

# INTRODUCTION



*Günther Heydemann and Karel Vodička*

Since the end of World War II, no event has changed Europe more fundamentally than the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc in the years 1989–1991. The domino effect of collapsing communist-authoritarian societies, economic systems and systems of rule in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, which finally reached even the Soviet Union itself, altered the map of Europe and launched extensive transformation processes that are still ongoing in individual countries, including the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) or so-called New Federal States of Germany. From the outset, overcoming and successively shaking off the straitjacket of Real Existing Socialism was a dual task. It was not enough to reconstruct the complex of state structures, legal system, administrative apparatus and media and – not least – establish a functioning democratic community; at the same time, it was also essential to undertake the fundamental regulatory task of transforming a centralized, state-directed planned economy into a liberal market economy.

Meanwhile, another quarter of a century has passed since this truly epochal break, and the great hopes and expectations from the early days have had to be revised. Indeed, ‘the prediction that structures and cultural patterns in East and West would soon be adjusted, which was widespread among social scientists, has proven far from reality’.<sup>1</sup> The transformation process did not run as quickly and smoothly as expected in Germany or elsewhere. Furthermore, it is now obvious that the individual former Eastern Bloc countries have taken quite different paths of transformation that may be expected to continue. Two initial burdens were especially consequential. First, the length of a country’s subjection to communist, fascist or other authoritarian dictatorships – including National Socialism – played a considerable role. Second, the state of its

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socio-economic structures and social-mental conditions before the epochal break of 1989/90 was a decisive factor that remains influential today. Both transformation research and the analyses presented in this volume lead to the conclusion that the gradual change of mentalities is the core problem of transformation.

These are only the most important factors, however – they are far from all of them. Mental attitudes, behavioural stereotypes and the actual quality of a state's market economy and democracy are closely interconnected. The post-communist countries also still suffer from insufficient development of a committed civil society and a broad, economically efficient middle class, due especially to the burden of the past and the problems arising in the course of the transformation processes. Developing and consolidating an independent, active civil society and a business middle class will probably take decades longer. Independent thinking and acting cannot be simply created but must unfold and mature, and much points to the truth of Dahrendorf's 1990 prediction that 'the realisation of civil society' will take two generations or as long as sixty years.<sup>2</sup>

Even if the illusion of 'speedy recovery' was followed by commensurate disillusionment, one should not underestimate or overlook eastern EU countries' substantial turns towards democracy, rule of law, market economy and pluralist society, conditions that, back in the spring of 1989, seemed utopian. Given the still existing deficits and problems at various levels, some of which will endure for years to come, people sometimes lose sight of this basically positive development.

Furthermore, two decades of intensive research work have greatly increased knowledge about not only the national transformation paths of each country but also the transformation process as a whole. As early as 1990, political and social scientists, followed by economists, launched their initial investigations and analyses of the transformation processes that had begun in the countries of the then collapsed Eastern Bloc. Unsurprisingly, they generated extraordinary interest, as these countries were seen as large-scale experimental, state-run socio-economic laboratories where the post-communist transformation process was happening at various levels, often skipping over other levels. For a time, transformation research even dominated both disciplines. Meanwhile, politics urgently needed information to adequately control the process, in view of the frequent danger of social unrest and revolt in societies coping with momentous breaks and radical changes in a comparatively short span of time after decades of totalitarian or authoritarian rule. Overall, transformation research has seen its greatest progress in the field of political sciences, maybe most in Germany, where research conditions have been very favourable.<sup>3</sup>

Five years ago, the Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung (HAIT) at the Technische Universität Dresden started to treat the transition process in the former Eastern Bloc states comparatively, as contemporary history.<sup>4</sup> Developments in the GDR were included from the outset, as researchers were aware that reunification with the Federal Republic in 1990 made it, and still makes it, a special case within the context of transformation. Indeed, the GDR was assisted by a 'big spender' that not only provided it with the capital needed for its regulatory restructuring from centralized planned economy to social market economy, including funding for its social systems and much more, but also, and most importantly, completely included it in a proven democratic constitution and federal structure. Unquestionably, therefore, the GDR or New Federal States have taken a special path. However, it would be premature to call any comparison between the GDR and other former Eastern Bloc states inappropriate.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, the fact is and remains that for more than forty years, just like other Eastern and South Eastern European countries, the GDR and its population was deeply influenced by a one-party communist system that inculcated psychological reactions and habitual ways of behaving that are still very much in effect.

Thus, in what follows, the GDR or the East German federal states will again be consciously included in the overall context of post-communist system transformation, to allow common grounds and differences between the respective developments after 1989/90 to be worked out from a comparative point of view. Comparison of system change in the GDR, Hungary, Poland and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) has already been undertaken,<sup>6</sup> so the present volume considerably extends the range of reference countries in respect of the transformation process to include all the former Eastern Bloc countries that became EU members in 2004 and 2007. These are the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all formerly Soviet republics; the Central European states of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, followed by Slovenia and Hungary; and, finally, the South Eastern European countries of Romania and Bulgaria. From the beginning, we worked from both a contemporary-historical and a comparative political science point of view to pinpoint and clarify individual developments and phases of each national transformation process.

Conducted through political science comparison from the standpoint of transformation research, this comparative presentation and analysis of all former Eastern Bloc countries that have become part of the European Union – including the East German federal states – has proven abundantly fruitful. The structural comparability of the country reports, together with the comparative overall analysis of all countries in the post-communist area of the EU, brought to light a number of insights that were new

to comparative political science or transformation research. The post-communist area was defined as consisting of the eastern German federal states and the eastern EU states. As proven by the comparative analysis in this volume's concluding chapter, the post-communist EU area is characterized by certain substantial common grounds and analogous trends of development that qualitatively distinguish it from the established EU democracies on the one hand and from the other former Eastern Bloc countries on the other.

The post-communist EU countries carry a deeply influential burden of history that differentiates them from established EU democracies like the Netherlands, Austria and the former West Germany, taken as points of reference. Besides being scarred by the trauma of forty years of violent communist rule, the post-communist EU societies are also characterized by the subsequent nearly thirty years of radical transformation. In 1990, Václav Havel, last president of the ČSSR and first president of Czech Republic, described the state of society after liberation from dictatorship as follows: 'We have become morally ill because we have become used to saying one thing while thinking the other. We have learned to believe in nothing, to behave indifferently towards each other, to care only about ourselves'.<sup>7</sup>

The nearly thirty years of transformation since the implosion of the communist regimes, with their distortions, injustice, insecurities and growing social disparities, have not been able to cure this illness. Even today, the social resources of ethos, trust and morality that are requisite for a vital civil society, efficient economy and uncorrupted politics are rare goods in the post-communist EU, where citizens combine distrust of political parties and state institutions with a basic scepticism of politics. Because they do not believe they are able to change actual politics through their behaviour, they are seldom committed; therefore, voter turnout is consistently much lower than in established democracies. The political parties are only superficially rooted among the population. They have few members and the share of swing voters is high, so the parties are unstable and, as a consequence, governments' average time in office is often too short. Political parties' limited recruiting potential works to benefit right-wing and left-wing extremist parties. Corruption is massive and widespread, in part because the sceptical-apolitical citizenry has insufficient control over decision-makers. Thus, in comparison to established EU democracies, the post-communist EU shows a variety of democracy deficits at the levels of representation (particularly in virulent party systems), actors (liability to corruption) and civil society (weak support for democracy and lack of readiness to participate).

On the other hand, the eastern German federal states and eastern EU countries also differ from former Eastern Bloc countries that have not

been able to join the EU, in that the former are clearly amidst a sustainable consolidation process and rank at the top of transformation countries worldwide as the most consolidated market economy democracies. This becomes obvious when all former Eastern Bloc countries are compared. The European Union definitely earned its Nobel Peace Prize of 2012 for its successful democratization of the post-communist EU area, among other reasons. Whereas independent experts count all eastern EU countries among 'consolidating democracies', other former Eastern Bloc countries achieve at best Ukraine's rank of 'defective democracy', all others rating lower still as strongly defective democracies or even moderate or hardcore autocracies. In the post-communist EU area, on the other hand, the risk of radical de-democratization may currently be estimated as low (for South Eastern Europe) or very low (for East Central Europe). In this context, the external framework conditions, in particular EU and NATO membership, work as an essential stabilizing factor for young, still fragile eastern EU democracies.

To achieve the most analogous accounts possible and thus enable coherent comparison (see this volume's Conclusion), the individual country reports were structured according to the macro levels of politics/constitution, economy and society, a standardization that was imposed to make the contributions handbook-like. Accordingly, this volume attempts to satisfy a need for information at levels as disparate as policy-making and school-teaching.

The individual country reports in this volume were updated several times by their authors, and here we wish to express our deepest gratitude for their particular efforts. Many thanks to Mrs Kristin Luthardt and Mr Walter Heidenreich for their sometimes difficult editorial work and the layout. Special thanks go also to the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur (Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship).

A comparative look at the transformation processes in former Eastern Bloc countries that today are EU member states will doubtless be a focal point of debate for national and international politics and the public, as well as a topic of work in political science, economics, social science and, not least, contemporary history.

After having completed his studies in history, German philology, social studies and Italian studies, as well as having earned his doctorate (1980), **Günther Heydemann** worked as a member of the scientific staffs of the Universities of Erlangen and Bayreuth as well as of the Deutsches Historisches Institut London. After his habilitation (1991) and interim professorships in Munich and Bonn, he was appointed to the Chair of More Recent and Contemporary History of the University of Leipzig. Since 2009

he has also been Director of the HAIT, and has held visiting professorships and fellowships in Italy, the USA, Russia and Tunisia. His research work focuses on the history of historical science, comparative European history, the dictatorships of the twentieth century as well as the post-socialist transformation processes.

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## Notes

1. H. Best and E. Holtmann, 'Die langen Wege der deutschen Einigung: Aufbruch mit vielen Unbekannten', in H. Best and E. Holtmann (eds), *Aufbruch der entscherten Gesellschaft: Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung* (Frankfurt a. M., 2012), 15.
2. R. Dahrendorf, *Betrachtungen über die Revolution in Europa* (Stuttgart, 1990), 101; see also W. Merkel, *Systemtransformation: Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung* (Opladen, 1999), 164; S. Kirelli, 'Vom Plan zum Markt: Der wirtschaftliche Transformationsprozess in Ostmitteleuropa', *Der Bürger im Staat* 97(3) (1997), 164–68, here 164–65.
3. In two decades of researching the transformation process in the New Federal States, psychological and anthropological issues have increasingly come to the fore, more so as changes in mental-habitual ways of behaviour are clearly what take the longest. Furthermore, the sometimes radical changes in living conditions and employment situations created much uncertainty at both the individual and the collective levels. See Best and Holtmann, 'Die langen Wege'.
4. See C. Vollnhals (ed.), *Jahre des Umbruchs: Friedliche Revolution in der DDR und Transition in Ostmitteleuropa* (Göttingen, 2011).
5. See A. Rödder, *Deutschland einig Vaterland: Die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung* (Munich, 2009), 314, which is nevertheless currently the best and most balanced description of German reunification.
6. See Vollnhals, *Jahre des Umbruchs*.
7. Cf. K. Vodička, 'Wir sind moralisch krank geworden: Die Neujahrsprache des tschechoslowakischen Staatspräsidenten', *Osteuropa* 40(4) (1990), 248–53, here 250.