1989 and After: Morality and Truth in Postcommunist Societies

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Almost 30 years ago, the independent, self-governed Polish trade union Solidarity was legalized after a long campaign of strikes, and allowed to compete in parliamentary elections that it won by an overwhelming margin. What followed was a chain of breathtaking, radical changes, now designated as the revolutions of 1989. The collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe stirred huge hopes and widespread euphoria. Many of us—historians, political scientists, economists, sociologists, philosophers, and journalists—indulged in wishful thinking and overlooked how complicated and frustrating the divorce from the dictatorial past would be. Things have been far from simple in the three decades since then. Transitions do not follow a teleological libretto.

Some politicians remained faithful to the ideals of 1989. One was the pro-Western liberal Pawel Adamowicz, the mayor of Gdansk—the home of Solidarity—for 20 years. He was murdered in January, as I was writing this essay. Another politician chose to betray those ideals and has become the apostle of the antiliberal counterrevolution: Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, a former anticommunist maverick turned right-wing populist. Such metamorphoses reflect the psychological and social components of the postcommunist imbroglio. But things were not simple in Poland and Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968—or for that matter, in 1989, either. On the contrary, they were maddeningly contradictory, nonlinear, and often discombobulating.

Communism and fascism still have followers and continue to exert an uncanny seductive power. Can critical intellectuals still make a difference? Can liberal values resist ethnocentric attacks? We need clearheadedness, moral intelligence, and political lucidity. Maybe these are all "lyrical illusions," to borrow the title of a chapter in André Malraux's Spanish Civil War novel *Man's Hope*. But without lyrical illusions we would succumb to non-lyrical demagoguery, xenophobic populism, and other unsavory forms of bigotry.

At first, in the early 1990s, critical intellectuals were lionized as truth-tellers indispensable for Eastern Europe's transformation. Václav Havel, the dissident playwright, became the president of Czechoslovakia; then, after the "velvet divorce," he remained president of the Czech Republic. Solidarity's legendary leader, Lech Walesa, was elected president of democratic Poland. Morality and politics were regarded as mutually compatible. Civil society represented a widespread aspiration to a non-Machiavellian new form of politics.

Coming to terms with the past was a matter of moral and political urgency, at least during the first postcommunist years. But to accomplish this reckoning with history, which the Germans ponderously call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, is a very complex, thorny, and more often than not vexing process. To right the wrongs of the past requires engaging in a historically grounded undertaking that is meant to offer traumatized societies a chance for closure. To accomplish this task, political leaders need both moral imagination and civil courage.

Unfortunately, these virtues are in short supply in Eastern Europe's new dark times. Instead, scapegoating fantasies and fundamentalisms of all sorts abound and pollute the public sphere. An example of this is Orbán's obsessive besmirching and vilification of the billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros, portrayed by state propaganda campaigns as a rapacious destroyer of Hungarian (and European) identity. This harassment recently forced Central European University, which was founded by Soros, to announce that it will move most of its operations from Budapest to Vienna.

ROMANIA'S DELAYED CATHARSIS

One country where a break with the totalitarian past was initially dismissed as unnecessary, even

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deleterious, was Romania. The country's December 1989 revolution was the only violent one in the region. Nicolai Ceaușescu's regime, the most absurd even by Leninist standards—a "sultanism" of sorts, as the political scientist Alfred Stepan called it—was a dynastic communist experiment. It came to an end as a result of a spontaneous revolt from below, combined with an intraparty coup.

The first post-dictatorial leader, Ion Iliescu, was a Moscow-trained former ideological apparatchik who had been mildly critical of Ceaușescu's excesses. For Iliescu and his partisans, liberal democracy was a bourgeois concoction. From the beginning, their party, the successor to the Romanian Communist Party, advocated what Iliescu called "original democracy," which would feature state control over the media, repression of civil society, and distrust, even hostility for the free market and private property. We might say that post-1989 Romania was the first experiment in what Orbán would later champion as "illiberal democracy."

One of the premises for such a regime is historical amnesia. Battles about the meanings of the past are in fact confrontations about the present and the future.

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In 1996, Romanians elected Emil Constantinescu, a former rector of the University of Bucharest and civic activist, as president. Many people pinned their hopes on him to initiate a long-delayed national catharsis. Yet there were two or three missing elements.

First, the pressure from society for such a coming to terms with the past was not very strong in the mid-1990s in Romania, or in East-Central Europe as a whole. Second, Constantinescu made an unfortunate statement that his very election as president fulfilled a key point of the March 1990 Timișoara Proclamation, since he had never been a paid Communist Party activist. The proclamation, issued by a group of participants in the December revolution, demanded the lustration, or banning from public life for a period of five years, of a whole class of people: the party and secret police apparatchiks. It was not really about Emil Constantinescu becoming president (or King Michael, or whomever else). But the hour of decommunization had not yet arrived.

Sometimes distance in time can help. That's one of the lessons I've learned. It's never too late. The Dominican Republic only a few years ago opened a museum devoted to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 to 1961. The same thing happened in Brazil and Guatemala decades after the breakdown of military dictatorships.

People sometimes forget that in 1996 there were very few, if any, young Romanian historians or political scientists with a Western background who would have been able to do what the Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania finally accomplished a decade later. The average age of the commission's experts was around 30. Ten years earlier, under Constantinescu, these people were still students.

I was appointed head of the commission in March 2006. One of its main achievements was the democratization of access to the National State Archives. We reviewed many previously classified documents. The Final Report, which condemned the communist dictatorship as illegitimate and criminal, was handed to then-President Traian Băsescu in early December. On December 16, Băsescu summarized the report and its main proposals before a joint session of both chambers of the Romanian Parliament.

Our analysis led us to a number of far-reaching conclusions. First, the nature and strength of the Romanian struggle with communism emerged much more clearly. The country had a real armed resistance. Contrary to the legend (promoted both by the far right and the far left) that the resistance consisted only of remnants of the Iron Guard—the fascist movement that had been a force in Romanian politics during the 1930s—it was in fact made up of former military officers, teachers, and members of democratic parties, including some social democrats and even a few disenchanted Communists. This broad cross-section of society had joined the resistance brigades and units in the mountains. The far left and far right were united in their displeasure with our findings.

Our second conclusion was that there had been continuity between the first and second stages of Romanian communism, shattering the historiographical consensus that the Ceaușescu regime (he took over in 1965) was fully nationalist compared with the first stage, which was more deferential to Moscow. That provoked an outraged reaction from the "old historians"—ex-Communists—who argued that Ceaușescu had broken with Moscow by condemning the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czecho-

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slovakia. But our position was that there had been continuity with variations in what were essentially Stalinist regimes.

A third conclusion addressed the level of individual and collective dissent under communism. We found quite a lot of evidence showing that there was indeed a significant amount of protest and opposition. The archives revealed that protests in the Jiu Valley in 1977 and in Brasov in 1987 shook the top leadership with the force of an earthquake. For the first time, we had access to documents showing that Ceaușescu personally gave orders for the arrest, interrogation, and torture of the 1987 rebellion's leaders.

Through the work of this commission, I began to question the "totalitarian thesis," at least as it pertained to Romania. According to the classical model, totalitarianism made any form of protest and resistance impossible. This static image was contradicted by the events that followed Stalin's death in March 1953.

Hannah Arendt once said that the only perfect totalitarian universe is the concentration camp. Romania could not have been described as a concentration camp, definitely not after 1956 brought Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech condemning Stalin, followed later that year by the Hungarian Revolution. Maybe at the height of Stalinist repression between 1949 and 1953 it could have been characterized in such a way, but even then there were cafes and restaurants. And it's now clear that there was much more resistance and opposition than I used to think was the case.

DEMOCRACY AND MEMORY

Why was the report so controversial? We clarified the values of the commission from the beginning. I said that our unambiguous anticommunist ideals were not rooted in another extremism. Our position was based on civic, liberal anticommunism, which is morally synonymous with civic, liberal antifascism. We were explicitly antitotalitarian—that is, both anticommunist and antifascist. In a country that experienced both forms of totalitarianism, it's important to emphasize that.

You can imagine the reactions. Former party propaganda hacks closed ranks with xenophobic demagogues in slandering us and denying the very legitimacy of such a conclusion. Some of the strongest attacks came from prominent historians associated with the communist era who later turned out to have been informers for the secret police, the Securitate.

To his credit, in spite of all the criticisms, Băsescu stood by the report. He would have liked his speech in December 2006 to be a moment of closure. But Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the head of the ultranationalist Greater Romania Party, turned it into the opposite by clowning and booing, creating a circus in the parliament.

Iliescu got very angry because he was mentioned in the report. The former president was not singled out unfairly, but cited for obvious reasons. He had been a secretary of the Central Committee and Minister of Youth under Ceaușescu. Later, hoping to learn more about the man and to find out if he had changed at all, I collaborated on a book with him, a series of interviews that was published in 2004. Later, he dismissed me as a mere scribbler. "I'm very flattered, you wrote a book with a scribbler!" was my reply. Ultimately, I realized that he had not evolved much. In December 2018, Romanian prosecutors indicted Iliescu for crimes against humanity, for taking actions that contributed to violence in December 1989.

The conclusion I have drawn from my extraordinary experience with the commission and Romania's debate over historical justice is that democracy and memory are inseparable. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski once said that a "lie is the immortal soul of communism." A robust and vital liberal order cannot be erected upon a pile of lies. In a country that has emerged from a period of dictatorship, truth commissions such as the one I chaired are essential for the credibility and legitimacy of a functional democracy. Thirty years after those exhilarating moments that we refer to as the revolutions of 1989, coming to terms with the traumatic legacies of the past remains politically urgent and morally indispensable. ■

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