

Dancing on the Mine-Field

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In this paper I will deal with some aspects of the origins of the peacefulness of democratic regime change in Eastern and Central Europe. In the first part, I will focus on the impact of the Polish Round Table negotiations on the strategic interactions among social and political actors in the other countries of the region. I will argue that the specific events of the negotiated regime change in Poland were “signals” to the political actors in the region that peaceful political change was possible. The Polish events of 1989 had the regional effect of reducing the attractiveness of the use of force, while increasing the readiness of non-regime forces for mobilization, as well as the efforts of forces within the elite to find peaceful ways to preserve at least part of their power. In the second part of the paper, I will deal with the question of the origins of peaceful political change in Poland. The search for peaceful ways of political change was partly motivated by pragmatic considerations, based on assessments of the geopolitical situation or the changing relative balance of power between the elite and the opposition. At least as importantly, in the search for peaceful solutions – first within the opposition and later also among reformers within the regime – an important role was played by the rejection of violence on moral grounds. This was not solely about the rejection of the use of violence to further one’s political goals. Just as important a role was played by the readiness of the actors to enter into political action to prevent the use of violence by other forces. These two aspects of the principle of non-violence played an equally important role. There was hardly a chance for a peaceful regime change until dominant forces within the regime and the opposition were ready to give up the use of violence as a means to conserve or transform the regime. On the other hand, one of the strongest factors pushing actors toward peaceful regime change had been readiness to enter into political action to prevent the chance of the use of violence by other domestic actors.

In the Eastern and Central Europe of the second half of the 1980’s, there was a general feeling that the days of the old regime were numbered. However, no one could predict how long the agony of the state socialist regime was going to last or how it would exit. In most of the countries of the region, the power holders undertook to prepare for the worst by strengthening the repressive apparatuses of the party state and

by increasing the harassment of opposition forces. Even in those countries, like Poland or Hungary, where reformist communists were ready to introduce economic reforms, there were forces within the regime ready to use violence to save state socialism. Even as late as 1987, it was the dominant view in Eastern and Central Europe that the probability of peaceful political change in the countries of the region was minimal, and the chances for finding a way out of the declining state socialist regimes were rather bleak. The general feeling of the political participants and observers both within and outside of these regimes was best expressed by the formula, "Ottomanization," first used by Timothy Garton Ash¹. The word "Ottomanization" was a reference to the potential similarity between the decay of the Turkish and the Soviet Empires. One could expect accordingly some attempts to reform the system, accompanied perhaps by failed revolts and revolutions on the peripheries of the Empire, with large-scale violence, but without any significant longer term results and without any chance of stopping the deepening economic and political decay of the whole Empire.

But it was in Poland, and somewhat later in Hungary, where first within the opposition and later also within the regime those forces became dominant who not only rejected the use of violence, but who were also ready to enter into political action to prevent violence. The negotiated peaceful regime change was the outcome of the strategic interactions of these forces in these two countries.² Whereas in Poland the negotiations brought about a compromised institutionalization of democracy, in Hungary the agreement about the holding of free elections was the final outcome of the negotiations. As stated above, the Polish Round Table negotiations played the dominant role in pushing actors in the other countries of the region toward strategies leading to peaceful regime change. On the other hand, it was the Hungarian regime change that increased for the elite in other regimes the attractiveness of competitive elections, as a way of salvaging their power and as a peaceful way out of decaying state socialism.

¹ T. Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague*, 1st US Edition (New York: Random House, 1990); T. Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (Cambridge: Granta Books, 1990).

² I. Banac, *Eastern Europe in Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); L. Bruszt and D. Stark, "Remaking the Political Field in Hungary: From the Politics of Confrontation to the Politics of Competition," in *Eastern Europe in Revolution*, edited by I. Banac (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); T. Garton Ash, *Magic Lantern*; J. Staniszkis, *The Dynamics of the Breakthrough in Eastern Europe: The Polish Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

The "Polish Effect"

By now there is a large body of literature on the sudden and largely unexpected wave of peaceful democratizations in 1989 in Eastern and Central Europe.³ Within this literature, there is a wide consensus about the existence of linkages among the different transitions in the various countries of the region. In the language of comparative methodology, purely structuralist comparative explanations using the methods of similarity or difference would be inappropriate in the analysis of these transitions, because the country cases were not independent. One way to describe the relationship among these transitions is to use the analogy of diffusion or contagion. According to such an approach, the experiences of the stronger civil societies were charting the course to be emulated by citizens in countries where civil society was far weaker. Using such an approach, one could only expect differences in the timing but not in the mode of democratization. A second approach could be based on a more complex understanding of the effects of the experiences of the earlier cases on patterns of change in later cases. It might be argued, first, that not only citizens within the society but also actors within the old elite learned by observing the processes and outcomes of the interactions of rulers and opposition in other countries.⁴ Lessons from the earlier cases have sometimes dramatically changed the perception of possibilities, and with that, the perception of the relative balance of forces between rulers and opposition. On the other hand, the logic of strategic interactions between the later cases was not solely shaped by the characteristics of the previous changes. It was also shaped by the characteristics of interactions within the elite and between the elite and the opposition prior to the starting of extrication. As a result, these cases differed not simply in degree but in kind: 1989 saw a plurality of transitions with diverse paths to different types of political institutions.⁵ Thus, as it will

³ See, for example: L. Anderson, *Transitions to Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); G.A. Babcock and Rand Graduate School, "The Role of Public Interest Groups in Democratization: Soviet Environmental Groups and Energy Policy-making" (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Graduate School, 1997); Banac; A. Bozóki, A. Körösenyi, and G. Schöpflin, *Post-Communist Transition: Emerging Pluralism in Hungary* (London: Pinter Publishers, St. Martin's, 1992); K. Cordell, *Ethnicity and Democratisation in the New Europe* (London: Routledge, 1999); T. Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern*; J.F. Hollifield and C.C. Jillson, *Pathways to Democracy: The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (New York: Routledge, 1999); M. Kaldor and I. Vejvoda, *Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Pinter, 1999); J.J. Linz and A.C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); G. Pridham and T. Vanhanen, *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1994); Staniszki; D.C. Stark and L. Bruszt, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴ Bruszt and Stark.

⁵ Bruszt and Stark; Linz and Stepan. For a provocative discussion of the multiple modes of transition, see the work of Terry Karl and Philippe S. Schmitter, "Modes of Transition and Types of Democracy in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," *International Science Journal* 128: 269-84.

be shown below, the “Polish Effect” was different in these countries depending on the characteristics of strategic interactions among the various categories of political actors.

The second aspect of the interrelationship among these cases was the role played by international relations.⁶ One of the major differences of extrications in Eastern Europe vis-à-vis those in Southern Europe and Latin America was the fact that these countries formed part of an empire and had limited sovereignty. As Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Karl have noted, “without a previously announced and credible shift in the foreign and security policies of the Soviet Union, neither the timing nor the occurrence of regime change would be explicable.”⁷ A simpler understanding of this point would be to speak about the “Gorbachev effect,” in the sense that it was the public declaration of the end of the “Brezhnev Doctrine” by Gorbachev that had the effect in the countries of the region of dramatically altering the perception of the range of possibilities, and with that, dramatically altering the strategies of the political actors. This interpretation would, however, be misleading. While the shifting preferences in the foreign and security policies of the USSR played an important role in the later political developments of the region, the effect of these changes was not direct, mainly because of the high level of uncertainty about the *credibility* of these policy shifts. Not only was Gorbachev’s own position uncertain until the very end of 1988, but it was also not known how far political changes could go in the other countries, what the limits of Moscow’s toleration were, how the speed and the direction of political changes in these countries might affect Gorbachev’s position. In the language of game theory, the situation of 1989 could be described in the following way: with the complete absence of self-sustaining institutions allowing for credible commitments and with the absence of a previously acquired reputation for credibility, it was the reactions of Moscow to the actions of the first-movers that established the creditworthiness of the intentions of the leaders in Moscow. Thus the second conclusion: the credibility of the policy shift in Moscow was established by the events and outcomes produced by the Polish Round Table negotiations, or more precisely, by observation of the reactions of the leaders in Moscow to the Polish events and their outcomes. Thus, the first “Polish Effect” activated the “Gorbachev Effect.”

The Polish Round Table negotiations and their outcomes were the most important signaling events of the range of possibilities for political action in a highly uncertain geopolitical environment. In a situation in which neither the intentions nor the limits of toleration of the center of the Empire were clear, it was the facts created by the first-movers, the Polish actors in the negotiated regime change, that sent signals to Eastern Europeans, both to those in power and the people at large. These were important signals, dramatically altering the strategies of political actors in these

⁶ Pridham and Vanhanen; P.C. Schmitter and T. Karl, “The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?” *Slavic Review* 53 (1 Spring 1994): 173-85.

⁷ Schmitter and Karl.

countries. The Polish events were proof of the changing room for maneuvering for political action within the communist world. They were signals that it was possible to start negotiations about the legalization of the opposition, to allow for a free press, to pass laws about freedom of conscience and religion or about freedom of association, to run under opposition colors in semi-free elections; that it was possible for the opposition to win elections and for those within the old regime to peacefully accept a humiliating defeat; and finally, that it was possible for the opposition to form a government. These were signals to millions of people in the region that there was a peaceful way out of communism, that Moscow tolerated not only a “change in the model” of state-socialism, but also a change of political regime. On the other hand, these events and facts created by the Round Table negotiations in Poland were proof for the hard-liners and reformers within the regimes in other communist countries that the Brezhnev doctrine was over — they had to face their compatriots, ready to follow the Polish example on their own.

The most important uniform effect of the Polish events of 1989 was the dramatic altering of perceptions of a relative balance of forces in other countries of the region. It altered the perception of a balance of forces between hard-liners and reformers and between the rulers and the forces of civil society in these countries. The perception that the domestic rulers could not count on military support from Moscow dramatically altered the strategies of these actors, increased the readiness of forces within the civil societies to get mobilized, dramatically weakened the positions of those elite segments that were ready to use violence to salvage the regime, and forced reformers within the regime to search for peaceful ways of preserving at least part of their power. The specific impact of the Polish events, however, was different from country to country, depending on the logic of strategic interactions among the forces of political change prior to the unfolding of the Polish events. At the time when the opposition and the rulers in Poland undertook an exchange of *legalization* of the representatives of civil society for conferral by these forces of some *legitimacy* to the regime, in Hungary the ruling hard-liners were busy “*de-legalizing*” the emerging opposition, and the opposition groups were busy mobilizing civil society for *delegitimizing* the regime.⁸ The Polish events contributed to further weakening of the positions of the hard-liners in Hungary and strengthening of the reformers ready to start negotiations about peaceful political change with the opposition. Combined with the success of the Hungarian opposition’s strategy of mobilization, the Round Table negotiations in Hungary could start six days after the electoral victory of the Solidarity movement in Poland. But despite their similarities as negotiated extractions, the Polish and Hungarian cases differ dramatically in the institutional features of their reorganized political fields. Unlike their Polish counterparts, the Hungarian opposition forces never felt strong enough to speak “in the name of society” and enter into negotiations with the rulers about a compromised democratization. This self-perceived weakness of the opposition forces’ legitimacy

⁸ Bruszt and Stark.

pushed them towards demanding uncompromised free elections. On the other hand, it was the self-perceived electoral strength of the reformers within the regime vis-à-vis the newly organized opposition forces that made them wholeheartedly embrace the idea of free elections – as a potential means of salvaging the power of the party by acquiring new and robust legitimacy by way of electoral competition.⁹

In Romania, Bulgaria, and later in Albania, where strong repression of opposition forces prevented early large-scale mobilization of civil society, the effect of the Polish events was different. In these countries, segments of the old elite staged successful palace coups to remove hard-liners within the regime and, learning also from the Hungarian case, used restricted electoral competition to severely constrain their weak electoral rivals to stay in power.¹⁰ Finally, in the former GDR and Czechoslovakia, differences in the logic of the interactions between rulers and the weakly organized opposition led to escalating public demonstrations, with rulers lacking either the ability or resolve to use decisive force, and thus to the rulers' capitulation and the collapse of their regime.¹¹ All in all, the specific impact of the Polish Round Table negotiations differed largely depending on the "national" characteristics of the interactions among forces of political change in countries. The negotiated compromise in Poland contributed to different paths of extrication from state socialism: it restricted electoral competition and unfettered electoral competition, capitulation and regime collapse.

The Principle of Non-Violence and the Origins of Peaceful Regime Change

The most elementary condition for starting a peaceful negotiated regime change is the rejection of violence by influential forces, both within the opposition and inside the regime. Adherence to the principle of non-violence is only partly about the rejection of the use of violence as a means to further one's political goals; it is also about readiness to enter into political action for preventing violence by any other social and political actor. These two aspects of the principle of non-violence are equally important. There is hardly a chance for negotiated regime change until dominant forces within the two camps are ready to give up the use of violence as a means to conserve or transform the regime. On the other hand, one of the strongest factors pushing actors towards a negotiated regime change might be the readiness to do something to prevent or reduce violence by other domestic actors.

In the Eastern and Central Europe of 1988, there was a general feeling that the days of the old regime were numbered, but no one could predict how long the agony of the state socialist regime was going to last and how it would make its exit. In most

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

countries of the region, power holders undertook to prepare for the worst by strengthening the oppressive apparatuses of the party state and by increasing the repression of opposition forces. Even in those countries, like Poland or Hungary, where reformist communists were ready to introduce economic reforms, there were forces within the regime ready to use violence to save state socialism. But these were also the two countries in the region where, first within the opposition and later also within the regime, those forces became dominant who not only rejected the use of violence, but who were also ready to enter into political action to prevent violence.

Rejection of the use of violence among the forces of opposition in these countries had deep roots. The Hungarian democratic opposition, among others, was strongly influenced by the “new evolutionist” ideas of the Polish opposition.¹² Also, a central role was played in the development of the ideology of non-violence by the idea originating from Polish opposition circles that the re-establishment of democratic order and rule of law cannot be based on disorderly political change.¹³ As in many Latin American countries, by the late 70’s a new opposition identity emerged in Eastern and Central Europe, one based on a rejection of revolution and any other violent form of political change and centered on the ideas of human rights and democratic values. The “new evolutionist” ideas, themselves products of several previous failed attempts at political change, rejected direct confrontation with the regime, still based mainly on pragmatic considerations. Confrontation with the regime might have just provoked repression and the use of violence, both by the domestic rulers and by Moscow. The opposition should try to push for change in social fields where direct confrontation with the regime might be prevented, in fields where the dominant elements of the structure of the repressive political regime would not be challenged.¹⁴

The idea of *non-violent political change*, unlike the anti-political idea of new evolutionism, was based on moral principles. The reasoning was twofold. First, revolution, and any other form of violent political change, might just lead to the emergence of another repressive regime. Second, violent political change might not only endanger possibilities for the emergence of a democratic order, but might also undermine the chances for the preservation of human rights. Why would those who use violence to further a political goal be prevented from using it for another political goal? With this ideological change, the difference between the means and goals would also disappear: the means became identical to the goals. Not political change *per se*, but non-violent political change became the goal of opposition.

¹² T. Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (Cambridge: Granta Books, 1989); J. Kis, *Politics in Hungary: For a Democratic Alternative*, Social Science Monographs (Boulder, CO: Atlantic Research and Publications, 1989); A. Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹³ Kis; Michnik, *Letters*; A. Michnik, A. Grudzinska and G. Mink, *La Deuxième Révolution* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990).

¹⁴ Michnik, *Letters*.

Rejection of the use of violence was but the first step towards the negotiated regime change in Eastern Europe. The next step was made in the second half of the 80's, when both the Hungarian and the Polish opposition publicly declared their readiness to enter into political dialogue with the regime to prevent violence. The "Social Contract," the political program of the Hungarian democratic opposition, was published in 1987 in *samizdat* and was read by the members of the Politburo of the HSWP on the next day.¹⁵ The idea of striking a "crisis pact" between the Polish regime and the Solidarity movement was first announced in 1988 by one of the leading opposition figures, Bronisław Geremek, in an interview given to one of the regime weeklies. Both the Hungarian "Social Contract" and the idea of a Polish "crisis pact" were logical consequences and continuations of the above described ideas and moral standards about non-violent political change. Also, both of them were based on the assumption that there were forces within the regime ready to enter into dialogue on political change with the opposition to prevent violence.

It is important to see that these two programs were not based on fear of the imminent danger of violence but on readiness to prevent the possibility of the use of violence, either by those within the regime or by any other social force. By the second half of the 80's it was commonplace to talk about the "dangers of social explosion," even in the official regime newspapers of both countries. This "social explosion," according to arguments used at that time, might be triggered either by further deteriorating economic conditions in the absence of economic reforms, or by deteriorating social conditions resulting from the introduction of economic reforms. This picturing of the possibilities of political action was just like dancing on a mine-field: one bad move and there is an explosion. Dialogue and negotiation, in the programs of the Polish and Hungarian opposition, were the means and the ends: negotiations about peaceful political change in order to prevent violence.

To be sure, both the Polish and the Hungarian opposition could in principle have chosen other strategies to further political change. They could have chosen the strategy of "wait and see," led by the maxim of "the worse, the better." Time was on their side: either the absence of economic reforms or their introduction would have dramatically increased opposition to the regime. Sooner or later, they could have led masses against the headquarters of the state-party. Violence could also have come, to be sure from the other side – police forces against peacefully demonstrating workers sent by fearful local apparatchiks or by hard-liners within the regime – triggering an outburst of mass violence. Both the Polish and the Hungarian opposition rejected these solutions, not because they did not desire the final outcome, but because they were convinced that the chosen means might determine the outcome, that the achievement of the goal of the universal extension of human and political rights might be endangered by the use of violent means. All in all, by the second half of the 1980's the strategy of the opposition

¹⁵ Kis.

both in Poland and Hungary went much beyond the pragmatic considerations of non-confrontation of new-evolutionism. The compromise offered to the regime by the opposition in these countries was not solely based on pragmatic geopolitical considerations and/or the actual perception of the domestic balance of power among the supporters and opponents of the regime. The offer of a compromise solution was also based on moral reasoning. In the case of Poland, behind the slogan of the Round Table negotiations – “legality against legitimacy” – was the idea that, in exchange for re-legalization, the Solidarity movement was ready to lend some legitimacy to the regime, even at the price of the partial loss of its own legitimacy. This way, it could contribute to preventing violence, due either to the absence or to the introduction of economic reforms. In Hungary, similar ideas led the opposition to offer a compromise solution to the regime.

In both countries, non-confrontational forces were in the majority within the regime. However, those ready to enter into negotiations with the opposition to prevent violence remained in the minority until early 1989, and, until very late in both countries, there were significant forces ready to use violence to salvage the political status quo. In both countries, the dominance of the non-confrontational strategy within the regime was mainly the result of previous sharp confrontations between society and the regime. Haunted by memories of the 1956 revolution, previous violent confrontations with striking workers and with the legalized Solidarity movement of the early 80's, both the Hungarian and the Polish communist elite had good reasons to pursue strategies that did not provoke society. Fear of the use of force was, on the other hand, strengthened by the characteristics of the double geopolitical dependency of the communist governments in these countries. Added to the fear of Soviet intervention on the side of regime reformers, and later on, the fear of non-intervention on the side of the hard-liners, was the growing fear of a loss of Western credits, a fear resulting from the growing indebtedness and economic dependency of these countries, coupled with the changing Western political conditioning of continued financial support. Until the late 80's, growing fear of “social explosion” mainly had the impact of paralyzing the communist elite: delaying necessary economic reforms or, still worse, introducing redistributive economic policies with the object of improving the mood of society and resulting only in a further deterioration of economic conditions. Although in both countries there were forces within the regime ready to use violence, it was this paralyzing fear of both domestic and external reactions that helped reformers within these regimes to neutralize the hard-liners. Finally, in both countries, rapid erosion of the dominant ideology further contributed to the loss of viability of any strategy based on the use of force. Mere rejection of the use of violence, under the influence of regime interactions with the opposition, was slowly coupled with a readiness to take political action to prevent violence.

Summary

The skillful negotiations of the participants of the Polish Round Table negotiations had an enormous impact on later political developments in Eastern and Central Europe. They sent signals about the increased range of feasible political goals. Although no country has repeated the strategy of compromised democracy – the immediate outcome of the Polish negotiations – all of them were affected by the ethos of non-violent political change. Even the final outcome of the Polish Round Table negotiations has proven the use of the strategy of non-violent political change. A year after the introduction of the first non-communist government in Poland, nearly all the former communist countries had some form of free or semi-free elections. But among them, there were only two where a former communist would not be in the position of prime minister: Poland and Hungary.

Having said that, it is neither the external nor the internal consequences, but the means used that justify the political strategy of the participants of the Polish Round Table negotiations. Since these means – peaceful political change – were also the goals, and since these means and goals had robust moral foundations, one could hardly see the validity of recent opposition to these negotiations on “moral grounds.” Such a rejection of the Polish Round Table negotiations can only be validated from a perspective that would allow for the use of any means to attain desired political ends. But on this basis, it is hard to see how one could perceive democracy as not solely a means but also as an end in itself.