition was marked by its War of Independence, which for many was the key formative experience of breaking away from former Yugoslavia. Today, apart from the trauma of war, the country is troubled by unprecedented levels of perceived corruption, making it, alongside Hungary, "the new face of corruption in Europe"⁴. For many, the political transition has ended, but the economic is far from over. A mixture of an ageing population, early retirement, inadequate educations and an ineffective public sector has become a key motivation for young and well-educated Croatians to leave the country. Even though the state provides social benefits, many young people prefer to look for a different, albeit more competitive environment, where their skills are what matters most (Croatia: How to keep Talent at Home).

Ukraine is, in many senses, an unexpected case of a transition being reset a quarter of a century after Independence and a decade after the Orange revolution. It is improbable for strong waves of civic protests to occur over and over again, but Ukraine, in the presence of a potent external threat and war, has demonstrated extraordinary civic energy. After the annexation of Crimea and with the ongoing

⁴ N. Nielsen, Croatia and Hungary are 'new face of corruption', EU Observer, <http://euobserver.com/political/136664>, (retrieved January 2017)

war in the East, Ukrainians have shown a strong sense of solidarity, voluntary engagement and civic determination, especially among civil society (see Ukraine: Transition Reset). Despite the hardship, there is a widespread understanding among citizens that corruption, the Soviet style of doing 'business as usual' and the ongoing conflict with Russia are impeding the country's reforms.

In Bulgaria, people found themselves longing for the communist past in the volatility of transition. Before 1989, Bulgarians managed to reach a certain level of predictability in their life, despite the repressive nature of the communist regime. This was in stark contrast with the uncertainty and unpredictability of transition. Because transition fell short in fulfilling the high hopes of Bulgarians, many people tend to underrate democracy and overrate the communist era. Nevertheless, these subjective experiences need to be placed in the context of objective indicators, which show that life in Eastern Europe has significantly improved in many aspects after 1989 (see Bulgaria: Nostalgia on the Rise).

Romania's transition took a toll on all of its citizens, but it disproportionately disadvantaged the already vulnerable social groups including women, minorities, the Roma and the LGBTQI community. While its political system and institutions were being rearranged at the beginning of the transitional period, the voices of minorities were underrepresented in the decision-making processes, making their interests easy to overlook or discard entirely. While there has been some progress in recent years, there is still a long way to go before achieving a truly inclusive and diverse society (see Romania: A Missed Opportunity for Minorities).

Theory vs. Experience of Democracy

The work of democracy scholars of the 1980s, such as O'Donnel and Schmitter, and early 1990s, such as Claus Offe, shaped, to a large extent, the assumptions and approaches of classical "transitology" in Central and Eastern Europe. Leading academics in the fields of political science and economics offered frameworks, focusing on

"triple transition"⁵, and looking to reform the political system, the economy and the civil society with "shock therapy"⁶. Today we know that the significance of social, cultural, or historical contexts⁷ remained largely neglected. We also know that the knowledge foreign experts had of the regions, which had been closed for more than 40 years, was negligible. It was, therefore, often assumed that transition was "the same road, regardless of the starting point, whether that be Sao Paolo, Singapore, or Slovenia"⁸. This assumption was an oversimplification of the complex transition processes of the Eastern European countries, each of which took a unique path.

There is a basic understanding that a democracy cannot exist without democrats. In Eastern Europe, there are democratic institutions, regular elections, multi-party systems, and market economies. However, apart from installing formal democratic structures, there is also a need to cultivate a democratic political culture and a strong belief in, and commitment to, democratic values. Communist propaganda has worked tirelessly and, at times, aggressively, for more than five decades to convince Eastern Europeans that communism is superior. Obedience, rather than proactivity, was what mattered.

“ After the changes, no attention was paid to the simple fact that without an understanding of democracy and without a continuous positive experience of democracy as a way of living, it would be difficult to convince citizens that democracy, albeit imperfect, is the best form of "government of the people, by the people, for the people"⁹. In the absence of targeted efforts to make a strong case for democratic values and to educate citizens on how to contribute to and take advantage of a democratic society, a communist mindset, or one susceptible to authoritarianism and populism, will persist.

⁵ F. C. Offe, Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe, (2004), *Social Research*, Vol. 71, No. 3, p. 501-528

⁶ J. Sachs, Shock Therapy in Poland: Perspectives of Five Years, (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1994)

⁷ J. Kubik and A. Linch, Post-Communism from Within, Social Justice, Mobilization and Hegemony, (Social Science Research Council and New York University Press, 2013)

Our research demonstrates that continuous positive experiences with democratic practice are crucial for the consolidation of democracy.

Instead of this, what occurred almost everywhere in the years of change was that the three key benefits of democratisation were challenged by the transition process – these being the free market economy, the liberal state institutions and the establishment of an open civil society. The free market economy became associated with very few becoming very wealthy and the majority of people remaining poor and neglected. According to EBRD's latest report, "73% of the population of post-communist countries have experienced income growth below the average for those countries"¹⁰. As mentioned above, apart from Germany, politics and institutions in Eastern European countries became associated with corruption and self-interested elites. Civil society is often mockingly referred to as the product of a failed 'grants democracy', meaning that grants for non-governmental organisations from large donor organisations or governmental development aid agencies have failed to solve many of the countries' pressing societal problems.

“ Against this backdrop, it is important to convey a strong message that democracy is not the problem. The problem is the long shadow of communist legacies, in combination with the way transition was approached.

A large number of people perceive their country's transition as a negative experience. It does not come as a surprise that democracy is associated with lack of rules and disorder, rather than with freedom¹¹. This makes it difficult to convince them to uphold

⁸ Stark and Bruszt, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

⁹ A. Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, New Brunswick, (Rutgers UP, 1955).

¹⁰ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Transition for All: Equal Opportunities in an Unequal World*, (2016), <http://2016.tr-ebrd.com/>,

¹¹ A. Besand, *Politische Kulturforschung und Politische Bildung an Europas Rändern*, (2015) <https://oezp.univie.ac.at/index.php/zfp/article/view/650/525>

democratic values – values related to transition. If their personal experience of democracy is of corrupt institutions, power-hungry elites and economic instability, it is understandable why they may see communist regimes as “not so bad” by comparison. Corruption was a wide-spread phenomenon under communism, but the lack of transparency then and its normalisation in the form of trading favours made it invisible to most. For this reason, corruption is seen as a new phenomenon and a result of transition.

One important aspect of life under communism, highlighted in the German example, was the existence of a number of informal social networks and physical spaces of organised communal exchange (see Germany: A Tale of Two Generations). The dismantlement of these networks has given people a sense of alienation and a view that the old social fabric has been destroyed. The system of trading favours, where people had the sense, if not of equality, at least of being equally deprived of goods, has been replaced by petty corruption where only some hold power over others. While alienation in transition might be a side-effect of globalisation, just like improvements in people’s condition under communism came as a side-effect of modernisation, once they set in as simplistic equations, it becomes almost impossible to explain why democracy is not equal to alienation and communism not equal to prosperity.

Institutionally and on paper, most Eastern European countries can be seen as textbook examples of successful transitions. To various degrees, democracy has been institutionalised, there are somewhat strong checks and balances, and citizens have different means to influence politics and policies beyond elections. Indeed, after the fall of the Berlin wall, it felt as if democracy had won and history had finally come to an end. The current rise of illiberalism and populism in Eastern Europe shows this victory is fragile and democratic societies are vulnerable. The high levels of susceptibility to these phenomena, which can arguably be traced back to the communist past, demand close examination. One lesson from the region for both struggling and consolidated democracies around the globe is that democracy is a constant work in progress.

The Consequence of not Dealing with the Past

When the refugee crisis hit the continent, many people in Central and Eastern European, including in East Germany, reacted in a negative way. This sentiment was additionally fuelled and misused by political elites. When governments did propose welcoming policies for migrants – like in Germany – this gave a boost to anti-immigration parties. In a report commissioned by the Tent Foundation about the public perceptions of the refugee crisis¹², Hungary leads the rank of negative attitudes with 67%, reaching 82% among millennials. There is data suggesting that seven out of the ten least empathic countries in the world are in Eastern Europe¹³. Ivan Krastev argued that the region's "compassion deficit" was founded in unmet expectations as "we were promised tourists, not refugees"¹⁴. There are potential alternative explanations.

Can the forceful attempts to create largely unitary societies under communism be a prerequisite for the lack of tolerance and for the rise of xenophobia? What does the comparative isolation and cultural homogeneity of Eastern Europe before 1989 tell us about the negative attitudes towards "the other"? And what does the lack of sanctioning of hate speech imply about the way we interpreted the newly gained freedom of expression?

A study commissioned by Sofia Platform in 2014¹⁵ showed that 55% of Bulgarians evaluated communism positively, compared to 76% denouncing it in 1991. Does the lack of knowledge about the atrocities of the communist regime and the fading memories of the past result in disillusionment with democracy? Today, rather than perceiving themselves as victims of the former communist

¹² The TENT Foundation, Public Perceptions of the Refugee Crisis, (2016) https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/5706810201dbae9366c3a7ad/1460044090846/TENT_Main+Report+JAN+2016+Re-contact.pdf

¹³ J. Bryner, The Most and Least Empathetic Countries (Full List), (Live Science, 2016), <http://www.livescience.com/56557-most-and-least-empathetic-countries.html>

¹⁴ I. Krastev, Eastern Europe's Compassion Deficit, (The New York Times, 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?_r=0,

¹⁵ Sofia Platform, The Transition: Myths And Memories, National Public Opinion Survey, (2014), <http://sofiaplatform.org/2014/the-transition-myths-and-memories-25-years-free-bulgaria/>

regime, people identify themselves as victims of transition. Central and Eastern Europe's recent call for 'cultural counter-revolution', led by Budapest and Warsaw, speaks loudly of the push against more European integration and is also a reminder of the nationalist sentiments in the midst of Europe.

“ Beyond installing democratic institutions and pushing for transitional justice, one of the most successful ways to ensure that citizens today learn from the past is to instil a 'never again' mentality when it comes to totalitarian regimes. Civic education is an ideal tool for this.

However, the Sofia Platform study cited above showed that 94% of young adults in Bulgaria know nothing or almost nothing about this period and only 10% of what they know is acquired at school. Most of their knowledge comes from private conversations with family and friends. Adequate historical knowledge and formal civic education¹⁶ are absent, as is a strong and unequivocal political denouncement from political elites of the former system. The picture is similar in other countries.

Against this background, the younger generation's opinion about communism is formed by the older generation's changing memories and interpretations. The older generation is often nostalgic for an idealised version of the past because the imagined democratic future never came to be.

It has become increasingly hard to separate fact from fiction when it comes to communism. Many now believe communism provided equality for all, while democracy brought wealth and success, but just for some. *"Before, one did not need to become rich, and today, one cannot with honest work. Before, we were not permitted to travel, and today we cannot afford to. So why have freedom if we cannot enjoy it?"*, an interviewee from Bulgaria told us.

¹⁶ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Citizenship Education in Bulgaria, (2016), <http://www.bpb.de/veranstaltungen/netzwerke/nece/206152/citizenship-education-in-bulgaria?p=all>

In the absence of facts, nostalgia kicks in. While one cannot blame the older generation for longing for their youth, nostalgia can be dangerous. Both internally and externally, authoritarians and charismatic populists make use of it, as its emotional appeal can be very powerful. Nostalgia also paves the way for myth propagation and is passed on to the young generation, especially in the absence of fact-based narratives embedded in the context of personal experiences.

Recommendations

Our research and discussions have revealed that a useful metaphor to think of citizens of countries in transition is the way we think of integration of citizens with migration background. The process of transition should be thought of as a process of integration into a new society, i.e. not only expecting citizens to adapt, but also helping the elites to understand by actively listening to the experiences prior to the change. Integration takes generations and it would be naïve to expect a transition from a communist to a democratic political culture to take place instantaneously. As Dahrendorf warned: "It takes six months to create new political institutions, to write a constitution and electoral laws. It may take six years to create a half-way viable economy. It will probably take 60 years to create a civil society"¹⁷.

“ While the focus on institutions and formal structures in Eastern Europe's transition has been strong, political culture, attitudes and beliefs have been largely neglected, even within the work on boosting civil society. Former regimes forced citizens to internalise the communist political culture for half a century. Therefore, communist ideas are deeply rooted and their durability is very much underestimated by democracy promoters. Therefore, they cannot be changed instantly and should be targeted specifically through tools of civic and history education.

¹⁷ R. Dahrendorf, *Has the East Joined the West?*, (1990), *New Perspective Quarterly*, 7:2, p.42

In addition, there is a rift between the normative story of democracy and the way citizens in transitional countries perceive it. Working on improving the democratic process in Eastern Europe has to involve a dialogue with citizens who have been disillusioned with democracy. In other words, the challenge for civic education is to combat this disappointment with a positive experience of democratic practice. Civic education efforts should be fact based without dismissing personal experiences. People's stories should be factored in and discussed, keeping in mind the subjectivity ingrained in each individual narrative.

It is well-known among advocates of civic culture that civic education needs to be more prominent. But advocacy activities need to take place in order to convince more people apart from the already 'converted' that civic education has a crucial role to play, whenever processes of societal change of this magnitude take place. Apart from Germany, none of the countries examined are giving a prominent place to civic education and they have struggled to include it as part of the formal curriculum at schools. In addition, areas like history education, culture of remembrance and dealing with the past should be integrated into the toolkit of civic education.

None of the policies of large donor organisations active in the region have been targeting the civic culture in a systematic way. To a large extent this is understandable, as civic culture is difficult to measure compared to institutional progress. Against this background, it is even more important to map the history and civic education efforts more thoroughly in order to identify the gaps, as well as draft systematic recommendations for actors like the European Union, the Council of Europe or the World Bank.

Personal experience matters



Our findings suggest that there is untapped potential for learning about democracy through practice.

Explaining why one regime is better than another is important, but experiencing and practising democracy, and bringing historical dilemmas closer to modern day dilemmas, appears crucial to provide the right context. The often contradictory experiences of citizens, just like their changing memories, should be taken into account, too. They might be subjective, but unless citizens are given agency and the sense of being listened to, we will keep swirling in a spiral of angry people and detached elites, widening the space for populists.

The importance of exchange among 'equals'

Another lesson learned in our project is the importance of the comparative perspective and the exchange among Eastern European societies. The access to similar, yet different contexts enables citizens to realise that other societies struggle with similar issues. Sharing stories of difficulties, alongside with good practices makes for a genuine exchange among equals, where citizens do not feel that one country outperforms another. The equal footing makes this method superior to other approaches.

It's time to talk!

Fact-based civic education in history and politics is not only desirable, but absolutely essential. However, facts should be framed through relatable narratives. This is precisely what dialogue is about. It provides a space for people to come to understand transition by listening to different stories about how transition has affected people's lives, a place to reflect on experiences and narratives. This helps citizens recognise that there are different viewpoints about the same event.

Another important role is ascribed to civic education in regards to facilitating the dialogue between generations, or even groups with contradictory experiences of the recent past. Citizens born after 1989/1991 are often more open and cosmopolitan, while their parents and grandparents remain largely traditional. This conflict is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of each other's experiences. As an interviewee in Bulgaria put it, the former regard the latter as

backwards, the latter think of the former as being immoral. The lack of dialogue between people hinders the normal functioning of a society and additionally undermines a core feature of democracy. Democracy should provide a space for criticism, dissent and public dialogue, and a platform that enables citizens to agree to disagree while sustaining openness and dialogue. With a restored dialogue, conventional means and techniques of civic education can find their way back into the process.

“ Right now, we are at a point in time, where younger generations and more cosmopolitan groups do not recognise the looming dangers of the authoritarian past, while older generations and more traditional groups do not recognise the benefits of the democratic present. Using dialogue to build a bridge between the two groups is vital, as divided societies are an easy target for demagoguery.

In this respect, Eastern Europe has important lessons to teach both older and other younger democracies around the world. Beyond consolidation of institutions, experiencing genuine democratic practices and sustaining dialogue appears to be crucial. Democracy, it seems, is not set in stone. Citizens should be constantly empowered to be an active part of the ongoing renegotiation of the foundations of the societies they live in.

About the author

Louisa Slavkova is the Executive Director of Sofia Platform. In 2016, she was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights, at Columbia University, New York. Louisa has previously worked as a Programmes Manager at the European Council on Foreign Relations and as an adviser to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nickolay Mladenov (2010 – 2013). Prior to that, she worked with the Network European Citizenship Education platform of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. She has an MA in Political Science from the University of Cologne and is currently pursuing a PhD.

Bulgaria: Nostalgia on the Rise

Iva Koprалеva

Partner organisation: Sofia Platform, established in 2013, www.sofiaplatform.org

“In transition, we focused on institutions, but neglected the political culture. As Václav Havel once said, economic empowerment is a must, but if we do not look into the general culture of our societies, more money will not make a nurse treat their patients better. The legacies of a regime that lasted more than five decades in some of our countries cannot be overturned from authoritarian into liberal only through free market and regular elections. There is much more to be done and more than 25 years after the end of communism, it is time to do it. Education about the communist past is a cornerstone. Knowledge prevents us from making the same mistakes over and over again.”

Louisa Slavkova, Executive Director

Introduction

More than quarter of a century after the end of the communist rule in Bulgaria, the country has largely overcome the struggle with the direct consequences of the transition towards democracy. There has been undeniable progress on many fronts. Despite all of the legitimate criticism that can be directed towards the justice system, corruption levels, media freedom, and many other areas, overall, Bulgaria has

a functioning market economy and democratic institutions. As a member of the EU and NATO, we are also well integrated with Euro-Atlantic international structures. Against this backdrop, one question looms large: why are young Bulgarians so ignorant of the country's communist past?

Explaining the Knowledge Gap

“ A representative national study in 2014 showed that 94% of Bulgarians aged 16-30 know very little about the recent past and the communist regime and 69% do not associate the period before 1989 with any particular event¹⁸.

A lack of knowledge about the communist past has very tangible consequences. 43% of all respondents in the 2014 study positively rated the development of the country in the period from 1944-1989, as opposed to 33% in 1992. In addition, approval of Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian authoritarian leader during most of the communist era, has jumped from 16% in 1991 to 55% in 2014. When speaking about the communist era, one Bulgarian interviewee said *“There was discipline, respect, people did more sport. Education was solid. This has largely disappeared today”* (interview excerpt). Another person pointed out *“There was social security and tranquillity. There was also less crime”* (interview excerpt). According to another study, conducted by the National Centre for Public Opinion Studies in 2013, a whopping 18% of people under 35 would prefer to live in the period before 1989¹⁹.

These findings suggest that the educational needs of the generation or even generations marked by the period of transition in Bulgaria have not been met adequately.

¹⁸ Sofia Platform, Transition: Myths and Memory after 25 Years, (October 2014), <http://25freebg.com/25-%d0%b3%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%bd%d0%b8-%d0%bf%d0%be-%d0%ba%d1%8a%d1%81%d0%bd%d0%be/>

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt Centre in Sofia, To Teach the History of Communism, (2013), http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_10764-1442-11-30.pdf?130927085054

“ A lack of knowledge about the past allows the propagation of myths and nostalgic sentiments that replace factual evidence about the repressive nature of the communist regime.

Instead of learning about the recent history at school, from books or at museums, young people today predominantly rely on the (not necessarily objective) stories of their parents and grandparents.

The different perceptions of this era can be illustrated with the answers we received to the question: Was there trust in society before 1989? One interviewee is convinced there was, stating *“Yes, people trusted each other more and also helped each other more”* (interview excerpt). However, another person argued *“Trust existed only between close friends. You never knew who might be listening”* (interview excerpt). These accounts appear to contradict each other, but in fact, they present reality as perceived through personal experiences. Incorporating them into a larger, fact-based discussion about communism and transition is paramount in teaching young people a nuanced understanding of history and discourse.

As older generations from different backgrounds may have strong pro- or anti-communist sentiments, objectively examining the subject of the recent past could cause controversy in the classroom. Combined with the chronic insufficiency of hours dedicated to history in school, the fact that the period is generally placed at the end of the history curriculum, and the exclusion of the period from university entry exams, teachers are almost forced to cover the subject superficially, if at all.

In this way, idealised narratives about zero unemployment, free healthcare and education and affordable vacations for everyone overshadow the fact that there was a lack of basic freedoms in the period before 1989. Young people are not taught the way the authoritarian regime operated or dealt with dissent, and they know very little about the repressions of the State Security Agency or the scarcity of rudimentary products in shops.

The lack of knowledge about the recent past is not just dangerous due to it compromising society's appreciation of democracy and freedom. The forced homogeneity of the communist societies, where everyone is supposed to be equal (to be read "the same"), also perpetuates a closed-off mindset that is harmful to an open democratic society.

“ *“Before I met any foreigners, I thought that Bulgarians were the best. After I got to know some people from foreign countries, I realised that these are normal folks who are a lot freer than we are. During my trip to Turkey I was amazed at how welcoming, open and warm the Turkish people are”,* a former sportsperson and current entrepreneur told us during an interview.

This kind of narrative busts a lot of the stereotypes, created by Bulgarian literature at the time. The 'us versus them' mentality that is applied to 'the other', which stems from this notion of homogeneity, is especially explosive in the context of increased migration rates and the European refugee crisis.

It is, therefore, imperative to address the lack of knowledge about the recent past in a quick and effective manner. Sofia Platform's efforts are directed in precisely this direction.

Tackling the Knowledge Gap

Civic education is an ideal tool to link knowledge of communist era to relevant current issues. Sofia Platform uses numerous civic education approaches to tackle knowledge gaps about the recent past.

First, we bring experts on the topic of communism and transition, including historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists and even artists to the classroom, predominantly to small town schools. This allows students to have access to speakers with varied

perspectives and access to information that would be unavailable to them in the context of the curriculum. These lessons are accompanied by supplementary materials. A book on the communist past, authored by renowned experts and edited by Sofia Platform, addresses knowledge gaps about communism in general and specifically targets the topics that are not sufficiently covered in the curriculum. In addition, we have produced short educational videos that discuss the communist past in an accessible and interesting way and are particularly suitable for classroom use.

Second, we target history teachers with a “train the trainers” approach, in order to equip them with the tools necessary to address the admittedly complicated topic of the communist past. Here, we do not discuss particularities from the history of the communist regime, which the teachers are presumably familiar with. Instead, we focus on innovative and interactive methods that can be applied in the classroom in order to spark the interest of the students and underline the link between the recent past and the present. In addition, as most teachers are living witnesses of this period, these methods are designed to address any personal biases the teacher may have about the topic. Finally, specific challenges related to a lack of time and polarisation in the classroom are also addressed during the training sessions. A book, which briefly outlines the methods that are discussed during the training sessions is also made available for the teachers.

Third, we actively engage the academic community and university students in discussions about the recent past. We have organised a series of lectures in five universities, dedicated to Bulgarian writer, dissident and journalist Georgi Markov, that also touched on the questions of free speech, democracy and liberty. As part of the project “25 Years Free Bulgaria”, we organised international conferences, public discussion forums and roundtables on transition, to engage not only academia but also intellectuals, NGO representatives and policymakers on the topic.



*Inauguration of the monument of Georgi Markov in 2014 by the Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev, Sofia, Bulgaria
Source: BGNES*

Finally, we also organise events for the wider public, tackling the issue of transition from different angles. These include public art exhibitions, movie screenings, and even rock concerts.

We are constantly working on improving our approach in tackling ignorance by gathering feedback from all participants in our projects, including teachers and students.

“ Based on what we have learnt, addressing the recent past by comparing it to the present is a great way of engaging young people in a conversation, as it makes the topic relatable and understandable.

Keeping this in mind, for the next steps of our work, we are planning to work on “myth-busting” by debunking popular myths about communism in a series of short videos, accompanied by a publication. Myths about communism are often the source of nostalgia for a time that never really existed in the way it is described. It is, therefore, important to address these misconceptions and to start a fact-based, rather than an emotion-based conversation about communism, its effect and its consequences. These materials will then be used in classrooms and in town-hall meetings as a starting point for a conversation about the recent past.

We are also actively cooperating with our international partners in order to improve our understanding of transition and civic education in Europe and beyond. Our participation in the Transition Dialogue Network is an ideal tool to exchange knowledge with a number of organisations that specialise in transition. As part of this network, we participated at Networking European Citizenship Education (NECE) Thessaloniki in 2015, where we organised a workshop on “Otherness through the eyes of the generation of transition” and talked in detail about the attitude towards the other and refugees in particular when it comes to post-socialist countries. We also presented our research on the topic (in cooperation with Stiftung Wissen am Werk) at the University of Vienna during the conference “Children of transition. Children of war” in November 2016. In the same month, we were part of the NGO marketplace at NECE Zagreb where we promoted the Transition Dialogue Network and our own civic education activities.

Our partners extend to other regions of transformation beyond Europe. We cooperate with UNDP Iraq in sharing our knowledge and experience in transitioning towards democracy with public officials, members of Parliament and NGO representatives from Iraq and finding common transformation patterns beyond the post-socialist space. In the past, we have also cooperated with partners from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Lessons for Civic Education

Turning once again to the topic of knowledge gaps, one of the best ways to solve the issue on a large scale is to revise the student curriculum in a way that presents facts that are not only more detailed, but also contextualised in a way that makes them both comprehensive and understandable.

In addition, Bulgarian communism should be thought of in a comparative way, with other totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and fascism. There is already an attempt to do this in the Bulgarian history textbooks, but the content inevitably focuses on the USSR. In addition, lessons on the communist regime in Bulgaria are taught in a different school year to the USSR, and are placed at the end of the curriculum. This has made it difficult for teachers to comprehensively cover the topic while giving students an understanding of the wider context of totalitarianism.

The period of 1944 – 1989 should be a part of the university entry exams. In this way, students who are interested in studying history or related disciplines at the university level will be actively encouraged to learn about the recent past. Excluding the period from the exams means that even students who are most interested in the subject matter may lack knowledge about this particular period. In an attempt to ensure the best exam results for their students, teachers are also likely to focus more on the topics that are required for the exams, as opposed to the rest of the study material.

More needs to be done in the classroom and beyond to spark interest and conversation among young people. The societal conversation between the generations about communism should be revived. This means not only engaging students, but also their parents and grandparents. This can be achieved through organising public events like discussions and town-hall meetings but also can be achieved at home by, for example, giving students an assignment to interview their parents.

Finally, content related to the communist era and transition should be created with new types of media, including infographics and other visual content for social networks and video material for YouTube and other video platforms. In this way, factual information can be easily accessed and shared by many young people.

Conclusion

Sofia Platform's experience with civic education activities has so far been focused on Bulgaria and the issues that we have identified as most relevant in the Bulgarian context. However, it is worth noting that our research with partners from Eastern Europe and beyond has revealed that many of the problems and challenges we face in Bulgaria are similar in other countries as well. This means that, subject to further analysis and evaluation, our activities and recommendations could be used to develop a comprehensive approach towards civic education on totalitarianism, communism and transition for the whole post-communist space.

About the author

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Croatia: How to keep Talent at Home

Rafaela Tripalo

Partner organisation: Foundation Zaklada Znanje na djelu/
Stiftung Wissen am Werk, established in 2015,
www.znanjenadjelu.hr/en/

“Identifying high youth unemployment and brain drain to be among the most pressing problems in Croatia, a group of leading local entrepreneurs founded Stiftung Wissen am Werk. Our core mission is to bring together schools, enterprises and youngsters in order to help develop better education and skills training for young people and to provide more attractive employment opportunities at home. The different programmes are developed in partnership with schools, educational authorities and partners from businesses, institutions and social enterprises. As a member of the Transition Dialogue Network, we expanded the scope of our work, looking into defining the generation of transition and how it relates to current challenges. The refugee crisis being one of them, made us look into attitudes in comparison with other post-communist countries (Bulgaria and Ukraine)”.

Rafaela Tripalo, Project Coordinator

Croatia joined the European Union in 2012, and this is when the transition period technically ended. However, legacies from the past impede Croatia's development. Stiftung Wissen am Werk tackles the issue of brain drain and advocates for broader economic reforms

to counter the negative trends in economic growth, employment, demographics and trust in the public sector.

As part of the Transition Dialogue Network, we interviewed people from the generation of transition in Croatia in order to examine their understanding of current challenges, like the refugee crisis in Europe. We found that their worldview is marked by the traumatic experience of war, making them empathetic with others fleeing conflicts. In November 2016, we hosted a meeting of the Transition Dialogue Network, allowing our partners to get familiar with the Croatian context.

Since our work as an organisation focuses on the structural economic challenges that are faced by young people in Croatia, including the generation in transition, the following country profile is focused mainly on these issues.

Historical Background

The transition in Croatia started with dissolution from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the declaration of Croatian independence in 1990/1991. What began as a peaceful political and economic transformation was abruptly interrupted by the War of Independence with Serbia²⁰. The war jeopardised the process of transition – resources were limited, the army was weak and under-equipped, an overwhelming number of refugees from Bosnia and Slavonia fled to Croatia, the economy de facto ceased to function, and a considerable number of Croatians had to rely on humanitarian aid from international organisations²¹. In addition, the grey economy grew, contraband, money laundering and stock manipulation flourished²². Peace was negotiated in 1995 and the country started to rebuild itself. However, the process was hasty, there was little strategic planning and citizens suffered from a deep

²⁰ T. M. I. Costa & G. P. Gustavo, *La Ex Yugoslavia. Conflictos Y Tensiones En Una Región De Encrucijada*, Huellas, Instituto Y Departamento De Geografía Facultad De Ciencias Humanas – UNLPam 15 (2011), p. 244-64.

²¹ C. Carroll, *The Serbs: A divided nation*, in *National Geographic*, Vol.25, No. 1. (Mexico, 2009)

²² G. Chaliand, *Atlas del Nuevo Orden Mundial*, (Paidós Iberica, 2004)

trauma, both from the recent war and from the communist past. Politically, the country never engaged in lustration and dealing with the past, many members of the Communist Party simply changed their party affiliation and kept high positions within the government. Interviewees identified the war of independence as the beginning of transition, while at the same time, it became in their view the main culprit for its failure.

"The Croatian history in the last 30 years can be marked starting with the peaceful and unmoving stagnation of communism, followed by the war trauma, the confusion by the new economic and political system, and the general pessimism that was enhanced by the global recession. There is a difference in the optimism – my generation will never be able to have the optimism that was present in the older generation at the surge of independence, or even before, at the moon landing and such events. The people have lost their perspective worldwide, but Croatia is really extreme" (interview excerpt, Dina, 35).



Annual commemoration of the fall of Vukovar
Source: Oliver Bešić

A Generation in Transition

For the purpose of the project, the generation in transition in Croatia was defined as the generation born between 1980 and 1992, thus including the people who formed the so-called “war generation”. This definition was made under the assumption that even though they were very young at the time, the representatives of this generation were old enough to remember parts of the war. The war was a central formative experience – the constant attacks and hiding, the impact on their families and on their post-war upbringing.

“I had to flee Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in 1993. I remember having a Serbian friend there, and he was not allowed to go out and play with us on some days. On those days, there would always be people killed in our neighbourhood. Only later I found out that his father was a sniper, he was charged with the murders in Sarajevo during the war.

I live in Zagreb now, and I have to say that I can feel that the excitement from the independence quickly dissolved. I mean, I do not understand why democracy also means the loss of workers’ rights. The workers are not appreciated and are oppressed. Some personal freedoms have improved, and I feel much safer now.

“ *We are more democratic, but economically, we are still struggling. It is like we make one step forward, and then five steps back – there is so much potential, but it is not being used, rather, it is being abused” (interview excerpt, Gregor, 36).*

There is a shared understanding that transition is not over. Whereas the end of the war is defined as the end of the political transition and independence, the economic transition is far from over, and our participants see its many influences in most of the aspects of their lives. Although there are many burning issues regarding the transition, all of them together make for an unacceptable atmosphere for the young generation that was, as can be seen, left without a perspective and who feel they have no future in Croatia.

Facing the Challenges of Transition

The interview participants spoke of Croatia's current economic and political problems as a legacy of the war and the post-war era of reconstruction. They identified a lack of trust in politicians and the institutions, high levels of corruption, a low GDP, low wages, poor post-conflict reconciliation work, the lack of a shared culture of remembrance, the rights of war veterans, and problems in regions of mixed ethnic populations as Croatia's main challenges today. These concerns were also shared by the European Commission in its annual country report²³.

"I am not supposed to be complaining, there are so many people that have it much worse – I have a steady job, I'm doing a PhD, it takes me 7 minutes to get to work – but the state of things is bad, and the people are depressed. I have an above-average salary but I do not think it is enough for the amount of work I am doing, and especially the responsibility I have. Also, all of the money I earn is still only sufficient to cover the costs of life; I am not able to save anything up.

“ *In the first years after the war, there was a huge excitement and optimism, but it simply vanished in the later years because we were promised so many things, and we did not get any of them. The living conditions are bad, and the nepotism is destroying us, and there are still so many people who cannot move out of their parents' houses”* (interview excerpt, Nela, 30).

Corruption

Corrupt practices go back to the period of war, if not even further back, to former Yugoslavia, with war profiteers, ill-performed

²³ European Commission Directorate - General for Economic and Financial Affairs, Macroeconomic imbalances Country Report – Croatia 2015, European Economy. Occasional Papers 218., (2015)

privatisation and authoritarian business practices not allowing for fair competition to emerge. Among other things, corrupt practices reduce expenditure efficiency, impede productive public investment and undermine business confidence. Coupled with a continuous drop in investment and GDP, this is what is seen as the ‘new Croatia’ for the younger generation, leading to many of them wanting to leave the country due to mid to long-term concerns that nothing will change. However, there is a high level of awareness that ‘the good life’ in other countries has its downsides too – the work environment is more competitive, and social insecurity is higher. As opposed to some other countries, Croatia is a highly social state that takes care of the unemployed, provides free healthcare, and has a system of free education at all levels. Still, knowing this, our participants stated their willingness and readiness to leave the country in search of better opportunities.

“I have two kids and my husband and I are both employed, but I still depend on my parents financially. I have changed so many jobs. I even worked as a bodyguard, but both times I got pregnant and I was instantly fired. I am tired of the politicians, I do not trust them, and I think they are here only to steal. The times are unstable, there is nepotism and political connections, I can see its influence in my office – it is obvious that most of the people fear the elections because any change could bring about mass firings” (interview excerpt, Irena, 35).

“*“The young people leave the country – you and I both know so many people who have left Croatia within the last couple of years. They leave, and they are not coming back because there are better conditions for them elsewhere, even though they always complain about how much they miss the relaxed mentality and the high level of social interaction and support. My twin brother left Croatia for a semester-long Erasmus exchange seven years ago, and he is not planning on coming back” (interview excerpt, Bruno, 31).*

Demographics

The demographic situation in Croatia is mostly influenced by the alarming ageing of the population, mixed with the recent trend of brain drain, which has caused even more problems with the labour force. Additionally, there is a large percentage of people over 50 who are already retired and who are not active in the workforce. This can be supported by the fact that the activity rates for workers above 50 are 52%, whereas the average trend in the EU-28 in 2013 was 64%.

Although Croatia witnessed a growth in its number of low-skilled workers, mainly coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina and other neighbouring countries in the early 2000s, it has been affected by a brain drain which started around 2008 at the time of the global financial crisis. This resulted in a decline in the Croatian population. By 2009, migration flows turned negative and the trend has proven stable²⁴.

Croatia in the European Union

When the transition started, the Croatian economy was not focused on competition and innovation. This resulted in a serious brain drain, which in the next couple of years is likely to make the quality of education worse, as many of the best young experts are moving out of Croatia to bring innovation and education to other countries, which offer better conditions. Croatia has also not paid attention to the production and usage of its natural resources, and most goods in Croatia still come to the market from international imports. Croatia entered the European Union in 2012, but the institutions still have not found the best way to make use of the European Union funds. There is a concerning lack of capability and skill in both project planning and initiation.

²⁴ European Commission Directorate - General for Economic and Financial Affairs, Macroeconomic imbalances Country Report – Croatia 2015, European Economy. Occasional Papers 218., (2015)

The Public Sector

Croatia's government is highly complex, much ramified and very fragmented, and it is important to understand that the local and national government do not share the same distribution of competencies. It was recognised that this system is not compatible with the country's real needs, and it was unsuccessfully reformed twice, bringing about new problems such as economic and fiscal omissions. The changes contributed to the chaotic state of governance, further blurring the responsibilities of local and national government and their notions of accountability. The complexity of systems facilitates corruption on every level, and, since it is extremely user unfriendly, it leaves citizens and the civic sector in a grey zone without any actual influence. In this way, what is seemingly a system that has the potential to function well, becomes a smoke curtain for bad political, economic, and social management.

What We Do

Stiftung Wissen am Werk is the first non-governmental organisation of its kind in Croatia, dealing with the problems youth are facing in the context of transition, after recognising the burning need for modernisation of the Croatian educational system. While Croatia's education is highly accessible and informative and it has a very wide range of subjects (the average pupil has learnt about more than 30 different subjects by the time they finish high school), it is also somewhat outdated and is unable to provide the students with real-life experience of workplaces. This issue continues well into university education. This is a clear problem both for the employers and the young future employees. The candidates, although excellent with their theoretical knowledge, very often are inept and incapable of working in a business environment. This problem puts further pressure on the companies to educate their candidates more, or leads to them employing people with more experience, which leaves many young experts unemployed and hopeless in their search for jobs. The Foundation started working on this problem two years ago, with two different programmes aimed at primary and secondary schools. The projects within the programmes are developed under the patronage of the Ministry of Education, with assistance from the primary and secondary schools. They are aimed at the professors, teachers, and pupils, in partnerships with a large number of Croatian

companies and institutions, but also different start-ups and non-governmental organisations. The goal of these programmes is to promote new knowledge and skills, to connect the employers with their future employees and give them a chance to directly influence the course of their education.

Lessons for Civic Education

For Croatia to thoroughly change its current state of affairs, it is important to address the young generations that are still caught between the recent past and an uncertain future. It is a special transition that requires civic education in schools for younger generations to learn about politics, human rights, culture and new media. This is largely missing from the somewhat outdated education system but it is essential for young people to be the main harbingers of the real and sustainable democracy. It is important to bring about innovation in schools, either through training teachers in new educational methods, or through networking with other European schools and exchanging good practices. In this way, not only will students get an opportunity to participate in international projects, but educational institutions in Croatia would get insights in different ways of teaching, learning and funding.

It is important to use the existing strengths of Croatian society, such as its power of local communities. The community is a great place to empower citizens by increasing their awareness of political and social issues. Working with the community is intuitive, since they are already rich in social and physical infrastructure - it is only necessary to reconnect them and empower them to use their potential for civic causes and engagement. Along the same lines, civic education can and should be a tool in tackling youth unemployment and brain drain by teaching and promoting entrepreneurship and a start-up culture, and by providing the missing link between education and the market. A rethink from rescue strategies to a vision for empowerment is what the young generation of transition needs in order to find its way back to society.

About the author

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Germany: A Tale of Two Generations

Dr. Judith Enders, Mandy Schulze, Christine Wetzel

Partner organisations: German-Russian Exchange, established in 1992, www.austausch.org and Perspektive3, established in 2010, www.perspektivehochdrei.wordpress.com

“A separated country that has been peacefully reunited is what characterises the unique case of Germany. While the majority of East Germans say the reunification has benefited them, criticism is directed at the speed of the transition and the process of adaptation to the West German system. People interviewed by members of Perspektive3 stated that despite their initial enthusiasm, they felt deprived of agency in the project 'Aufbau Ost' (building up the East) and in redeveloping the state, the society and the economy. Noting that East German viewpoints are underrepresented in the assessment of the GDR and the reunification process, Perspektive3 was created to give the the last one that grew up under the socialist system – the so-called third generation – a voice. This essay also addresses structural weakness of rural areas as a remaining societal problem.”

Mandy Schulze, Perspektive3

To Germans, transition refers to reunification, both as an event and a process. The period of transition, in a narrower sense, is clearly defined by the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 after months of peaceful protests. Its ending point is the Day of Reunification on 3 October 1990. During the following 11 months after the fall of the Berlin wall, every part of the society, including social, justice, education and economic systems, experienced changes to their regulatory environment at a tremendous pace.

The essential difference between this transition and other transitions in former socialist states in Europe is the reunification of two parts of one country. The reunification process – the continuous relationships and comparisons between East and West Germany – has also significantly influenced the transition experience and its associated debate.

The Third Generation East

Feeling that after 1989 it was primarily just West German voices that were heard when it came to explaining East Germany in public, and that East German viewpoints were underrepresented in this debate, representatives of the “Third Generation East” founded their initiative in 2010. The third generation refers to those born in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) between 1975 and 1985. The main purpose of the Association Perspective³, represented in the Transition Dialogue Network by Dr. Judith Enders, Mandy Schulze and Dörte Grimm, is to give this so-called third-generation a voice.

So far, they have guided dialogues between parents, who were socialised entirely in the GDR, and their children, who grew up during the transition phase in those “new times”. They also found 15 representatives from the third generation, who reflected on how they perceived the transition experience and its influence on interrelations between different generations of a family. Another focus they had was on the changing role of women in society. After all, Perspective³ is interested in finding ways to initiate discussions about the past and social involvement, particularly when it regards informal democratic self-empowerment within local structures.

Transition Experienced by the 2nd and 3rd Generation East

After the first and only free elections in the GDR in March 1990, the new government was made responsible for negotiating the accession of the GDR to the territory covered by the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany on 3 October 1990. This involved issues that would have huge impacts on the living conditions of people in East Germany when compared to those in the western part. These issues included changes to exchange rates for people's savings, pension levels and the acceptance of educational qualifications attained in the GDR. A spirit of optimism and euphoria characterised the years of 1989 and 1990, expressed by those interviewed by Perspective3: *"We could renew everything. We had to relearn everything, reinvent everything"* (interview excerpt)²⁵. However, reunification, with its remarkable speed and performance, also left East Germans under the impression that their country's development was taken out of their hands, causing East Germans to have an initial and ongoing disappointment,

“ *"During that time of change, I had the time of my life. I had the feeling of being involved in a revolution. We were so happy. [...] We spent whole nights making plans for how this country could be reformed. [...] But we lost our revolution to the West German parties and their visions"* (interview excerpt).

Thus, it was the generation of the parents who, having been completely socialised within the system of the GDR, had more difficulties with adapting than their third-generation children. "Now, they had to start from the beginning in many respects, often from the same level of information and knowledge as their children. [...] This was aggravated by fearing or actually experiencing unemployment, which meant an enormous insecurity with respect to the future. The course of the public dialogue seemed to be determined that

²⁵ J. Enders, M. Schulze & B. Ely, *Wie war das für Euch? Die Dritte Generation im Gespräch mit ihren Eltern*, (Ch. Links Verlag, 2016)

West German society would not have to change or learn anything. [...] To many, the present days became a permanent source of humiliation”²⁶.

In the collective memory of East Germans, mass unemployment remains as one of the most lasting experiences. From a 'mere' 15% in the years after 1989, it kept rising until it reached its peak of 20.6% by 2005²⁷. However, the term “unemployment” also signified a social decline and the devaluation of people's life achievements. In the broader sense, experiences at workplaces also involved income breaks and new West German superiors who would declare that all of the employees' previously used procedures and gained experiences were obsolete. Another effect was the differences in income that suddenly divided neighbours and relatives into 'winners' and 'losers' of the reunification. However, as the third generation was still young, it was better at adapting to and benefitting from, the new circumstances. This caused some tension in relationships between the generations.

“ *“I could not share my success with my parents, since at the same time they would experience the sale of the factories where they had been working, the dismissals, the closures, the demolition and the job hunt. [...] During that time, we primarily experienced things which separated us”* (interview excerpt).

This was confirmed by women interviewed for another survey (see below). Mutual misunderstandings and hurt feelings also hindered the dialogue between East and West Germans, *“My attempts to explain anything about the GDR to West Germans regularly ended with them telling me how the GDR actually was”* (interview excerpt). So, while the act of reunification was completed on 3 October 1990, the process of reconciliation of the people and approximation of

²⁶ A. Stemmler, Ein ostdeutsches 68? in: Judith Enders, Mandy Schulze & Bianca Ely, Wie war das für Euch? Die Dritte Generation im Gespräch mit ihren Eltern, (Ch. Links Verlag, 2016)

²⁷ M. Booth, Die Entwicklung der Arbeitslosigkeit in Deutschland, (bpb 2010), www.bpb.de/47242/

their living conditions still continues. *"Statistics in various fields still show significant differences between East and West Germany,"* the Federal Statistical Office stated in 2014. Their research found monthly incomes in East Germany were about 25% lower²⁸. These differences are another reason why some people cannot bring their own experience in line with the success story of the reunification, which is repeated annually around the Day of Reunification. Nevertheless, according to a social report by the association People's Solidarity (Volkssolidarität), more East Germans than West Germans see themselves as having benefitted from the reunification²⁹.



"Human will can move everything. In the past, this house stood in a different country," building on Brunnen Str. Berlin

Source: Christine Wetzel

²⁸ Statistisches Bundesamt, 25 Jahre Mauerfall: Ost und West bleiben statistisch sichtbar, (2014) www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/ImFokus/Bevoelkerung/25JahreMauerfall_Statistik.html

²⁹ Anonymous, Osten sieht Deutsche Einheit positiver als Westen, (Welt, 2011), www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article13635760/Osten-sieht-Deutsche-Einheit-positiver-als-Westen.html

Transition as One of Life's Lessons – East German Women's Biographies

In the years after 1990, young East German women became both the most mobile and the best educated demographic group in Germany.³⁰ This was the subject of seven in-depth interviews with women aged between 25 and 35, which were conducted by Dr Judith Enders and Mandy Schulze³¹. Most of them had left their home regions after finishing school to study elsewhere and were either working or looking for a suitable employment. In their interviews, the women described the pursuit of their professional goals and the associated achievement of personal and financial independence as an important prerequisite for an equal partnership, *“I consider an independent woman... with her own experience and success to be very important in any relationship”* (interview excerpt). Equally essential is a good balance between private and professional life, *“so one is not only working all the time, coming home late, unable to do anything else”* (interview excerpt). Deciding to sacrifice their own professional interests for the work of a housewife and mother was not mentioned by any of the interviewees.

Confrontation with their parents' generation plays as major a role for young East German women with children, as it does for any other young parent, *“If you have children, you inadvertently tend to analyse your own childhood over and over again”* (interview excerpt). However, the double socialisation in East and West Germany they experienced plays a special part in the lives of the interviewed women and becomes an intra-family and socio-political challenge.

³⁰ A. Domscheit-Berg, Familienpolitik in Ost- und Westdeutschland und ihre langfristigen Auswirkungen, (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2016), www.boell.de/de/2016/11/09/familienpolitik-ost-und-westdeutschland-und-ihre-langfristigen-auswirkungen#_ftn2

³¹ J. Enders & M. Schulze, Frauen in der Dritten Generation Ostdeutschlands, in: A. Bergfrede, E. Fuchslocher, K. Kollwe & K. Pittius, FrauenBewegung(en). (Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2013).
J. Enders & M. Schulze, Transformationsprozesse und Auswirkungen auf Geschlechterarrangements - zur Wertorientierung von Frauen der Dritten Generation Ostdeutschland, in: M. Thomas & U. Busch, Transformation im 21. Jahrhundert. (Transformerless Wissenschaftsverlag, 2015)
J. Enders & M. Schulze, Feministische Mutterbilder? - Eine Verständigung von Feminismus und Mutter-Sein vor dem Hintergrund ost- und westdeutscher Entwicklungen, in: M. Doldner, H. Holme, C. Jerzal & A. Tietge, O Mother where are thou?, (Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2016)

“A simple question like, ‘Tell me, mum, what time would you usually collect us from kindergarten?’ made her lose it completely that day, ‘We all had to work, we did not have any choice! Sure, we would have to take you there by half six because we would have to be at work by seven! And then in the 90s even, yes of course, you were latchkey kids. At least that is what they call it now but it was absolutely normal for you, kids, to have a key and to be able to go home whenever you wanted. You, children, were trusted and now it is as if we did not look after you’ (interview excerpt).

Here, the critically viewed image of motherhood in the GDR, which gives the young grandmothers of today the feeling that they need to justify themselves, opposes the genuine interest of young women seeking their own place in society as mothers. One young woman, however, clearly expressed what she believed would be required of society in order to achieve a constructive debate and a productive reappraisal of the parents' transition experience. *“What is completely left out of the media discussion, as far as I can see, are the personal biographies beyond all those stories about jails or attempts of flight. I think this microcosm of a typical average family in the GDR, particularly of our generation, is being completely forgotten somehow”* (interview excerpt).

As Martina Rellins, a West German journalist and author who interviewed East German women after the reunification, put it, *“During my interviews, I, too, have repeatedly noticed: There is something that West German women have not got yet and East German women have not lost – the deep understanding that work provides independence, that having children is a part of life and that there is no shame in having your children looked after in day-care or after-school facilities”* (interview excerpt). Therefore, it remains important to listen to the women from the former GDR and to their accounts of everyday life back then and to maintain a dialogue with them. This is a chance to find a clearer identity and explore both the strengths (e.g. female independence) and the weaknesses (e.g. a double burden) of their former way of life, particularly for women of the transition generation.

Loss and Recovery of the Public Space: an Example of Community Learning and Self-Empowerment

We have already touched on the issues of departure and migration. Some East German regions have lost up to 38% of their population since the reunification³². But what happens in those parts that have been left? Over the last 25 years, the Upper Lusatia, a region near the borders of the Czech Republic and Poland, has gone through a profound structural change. This process of economic and political transformation has left many buildings vacant, due to closed down plants and a declining population. This has not just occurred with industrial buildings and historical half-timbered houses (Umgebinderhäuser), but also with buildings that used to serve the community as places of social life, such as guest-houses, pubs and theatres.



Abandoned public spaces in East Germany
Source: Mandy Schulze

³² A. Demografie-Portal, Große regionale Unterschiede im Bevölkerungswachstum, (2015), www.demografie-portal.de/SharedDocs/Informieren/DE/ZahlenFakten/Bevoelkerungswachstum_Kreise_ab1990.html

³³ S. Bartmann & S. Tiefel, Biografische Ressource und Biografische Reflexion: zwei sich ergänzende Heuristiken zur erziehungswissenschaftlich orientierten Analyse individueller Erinnerungs- und Biografiearbeit, in: Margret Dörr, Heide von Felden, Regina Klein, Hildegard Macha & Winfried Machotzki, Erinnerung - Reflexion- Geschichte. Wiesbaden, (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008)

Public space also disappeared, both in its literal sense as the place where local people met, chatted and bonded and in a deeper sense as the places which shape a community. For years now, many of public spaces have been lingering over a sad fate or have just fallen into ruin. These “eyesores” became symbols for problems and failures of the transition time.

But in recent years, these buildings have received more attention. Members of the communities began to engage in activities around those vacancies. These dedicated people include inhabitants, as well as returnees and newcomers. During recent years in the region of Upper Lusatia, many very heterogeneous groups and initiatives have been formed around vacancies of spaces, usually without external support or highly institutionalised concepts. The engines for these developments are instead idealism, local ties and commitment, civil voluntary work and personal learning.

Creative Adoption Strategies Initiating Democratic Processes of Community Education

Learning in the course of life is part of a subjective transformation, meaning that each person has ‘biographical resources’³³. But in order to turn an experience into a biographical learning process, it is necessary to reach a certain level of reflection about these experiences. In order to promote this, various unconventional paths are offered. The most important conditions are to create the space for biographical discussion and to provide an opportunity for this³⁴. Community education is also described as a long-term and fundamental requirement to empower a sustainable basis for a lifelong learning culture³⁵, especially informal learning in civil society at a regional level. A culture of lifelong learning can be

³⁴ M. Schulze, Transformationserfahrung – Anlass zur Kompetenzentwicklung der Dritten Generation? Eine Annäherung an generationales Lernen im Lebensverlauf, in U. Busch & M. Thomas, Ein Vierteljahrhundert Deutsche Einheit. Facetten einer unvollendeten Integration. (Trafo Wissenschaftsverlag, 2015)

³⁵ L.Chisholm, L. Lassnigg, M. Lehner, W. Lenz & R. Tippelt, Wissen – Chancen – Kompetenzen. Strategie zur Umsetzung des lebensbegleitenden Lernens in Österreich, (2009), http://erwachsenenbildung.at/downloads/service/LLL-Strategie_ExpertInnenbericht.pdf

achieved through personal development, self-learning about social and cultural topics, and volunteering in new learning environments. Because of the long-term view of this strategy and its qualitative aspects, its focus is on the practice and organisation of existing projects and initiatives³⁶.

The vacant properties in Upper Lusatia are historical buildings, and volunteering in one allows people to combine a part of their own history with the history of the community, providing voluntary work in a space that can be experienced directly. Having concrete and immediately available spaces is one of the main triggers for common action and learning. The key factors, however, to start a change process in the community, in this case, was a space or building being open and free for use and open to the general public. Further, the community and the public were involved at an early stage and were asked for help continually. This open-door policy is crucial for gaining new members and support from the municipal administration. It was equally crucial for the initiatives to be open to listening to the volunteers and for them to lend a sympathetic ear to the volunteers' needs.

Members of the initiatives handle a number of aspects of community management. This includes dealing with the administration, learning about public decision making, finding supporters on the polity level, understanding funding policies, but also investigating local history. So, although the agenda of the vacancy-initiatives had primarily not been political, the effect was a contribution to the recreation of public space.

Lessons for Civic Education

An active examination of recent history in post-socialist countries is essential for strengthening democratic processes. Many of the interviews conducted in the countries of our project partners reveal a similar crucial experience, which has had a lasting impact: a loss of

³⁶ L. Lassnigg, Community Education als Aktionslinie der nationalen Strategie zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen, (Magazin Erwachsenenbildung.at, No. 19, 2009), <http://erwachsenenbildung.at/magazin/13-19/meb13-19.pdf>

trust, rules or orientation³⁷. However, trust in other people, groups and institutions is a prerequisite for the functioning of democratic processes. Civic education needs to deal with people's actual perception of society and democracy, rather than solely teaching them about it. However, it is not just history lessons at school and other educational situations that allow for discussion. People should be able to talk about the past, particularly in families, private circles and local communities like neighbourhoods.

“ If someone cannot come to terms with the past, this can impair their ability to accept new situations and experiences for entire groups or for a whole generation, which itself is nothing more than the many individuals it consists of. Many families are, apart from anecdotes or platitudes, quite lost for words when it comes to the past. It is not rare for the cosmopolitan attitudes and experiences of the young generations who have left for the big cities to be met with rather conservative or populist attitudes in their rural home regions.

The challenge for political education is to encourage and guide a dialogue. Experience working with shaping dialogues between the generations shows that simply asking the 'wrong' question at the beginning may cause the dialogue to fail ("Now you are starting to talk like a Wessi!" Nedo: 152). Therefore, we suggest the development of specific didactic concepts.

Finally, we strongly support non-formal education situations, in public spaces with 'real encounters', as they provide opportunities for social interaction and allow individuals to discuss their experiences of transition situations in recent history.

³⁷ Transition Dialogue Network, *Breaking the Silence. Memories of the Times of Change*, (2016), <http://www.transition-dialogue.com/breaking-the-silence>

This also applies to the international dialogue. It is important to include not only multipliers of civic education but also citizens of all age groups without a background or expertise in transition. Exchange should be accessible to different groups, including minorities. This requires resources for translation as the language barrier is a key factor, hampering large-scale dialogue across borders and social milieus.

DRA's experience over the last decade suggests that sharing the difficulties and not only the good practise examples, resonates greatly with our Eastern European peers. Partners consider this approach helpful and authentic, because it fosters understanding and dialogue. Last but not least, it is important to understand that history has happened to all of us and we all share similar challenges, much in the same way we all have the capacity to become a driver of change.

About the authors

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Romania: A Missed Opportunity for Minorities

Irina Ilisei, PhD

Partner organisation: PLURAL Association, established in 2012, www.asociatia-plural.ro

“During the transition, the most vulnerable societal groups that were exposed to change were the ones invisible during the communist era. Ethnic, gender and sexual minorities were the social categories that had, in theory, the greatest windows of opportunity. But in practice, they suffered the greatest losses during this period of time. While any kind of change in a political, institutional or economic system is a long process, building a plural, inclusive society takes even longer and has to be based on education. The experience of a totalitarian regime and a history of state racism and a patriarchy cannot be easily wiped out.”

Irina Ilisei, PhD, President of PLURAL Association

Introduction

The focus of the PLURAL Association in the framework of the Transition Dialogue Network was to analyse the impact of the transition towards democracy on social categories that were less

visible and that were most vulnerable in the Romanian society during communism - women, ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI community, and low or working class citizens. We aimed to understand how this period affected these social groups, and what their social and political gains and losses were during transition.

Our analysis is based on a thorough literature review and seven video interviews with activists, academics and intellectuals engaged in the Romanian civic society. The interviews will be made available on the project website³⁸.

Milestones and Frameworks in Understanding Transition

The transition period in Romania is rooted in the failure of the communist regime in the country. December 1989 can be seen as a starting point for the reconstruction of Romanian society: *"The 1989 Revolution represents the main event in Romania in the last half century. It radically transformed the lives of millions of Romanians, modified the position of the country in the world and it triggered a whole process of change"*³⁹. While the origin of the transition in Romania is rather clear – the fall of the communist regime - the destination of this transition is a subject of debate. Transition is multifaceted. It includes political pluralism, a functional market economy, rule of law and the political representation of minorities.

One interviewee pointed out the need to reflect on how we frame the concept of transition, signalling that a permanent comparison with Western countries entails some risks. *"Who defines the transition? One version of transition was just the shift from that heart-rending communist, totalitarian, dictatorial regime in Eastern European countries to the glowing, democratic and liberal capitalism of the Western countries. This is the 'official' definition, how we transitioned from one to the other. However, people stumbled a lot in understanding what we actually had to do. Did we have to change all social structures or was it enough to change the political regime?"*

³⁸ Transition Dialogue – Mapping a Generation, <http://www.transition-dialogue.com/>

³⁹ V. Pasti, *România în tranziție. Căderea în viitor*, (Editura Nemira, 1995), p. 37

Did we have to change as people to become more democratic?” She was even more sceptical about the use of the term transition and its implications. “There are administrative structures in which nothing really changed. If we take a look at the socio-political formulas, how much did they change? And, if changes are indeed necessary, who should change them and in which direction?” (interview excerpt, Ioana Vrăbiescu, researcher of Roma and Migration Studies).

Other respondents are less doubtful about defining transition as the period that followed the fall of communism and of when Romania took the aspirational road of becoming a state, governed by democracy, rule of law, pluralism and freedom of speech. *“I believe that the transition started from the moment the dictator’s helicopter left the roof of the Romanian Communist Party from Bucharest, from the days of the revolution when, we all wished for and had aspirations to be accepted by the international community, to become an occidental state like we used to see in movies and magazines when they would escape censorship”* (interview excerpt, Iulian Stoian, activist for Roma and LGBTQI Rights). Indeed, most of the respondents identified the milestones of the transition period in Romania in direct relation to events that occurred in the international arena, and with Romanian adhesion to international structures, such as the Council of Europe, the Common Market, NATO and the European Union.

The 90s are generally perceived as the period of resettlement of institutions, the economy and society. The values and institutions of the previous political system were wiped out and there were no longer authority structures.

“ *“A lot of people robbed the state and bankrupted state enterprises for personal gain. [...] Ordinary citizens would also get ripped off en masse, especially in the early 1990s when people did not have an economic education.*

[...] Industries of all kinds were bankrupted and their assets were stolen. I mean, it was happening at all levels of society, from the highest to the lowest” (interview excerpt, Adrian Schiop, writer and anthropologist). From this perspective, the transition slowed down at the beginning of the 2000s, when society became more settled, and it ended when Romania entered the European Union - a moment that indicated Romania’s societal and institutional stability.

At an individual level, for many, the 90s signified deep poverty: “I associate transition with poverty, the poverty that I, my family, and especially the people around us would live in. I cannot make parallels to what happened before 1990 because I was not even born at the time, but what was more difficult was the fact that you felt poor, but you would see the wealth on the other side, around you, on the television screens, in friends’ houses and houses of rich people, and that’s how I think the feeling of frustration would somehow get born. Before 1989, everyone was doing badly, we were all equal somehow, but from the moment of the transition and the beginning of capitalism, the inequalities have grown and become more visible” (interview excerpt, Andreea Petruț, researcher of public policy).

Personal perceptions of transition change based on a person’s age, social class, ethnicity, gender, and area of residency. However, a person’s career and their education level also have a great impact on how December 1989 is perceived by that person. This is probably also the aspect that has the greatest impact on distinguishing between the different generations. The pressure to readjust to a society, which was continuously transforming, was greater for those in the labour market or those who had just graduated. Their opinion of communism and transition depends on their ability to readjust and maintain their economic and social status. The peaceful transfer of power from those in power to the opposition is another relevant aspect of transition.

⁴⁰ D. Sandu, *Sociologia tranziției: valori și tipuri sociale în România*, (Staff, 1996), p. 28

“As opposed to Poland and other Eastern European states, what happened in 1989 [in Romania] was not really a regime change. I think that the power has been seized by the second tier of Communist Party members, who were nevertheless communists.

In Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, there was a real dissidence. In Romania, maybe also because the regime was much more brutal than in other Eastern-European states, this dissidence could not manifest itself. Starting from that simulation of a revolution where we still do not know what happened, it quickly became clear that the new rulers were not willing to renounce the leverages of power, to step back. And accordingly, the first peaceful power shift took place later, after six years. Some people say that it was then that the communist cycle in Romania ended – and I agree with them. 1996, I think, was the moment when Romania has become much more viable from the point of view of a democracy governed by rule of law. Because, until then it was not really the case” (interview excerpt, Adrian Szelmenczi, activist for human rights).

Effects of Transition on Minority Social Categories

Are minority groups represented in the political arena in Romania? This is considered a key indicator of a consolidated democracy. Therefore, it is worth examining if and how minority social groups take part in the decision-making process.

One of the main characteristics of the political regime in Romania before 1989 was that political or social pluralism was non-existent. There was only one way to rule Romania – namely through the communist party.

“Communism was a type of fundamentalism, in the sense that it had at its base the belief that there was only one truth, one morality”⁴⁰.

The fall of communism gave minority groups the chance to have their voice heard, opened up debates on the political rights of minority groups and allowed institutions that work for the protection of those rights to be created.

Despite this opportunity, however, the Roma minority continued to occupy a marginal position. *"We did not manage to build public institutions related to our identity. This is the greatest loss"* (interview excerpt, Nicoleta Bițu). In parallel to that, women were a politically underrepresented social category during transition. *"The ideology of gender equality, promoted by communism, completely collapsed. After the fall of the communist regime, the political representation of women fell to 3.5% at a national level and 1.6% at a local level"* (interview excerpt, Mihaela Miroiu).

This shows that minority groups needed time to develop their negotiating skills. Members of underprivileged groups needed to learn how to exercise their free speech rights. Moreover, minority groups did not even recognise themselves as such. In addition, these groups also needed to learn that they could organise themselves and take a political stand. Referring to the gay community, Adrian Schiop points out that *"In the 1990s nobody would come out of the closet and it was a non-existent category"* (interview excerpt). The LGBTQI community took over a decade to take its first steps towards fighting for political rights.

In practice, *"the analysis of different reports, public policies and strategies made by the Romanian governments and public institutions during transition shows an acute incapacity to think about the diversity of disadvantaged groups and the multiple facets of their problems"*⁴¹. From an economic standpoint, groups most affected by the transition, including the elderly, unqualified workers, people with disabilities, and the Roma were also underprivileged during the communist regime. Women were over-represented in all these categories and were the most exposed to the continuous fall of living standards, the rise of social exclusion and unemployment⁴².

⁴¹ V. Pasti, *România în tranziție. Căderea în viitor*, (Editura Nemira, 1995), p. 20

⁴² V. Pasti, *Ultima inegalitate. Relațiile de gen în România*, (Polirom, 2003), p. 30



Roma women standing in front of the Tricodava factory in 1976

Source: Crina Morteau, Urban Roma Collection



Bucharest street performance for representation and recognition of women in the public sphere, 8 March 2016

Source: Tudorina Mihai, www.feminism-romania.ro

During transition, the state took measures that indirectly had a much stronger negative impact on women than on men. For example, most of the existing social infrastructure for childcare was closed after 1989.

Another social category disproportionately affected by the transition was the Roma. Racism played a role when it comes to Roma losing their jobs and facing discrimination in accessing the labour market: *“At the very beginning of transition racism took violent forms [...]. Transition, in fact, has unveiled this passive-aggressive racism that I am talking about, that existed during communism as well. After the Revolution, all the rule of law institutions were unreliable. Without authority, these negative feelings added up and surfaced in the form of conflicts between Roma people and Romanians”* (interview excerpt, Nicoleta Bițu).

'Room Service' Recognition of Minority Groups

The transition was also the moment when the first state institutions and civil society organisations striving for anti-discrimination and human rights were created. However, the values that were ingrained in the past, such as a rejection of differences, negative experiences in building social solidarity and a lack of experience creating bottom-up political changes, were still inherited in the period that followed 1989 and did not shift along with the change of regime. The recognition of the value of pluralism and political rights of minority groups was very slowly achieved, and as both the literature review and our respondents show, it was achieved due to pressure from international institutions. *“During these 26 –27 years, there was a process of adapting the national legislation to the various juridical systems Romania was aspiring to. For example, the vocation towards a democratic state and Romania’s ascension to the Council of Europe was a fact that produced a series of changes to our legislative framework. We abolished the death penalty, we abolished article 200 from the Penal Code, which would bring penal charges for homosexuality, and so on. Lots of such elements have been*

progressively adopted, but this came at the cost of not educating the population properly during the process” (interview excerpt, Iulian Stoian).

As a consequence, Romania registered an important progress concerning the recognition of minorities but this improvement remained mostly at the level of legislation and political frameworks. It did not translate itself into better practical measures, improvement in societal attitudes or public speech of politicians: *“Romania, subsequently, has signed the framework convention regarding the protection of the national minorities, and has ratified it too. There are not many people who know about it, especially journalists [...]. The Romanian states assumes the protection of the Hungarian language as a minority and regional language, also through some international documents that were signed – though their application is not systematic. We still have a lot of sentences which are at least bizarre from certain points of view, which are clearly against the Romanian Constitution. We still have situations in which repressive organs [state institutions], if I may call them so, take action on ethnic considerations” (interview excerpt, Adrian Szelmenczi, activist for human rights).*

Referring to the situation of gender equity and women’s rights in Romania after the fall of communism, Mihaela Miroiu developed the concept of ‘room service’ feminism, which she defines as “form without content” that has been welcomed to answer Western requests for integration⁴³. A similar path was followed not only concerning women’s rights but also concerning ethnic minorities, LGBTQI rights and any diversity policies. A discourse in favour of minority groups was brought in and was included into legislative frameworks, but only a few measures were used in practice. Neither budget distribution, nor educational policies were written in support of equality for minority groups. The transition towards valuing diversity, inclusion and political rights for minority groups is, therefore, incomplete.

⁴³ M. Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie. Teorii politice feministe* (Polirom, 2004)

“I do not see transition as finished, I believe that the transition is only beginning. The political and systemic transition has been done but not the mental one. Public debates on certain topics are not very prominent, and these are the things that the well-being of this nation depends on” (interview excerpt, Nicoleta Bițu).

Lessons for Civic Education

The past of a society is the space where the values, fears, and modus operandi are rooted. One projects the future based on their past. The transition from a totalitarian regime to a pluralist democratic society, with functional institutions and a capitalist market, is a process that has occupied almost three decades. Internalisation of the democratic political culture and the spirit of an open inclusive society are subject to longer processes of change that need to be supported by education.

Having deep, structured debates on transition in Romania would help us understand how the communist legacy makes its presence felt over 27 years after the end of the communist regime. It would open up the dialogue about how different social groups envision their own political agendas and how these positions can be negotiated and brought together in an inclusive society. Reflecting on the past, such as the socialist or transition periods, is not only relevant for the sake of it but also for understanding where the political attitudes stem from, how different social categories experienced these periods, why society is polarised, and how constructive dialogue and solidarity inside of the society can be constructed.

Civic education, with non-formal educational methods, offers a great methodology for bringing together people with different social backgrounds, family histories and even people of different generations. It offers spaces for reflection, debates and interaction, and for getting in touch with different life experiences and attitudes towards social life. One of the most relevant goals that civic

education can achieve is making the interplay between the individual level and the structural level in a society visible. In every political era, individual choices interact with the social context, institutions or media. Individuals shape the society that they live in. Moreover, political regimes are experienced and interpreted differently based on the various social group a person belongs to. It is the role of civic education to shed light on these relationships, to generate the sense of responsibility, and to empower action.

About the author

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Russia: Authoritarian Resurgence

Oksana Bocharova, Polina Filippova, Vlada Gekhtman

Partner organisation: Sakharov Centre, established in 1990, www.sakharov-center.ru/english.html

“The 90s are both condemned and praised as a period. However, I have always felt that the arguments of both camps are not arguments about the 90s as a historical period, but rather arguments about different world views, and different sets of values. Memories people have about transition are highly fragmented. This is not, for instance, a topic families and friends discuss among themselves. I often feel that whenever we speak of transition and the 90s, rather than analysing the past, we speak about the future. In other words, we speak of the time thinking of what should have been, rather than of what really was. The 90s are the time we have lived without Sakharov – he left us on 14 December 1989. But his hopes and fears for a new world yet to come have stayed with us as challenges and questions that remained not tackled. Following his legacy, we try to look at the 90s as a multidimensional decade in the history of our country and try to escape from a black and white reading of history that attempts to diminish its importance.”

Polina Filippova, Coordinator

Introduction

Conservatism and authoritarianism are the two most precise terms to describe the condition of the political system and the public mood in today's Russia. As applied to the past, these refer to nostalgia over the Soviet period, which is seen as an era of stability and dignity, while the years of rapid societal transition in the 90s are linked in the public perception with chaos, disorientation, and national humiliation. Any alternative views of the period of transition only exist within relatively narrow circles of liberal intellectuals and entrepreneurs, independent from the state.

These attitudes emerged at the end of the 90s, as a natural consequence of mass disillusionment in the outcomes of both economic reforms, such as unjust privatisation, a sharp growth in wealth inequality and the demonstrative consumption of the rich, and political processes, such as fraudulent elections, corruption, and the abuse of power, in particular, by authorities and law enforcement agencies.



*People's march in Moscow, 19 August 1991
Source: Ivan Simochkin*

From Communism to Transition

Many people see the transition as a time of a radical change of values, as well as a time of challenges. This is why they call it uncertain, obscure and maze-like as often they recall the unlimited opportunities and the chances they had to radically change their lives. *"A generation divided by the 90s. A very diverse generation. Some have met it with high hopes, while others have experienced horrors and a total collapse of the values they have been taught to share"* (interview excerpt).

“It is like a fish bowl that has suddenly got all messed up, and every fish is experiencing a cognitive dissonance of some sort. Some found themselves buried under the sand, others caught something in their gills, and a scuba tank has fallen on somebody's head. But still, some fish swam out to clear waters. Everything sinks, yet something floats to the surface” (interview excerpt).

"It all went adrift in a way, because, on the one hand, the kids were growing up, and I knew it was time to talk to them about universally important things. On the other hand, I did not quite know myself what was universally important and how to respond to all that" (interview excerpt).

"I suddenly realised that I can do anything. I have got my brain and know how to do things, so I can earn money. There are limitless green fields all around, lots of opportunities, and nobody tells you what to do" (interview excerpt).

However, since 2000, government propaganda has been actively supporting negative perceptions of the transition period and has contributed to the reinforcement of these attitudes amongst younger generations. This does not assume a renaissance of communist or left-wing ideologies. Instead, statism and imperial nationalism on the edge of chauvinism have become mainstream. All periods of political

instability and weakening of the central power are condemned - the 90s, along with the revolution of 1917, and the troubled times in the early 17th century. This set of values is promoted in many ways, from propaganda events, such as large-scale expos "The Rurikids" and "The Romanovs" (held with the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church, Ministry of Culture and the Military-Historic Society, headed by Sergei Naryshkin, ex-State Duma chairman), to history schoolbooks. The Bolsheviks and Lenin are disapproved of, while Stalin gets a certain level of respect. The greatest anti-hero is Mikhail Gorbachev. Attitudes towards Boris Yeltsin are generally negative, though more restrained. The absolute leaders of opinion polls about national symbols and heroes are always the rulers and warlords (see, for example, the Name of Russia⁴⁴ project or the Public Opinion Foundation's research)⁴⁵.



Monument of Vladimir Lenin in Moscow
Source: Adam Bowie

⁴⁴ Name of Russia, <http://www.nameofrussia.ru/>

⁴⁵ Public Opinion Foundation, Russian Historical Figures Influencing the Country, (2008), <http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/istdeotcet>

From Transition to Authoritarianism

Over the last few years, ideological denial of the basic values of the transitional period has added up to the denial of the achievements of that time. Everything that liberal values comprise of, such as human rights, freedom, openness and individualism, is marginalised and declared wrong and false. Censorship is not only imposed upon the mass media, but also upon cultural institutions that translate these values. The Soviet understanding of education and culture as, primarily, ideological tools serving the rulers' interests, has returned.

Renationalisation of the economy has been rapid. The share of state-owned companies in Russia's GDP has doubled over just ten years and now exceeds 70%. While in the 90s most young Russians wished to work in private companies, they now usually aim to get a job with state-owned corporations, public agencies and power-wielding structures.

Simultaneously, the removal of the last remains of the Soviet system in social support, education, healthcare and science continues. These sectors have undergone what is called "monetisation" and receive budget funds depending on their efficiency indicators, such as how many people have received their "services", while the share of paid services is growing. It is quite possible this is what has caused the increase in the number of people who prefer to rely on their own resources and possibilities rather than on a state support (according to the Levada Centre, 78% in 2016). It is, seemingly, the only indicator which demonstrates certain social progress over the entire 25-year period.

On the whole, the recognised and valued fruits of the transition comprise of the understanding of people's own potential, and the absence of any "universally correct" templates for life trajectories and multiplicity of social norms. *"Nevertheless, for me, the bottom line of those years is comprehension that one could live in a different way, one could be free. And that one does not need to depend on the state; one would rather want to deal with it as little as possible"* (interview excerpt).

"Business and entrepreneurship emerged. People are more capable of fulfilling themselves, their inner resources. Not everyone is ready to march in lockstep, go to work every day, bow to the bosses. There are no forced obligations, some independence emerged" (interview excerpts).

Sakharov Centre

Maintaining Academician Sakharov's humanistic legacy, the Sakharov Centre strives to contribute to the continuity of the civil rights movement in Russia, to pass on traditions, values, and experiences. This is the strategy that joins our work together with historic memories and with civil education. We aim to raise a new generation of civil activists who perceive themselves as part of a continuous movement that roots down to the Soviet dissent and who know how to employ modern civil practices, from international civil society.

"However, our country is not hopeless. It seems that many bad things have come back, yet people have changed. They've learnt how to protect their rights and how to do it together" (interview excerpt).

"People came to know better what their rights are and how to fight for them, or, at least, where to go to seek protection if they feel their rights are violated" (interview excerpt).

Work to understand the transitional period, or rather, the transformational era in Russia, is just beginning. Its task is modelling a coherent perception of this historical time. Meanwhile, traumatic experiences of social and economic transition often obscure a whole range of new practices and opportunities that people very quickly get used to and see as something natural (e.g. liberty of movement and residence, new consumer practices, new educational choices). It is highly important to trace the political and social history of the transition period, to put together a consistent concept of the reasons for the transition and transformation of the Soviet state. Our discussion programme aims to close the gap between generations and to keep alive and share the traditions of humanitarian and critical thinking.

Sakharov Centre strives to work with the practices of solidarity, to strengthen existing traditions and build new ones, to teach Russians how to be citizens. These are not easy tasks. Today's Russians remember the social collapse that followed the Perestroika and the mistakes that occurred during the transition: notions of "democracy" and "capitalism" are closely associated with ones' powerlessness and poverty and others' omnipotence and excessive wealth.

"Of course, it is sort of a global shake-up. Literally, over months, people lost everything when the factories they worked at closed down, or did not pay salaries month after month. For many, it was too much to withstand, so they succumbed to alcoholism, depression and misery. Nevertheless, those with some entrepreneurial talent were able to earn huge money. So, they did, and some did so by deceiving people" (interview excerpt).

Thus, a typical emotion for the transition period is disillusionment. Disillusionment is both "retrospective", (i.e. via reappraisal of this period over the last few years, within the context of negative government propaganda and official attitudes), and genuine old disillusionment that appeared back then, by the end of the transition period. The latter kind of disillusionment occurred due to a turnaround in the perception of authorities and the business circles closely connected to them. However, these feelings then extended to disillusionment in the values of democracy and liberalism.

““You see, it was like a romantic crush. We were full of high hopes and dreams of freedom and democracy, and then, by the end of the '90s, it turned out that most of them were actually pursuing their interests and simply wished to become rich, that they did not think of any public good” (interview excerpt).

In other words, it is necessary to reconsider the ideas of "democracy" and "liberal values", to explain, again and again, what they mean. To drag democracy out of the debris of the transition, this explanation

should rely on the values and skills that most people had at the beginning of the transition period.

Lessons for Civic Education

Civil education should be based on the transfer of values, provisions for continuity, the maintenance of historic memories, and participation in specific civil practices. Therefore, programmes for civic education should be multidimensional, so that they include components that are related to all of the objectives mentioned above. This, in particular, means involving both experts and actual civic activists, working out mechanisms for volunteer participation, and supporting communication networks to build up a community for the activists, volunteers and the supporters. Sakharov Centre's Moscow Open Human Rights School is an example of this type of programme. It comprises of lectures on the history of the human rights movement in the Soviet Union, meetings with prominent human rights advocates who began their work at the start of the 90s, and courses on human rights theory and practical civil advocacy cases.

About the authors

Polina Filippova studied journalism and worked in various forms of media before becoming a project coordinator at the Sakharov centre. She is interested in everything to do with media and history activism.

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Ukraine: Transition Reset

Olena Pravylo

Partner organisation: The Congress of Cultural Activists, established during the Euromaidan civil unrest (2013), www.culturalactivism.org

“The aim of the Cultural Congress is to support the reform agenda in cultural politics, and foster dialogue and participation aiming at a progressive and inclusive cultural policy. In this respect, culture is seen as a means to involve citizen in social and political matters, comment on current debates and also provide opportunity for a new creative industry to emerge”.

Olena Pravylo, Chairperson

With the Maidan revolution, the process of transition has been reset. Three years into it, a difficult reform path has been launched, overshadowed by an ongoing war. While it has had some success stories, it has also had many setbacks. The Ukrainian partner in the Transition Dialogue Network, Congress of Cultural Activists, has worked on a series of audio and video interviews in Kyiv, Ternopil, Dnipro, Rivne, and Odessa, and organised public discussions and a conference for cultural activists. The organisation also hosted one of the meetings of the network. These were part of an effort to map the generation in transition in Ukraine. The following country profile is based largely on interviews conducted in Ukraine over the past two years. Interviewees were asked to talk about their memories and their experiences of transition. Our assumption is that many of the challenges we face today are legacies of the Soviet past and the first phases of transition.

Apart from the discussions and the conference, organised in Kyiv, we have conducted about three dozen audio and video interviews in Kyiv, Dnipro, Odessa, and Ternopil, as well as a few in Rivne. Ukrainians in Dnipro were especially patriotic in their political attitudes, but also rather passive in terms of civic engagement, with a strong focus on their daily life.

The main question in these open-style interviews was what the interviewee calls transition. Many do not think about transition in these terms, they perceive the situation as frozen or speak of changes occurring only in the last few years. In some regions people have a strong Soviet-time identity, in others they identify strongly as Ukrainians and acknowledge the fact that if change is to come, they need to be an active part of it with all the responsibilities that implies. In Donetsk, the understanding of the people is that the oligarchs will take care of them and that there is always someone else to take care of them.

The general sense, however, is that Ukraine is changing. De-communisation and decentralisation are key topics, but a broad and open discussion about them is missing. Many interviewees have a sense that they are excluded from the conversation about public space; communist statues get replaced by nation-centred groups with the same vigour as the Soviets replaced Ukrainian statues, and citizens disagree with the top-down approach being replicated.

Where It All Began

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of a process of dissolution that had begun for Ukraine in the late 70s and 80s. Launched with Gorbachev's *"perestroika"*⁴⁶, new multi-party principles were formed. By the time the perestroika movement emerged, the Communist party was already on an irreversible track of self-delegitimation, losing its standing and imposed solidarity. The rift between the ruling party and the societies was becoming

⁴⁶ Perestroika (Russian: перестройка; IPA: [pʲɪrʲɪˈstrojka]) was a political movement, which stood for reformation within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the 1980s. It is widely associated with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his glasnost (meaning "openness") policy reform.

even deeper. The elites were trying to protect the old system by introducing a basic level of pluralism, but this was not enough to save a system in a deep crisis, and it was destined to collapse. Ukraine had already seen the rise of informal oppositional groups and associations at the end of the 70s with the Ukrainian-Helsinki Group, which by the end of the 80s transformed from a human rights organisation into a political one. It was followed by the Ukrainian Democratic Union, the Ukrainian Cultural Club, the Ukrainian Christian Democratic Front and the Ukrainian environmental movement called Green World, supported mainly by intellectuals and students⁴⁷.

"After Chernobyl, the Berlin Wall no Longer Exists"⁴⁸

The words of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard capture best the dynamics in Ukraine in early 1986. The disastrous nuclear accident that occurred in the restricted zone of Chernobyl removed any doubts about the murderous nature of the regime, which had claimed to care about the people, but instead cared only about its own survival. Trust was irreversibly broken.

“*“Even if you were among the ones who believed that communism is possible, the concentration of power in the hands of very few in the beginning of its instalment should have ringed alarm bells for the upcoming disaster. In order to instil the ideas of communism, the public sphere had to be modified to fit the ideology. Since this did not happen easily, the ultimate consequences of the regime’s intervention were catastrophic – millions were sacrificed for the sake of the communist idea.”*⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ukrainian History, *The Beginning of the Building of a Multiparty System in Ukraine in the late 80s - early 90s of XX century*, <http://histua.com/istoriya-ukraini/ukraina-v-umovax-nezaleznosti/formuvannya-bagatopartijnosti>

⁴⁸ J. Baudrillard, *L'illusion de la Fin*, (Stanford University Press, 1994)

⁴⁹ V. Vyatrovych, Olga Salo & Yasin Yasynevych, *Чорнобиль і совок: розючі паралелі*, (LB.ua, 26 April 2016), http://lb.ua/society/2016/04/26/333911_chornobil_i_sovok_razyuchi_pareleli.html

"The main lesson from Chernobyl was 'do not trust the authorities.' The world saw the heroism of Ukrainians. The regime tried to hide the consequences of the explosion and its deadly consequences; it readily sacrificed us, but we never learned to demand the same sacrifice in return."⁵⁰

Before Chernobyl, most Ukrainians did not question the nature of the Soviet regime; the nuclear catastrophe exposed its defects to a point of no return. The tragedy put many in a disastrous social and ecological environment and people were afraid for their lives. Many had to move away to the Caucasus or to other places in Ukraine, like Odessa.

Surprisingly, not everyone has a negative recollection of the disaster. The younger generation, born in the late 70s and early 80s, remembers the period as an extended vacation time, away from home, at their granny's house or at the seaside. While 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, formally marks the beginning of the transition, the cracks in the system were already there in the 80s.

My Story or Your Story – our Ukrainian Story of Independence?

1991 was the year that marked the Independence of Ukraine. However, people's recollection of that time differs greatly, emphasising the ambivalence of personal experience, memories, and interpretations. *"We first did not believe what was happening"*, one of the interviewees said, *"we were to raise the Ukrainian flag for the first time with my parents in the city centre of Ternopil"*.

"But for me, as a KGB officer in Dnipropetrovsk, this was a real tragedy; as officers, we were the elite and we did not see anything wrong about our work – we were just protecting our country, the USSR" (interview excerpts).

⁵⁰ V. Onopryychuk, *Чорнобильська катастрофа запустила процес розвалу Радянського Союзу*, (Gazeta.ua, 27 April 2016), http://gazeta.ua/articles/events-journal/_cornobiliska-katastrofa-zapustila-proces-rozvalu-radyanskogo-soyuzu/693446



*"Comradery", façade of a public building in Russian in Ukraine
Source: Olena Pravylo*

Serhiy Oliferchuk, a lawyer from Kyiv, was born in 1972, and at 18 years old soldier in the Soviet Army, working nearby Moscow in the town of Naro-Fominsk. He remembers many Ukrainians in the army, following Ukraine's independence, including himself, immediately displaying the 'Tryzub' (the state coat of arms of Ukraine) on their belt buckles. This demonstrated their newly gained sense of national identity, but the commanders were very angry about it. As a result, when around that time Serhiy requested vacation time to go back to his family in Kyiv. He was put in a military jail, instead. His father helped him escape the detention and as soon as he got home, Serhiy joined the Ukrainian Army. This made him one of few soldiers who took oaths of allegiance to two different countries – the Soviet Union and Ukraine. Serhiy often reflects upon this split of identity and the multiple identities that continue to mark the lives of many of the citizens of the former Soviet Union.

Not everyone feels affected by the changes and even of those who do, not everyone feels positively affected. Aleksandr Dmitriev, who was born in 1973 and is a designer from Odessa remembers: "In the Soviet times my parents worked in a restaurant in Odessa. Work was good and they and I had many options to choose from, despite all the bandits. Now life has become much more difficult, there is

lots of competition and many more restaurants to keep pace with" (interview excerpt).

The Generation(s) of Transition

The generation born in the 70s vividly remembers the change of the system and can be considered to be the generation of transition. As teenagers, they experienced both perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet system. This, too, is the generation that is most sceptical of transition, as its memories of the Soviet past are not just negative. The pseudo-security that the communist system provided was highly valued and is greatly mourned. Free healthcare is often mentioned as a social benefit that got lost in transition. This is not entirely true, as state healthcare continues to be almost entirely funded by the government. However, this does not mean its standards and quality are not heavily neglected.

The generation of the 80s has different memories of the Soviet past. They recollect years of poverty and a shortage of food and clothing. Still, the transition was a greater challenge for the generation of the 70s; it moved with the country from one period of life to another.

Tonya Mishova was born in 1980, and describes her peers as the generation of 'pretenders'. *"We got prepared for life in a certain system, but we found ourselves in another one. We were not sure whether we are taking the right roles in our society now, we lost confidence, we were instilled with insecurities but kept going. We did not know how to be and this is why we pretended we did know. We pretend to be European too, but we are not. The next generation is really free, but ours is not"* (interview excerpt).

“Pretending is common in times of change; faking an activity for the sake of imitating normality becomes normal. Persepolis, an Iranian comic-book, captures a similar moment – the family has no food but the mother is boiling water, pretending she is cooking, because if you have something to cook, you are not poor and if you are not poor, everything is normal.

"I only came to realise that perestroika has changed the country when I moved to the city from my hometown. I was smoking on the balcony watching a family of three collecting cigarette stubs for the father. These were times when people were really starving", remembers Taras Donenko, a designer born in 1977. *"The younger generation knows no fear. It was born free and is not afraid to act. My generation is full of fears"* (interview excerpt).

As is to be expected, the generation born in the 80s has fewer memories of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but remembers the hardships and poverty of their childhood. Many of them are filled with remorse, because of the shortages and the difficult upbringing they suffered through.



Public discussion, Kyiv
Source: Olena Pravylo

Another interesting aspect revealed by the interviews is the sense of unity and solidarity Ukrainians share. Two-thirds of the interviewees testify that nowadays, as opposed to the Soviet times, there is a real sense of solidarity. The new wave of volunteerism that emerged after the Euromaidan protests is one example of the ability of Ukrainians to stick together. However, the other third of the respondents speaks with nostalgia about the informal networks of support that existed before 1991, which were based on mutual everyday support. They testify that this type of neighbourly help is very rare now.

“ People’s memories about transition and their understandings about them are very diverse and polarised. They are also very individualised and are based on the personal experiences or stories of the families a person has grown up with. Rather than being one grand narrative, they are associated with the personal choices individuals made in these difficult times.

1991 was a watershed for everyone, but many acknowledge that the changes began prior to that. For some, Gorbachev’s perestroika is the historical moment of change, but for others, the Chernobyl disaster is the symbol of the fall of the Soviet system, as trust was irreversibly breached. And while the fall of the Berlin wall has been noted, it is 1991 and not 1989 that marked the beginning of the transition. Everyone agrees that the transformation is not over and the elder generation admits it has made a mistake in being silent about the communist past.



"Director," sign on the door of a public administrative building in Russian in Ukraine with office hours

Source: Olena Pravylo

"We wanted to let the youth enter a bright future, free from the burden of the past. We realise we were not right" testifies one of the elder interviewees. The challenges related to the past are many, as Taras Donenko, born in 1977, stated: *"We will know transition is over when the people in the public service start smiling and behaving like normal people, not from a position of power, just like in the old days"* (interview excerpt). The latter alludes to problems of inherited 'Soviet-style' structures in politics and institutions and persistent centralisation – challenges, shared by many post-communist and post-Soviet countries. Our research and other encounters, organised for the project, have demonstrated that, while we share commonalities with all post-communist countries, the similarities are even bigger among the former Soviet republics. For these countries, transition is similarly chaotic and reforms similarly weak.

Through the work of the Transition Dialogue Network, we were able to put our experience in a comparative context, explore new venues of engagement and new formats of dialogue. At the 2016 Wroclaw Biennale, the work of 29 Ukrainian artists was presented under the title of Transformation. Key areas of our work are de-communisation (including in Luhansk and Donetsk), dealing with nostalgia and the effects of ignoring the memories of the Soviet past and using the tools of civic dialogue and videos for education.

Lessons for Civic Education

One of the main objectives of the work of the Cultural Congress is to map the people of Ukraine's understanding and experience of transition. Our focus is not only on the political, but also on the social, cultural, public, and urban space transition captured in their personal stories. At the same time, the picture is complicated by events like the annexation of Crimea, the Russian invasion and war in Eastern Ukraine and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and our society is deeply polarised.

“ There is a growing awareness that most of our problems stem from the unfinished transition and the unchallenged Soviet legacies. At the same time, we are not engaged in a large-scale discussion about who we want to be, what our national identity is and how we want to deal with our Soviet heritage.

This is the gap we are trying to address with our work. The generation of transition has a key role to play in this process, as this is the generation that is most active in formulating and executing reforms and helping the younger generation find its role in this process. In this respect, this generation is not very different from the same generation in other parts of the world, where it is involved in launching start-ups, running NGOs, and providing creative and collaborative spaces for new ideas. The freedom to travel, highly cherished by all our interviewees as a newly gained freedom in transition, has aided the transitional generation in following the same trends as many of their peers from around the world.

We have identified that dialogue on the local level is a key tool to map, but also to challenge, beliefs and attitudes related to the past that result in polarisation nowadays. An inter-generational dialogue is also an important component. We were able to discern that conflicts in society are to a large extent a problem due to the lack of dialogue between two conflicting versions of memory, and culture and art as mediums have an important role to play in facilitating harmonisation between these groups. Transitional dialogue is a useful comparative platform to look into Ukrainian's shared past, their beliefs and their attitudes, and to challenge these and use other country's experience in addressing them. This, however, should not be a process that evokes nostalgia, as it is skilfully used as a propaganda tool for a communist past that never was.

About the author

Olena Pravylo, the Chairperson of the Congress of Cultural Activists, a researcher, a creative entrepreneur, and an expert in cultural policy making and facilitation. Olena also works as a facilitator and local projects mentor for the Active Citizen Programme, in partnership with the British Council, which involves working with local communities and activists on social action projects and local strategy developments. In addition, she is a moderator for *Culture 2025. Platform for changes*. The main focus of the project is the development and implementation of Ukraine's 2016-2025 cultural strategy. Olena is an active researcher of cultural fields in small cities in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, and uses the frame of the "MetaMisto" project in collaboration with the NGO "Garazh Geng". She is also involved in research in Armenia, examining the creative potential of cities and regions, and manages an advocacy campaign for cultural and creative industries in Ukraine. In addition, she is a short movies producer at a family production company "Kontora Pravylo", and the organiser of the multidisciplinary festival "Transkaukazja".

Acknowledgements

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Partners

Below is a list of the organisations who founded the network and whose work was mainly coordinated by the efforts of German-Russian Exchange and Sofia Platform.

German-Russian Exchange (DRA), Germany

German-Russian Exchange (DRA) in Berlin works with its partner organisation, the German-Russian Exchange in St. Petersburg, and numerous partners in Germany, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine and various other European countries, to establish a strong civil society in the East and the West. DRA facilitates the creation of networks between different sections of society - businesses, state institutions, educational institution, scientific and religious groups. DRA in cooperation with partners, organises advanced training and other educational projects related to a range of areas, including freedom of the press, promotion of small businesses, memory politics, civic education, conflict prevention, organisational development and the environment. DRA is the host of the Transition Dialogue Network project and the Secretariat of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

Sofia Platform, Bulgaria

Sofia Platform has a two-fold mission: promoting awareness of Bulgaria's communist past using methods of historical dialogue and civic education, and the provision of training; and exchanging knowledge and experiences with countries in transition to democracy, in both Europe and North Africa. Launched in 2011 in Bulgaria, Sofia Platform's main objective is to promote liberal values by acknowledging the local context of countries in transition and reflecting the need for knowledge to be shared between the countries. The concept, successfully established by Sofia Platform, is based on a comparison of transitional experiences. This was obtained through research and dialogue between civil society and the political leaders of four transitional blocks: Central Eastern Europe (former Communist states), the Middle East and North African countries, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries.

Knowledge at Work Foundation (Stiftung Wissen am Werk), Croatia

Knowledge at Work Foundation (Stiftung Wissen am Werk) was founded in 2015 in Zagreb, Croatia as an initiative of a number of Croatian businessmen and educators. The Foundation focuses on cooperation and linking economic and educational sectors. It encourages young talent to get into the work force, the strategic and sustained orientation of education towards business practice, and the strengthening of Croatia's international competitiveness. The Foundation's goal is to reinforce international ties – especially with Croatia's traditional, German-speaking connections (i.e. Germany, Austria and Switzerland). The Knowledge at Work Foundation aims to promote: innovation, excellence and competence; equal opportunities; mobility, knowledge transfers and exchanges; international networking, especially with partners and institutions from German-speaking countries; competitiveness and the identification and utilisation of knowledge to benefit the domestic labour market. Our strategic partners are the Erste Foundation and the German Commerce Chamber. The Foundation is also sponsored by the Austrian, German and Swiss embassies in Croatia. In our third cycle of the four projects directed at the high school and primary school pupils and their educators, the Foundation is successfully working with almost 50 companies and 30 Croatian schools.

Perspective3, Germany

Perspective3 unites activists from the 3rd Generation – those born between 1975 and 1985 – from East Germany and beyond. Starting from the experience and perspective of this generation they aim to contribute to the public discourse on questions of common socio-political relevance. Perspective3 does projects in the sphere of science, culture and education.

Sakharov Centre, Russia

Sakharov Centre was founded in the 1990s in Moscow, Russia and was originally focused on the creation of permanent museum exhibitions, library collections, temporary exhibits, and historical research. In 2009, the main priority of the Centre shifted towards a robust discussion programme. Since then, leading specialists and opinion-makers have been invited to participate in debates, seminars, public lectures, and panel discussions. These activities have attracted numerous young, educated, and socially conscious people.

Congress of Cultural Activists, Ukraine

Congress of Cultural Activists is an organisation comprised of creative professionals based in Kyiv, Ukraine, who wish to increase cross-cultural collaboration on a global scale, and encourage activism as a method to move societies forward. The Congress team is committed to improving dialogue between Ukraine's regions, development by means of culture, and the integration of culture in national social and economic development strategies. The key focuses of our in-country activities and international projects are supported by cultural and creative industry professionals, and the development of urban communities through the empowerment of active citizens. We strongly believe in advocacy for culture as a driver of economic development. The organisation is part of the Alliance of Culture, a Ukrainian platform for civil society and public authorities, where the national Cultural Development Strategy 2015-2025 was created. It is also a member of Culture Action Europe, the biggest umbrella organisation to represent the cultural sector at a European level.

PLURAL Association, Romania

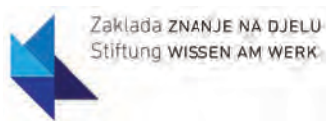
PLURAL Association was established in 2012, with the goal of promoting socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, gender, religious and political diversity in Romania. PLURAL's main activities are shaped in order to create informal citizenship education in the spirit of democracy, social equity and non-discrimination. The association has taken part in over 30 international projects, organising youth exchanges and seminars for multipliers on topics such as anti-discrimination, gender roles, ethnic minorities, European identity and conflict management. Moreover, PLURAL is highly involved in several national-level and European-level networks, which promote citizenship education, a remembrance culture and gender equity.

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Organisations of the Transition Dialogue Network



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