

# POST-COMMUNISM: A PROFILE

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The period of transition in the post-communist world can be regarded as over. While in the broad sense, all political systems undergo constant change (otherwise they stagnate), the period of rapid transformation, while the post-communist systems acquired their present shape, can be accepted as having reached an interim conclusion. Furthermore, after five years the activities of the post-communist political actors must also be added to the equation which has produced this interim configuration. There will, of course, be change in the future, but this is likely to be slower, although upheavals cannot be excluded. Certainly, while the potential for movement towards democracy as understood and practised in the West - the overt aspiration of the post-communist states - exists, the attainment of these standards and practices will take longer than was generally assumed in the heady days of 1989-90. In summary form, the post-communist systems can be described as "democratic in form and nationalist in content".

The reference is not coincidental, after all it was Leninism that left so deep a mark on these societies that the construction of democracy is proving to be such a hard road. This implies that both the communist legacy and the way in which post-communist politicians have responded to the challenge of introducing democracy should be seen as the key determining factors in the present state of play. These processes further imply that the term "post-communism" has authentic content and is not merely a temporal definition. This analysis is an attempt to chart the key features of this type of system. It will proceed from the broad assumption that while there are evidently significant variations between individual post-communist states, overall they share characteristics that allow one to make valid comparisons.

The essence of post-communism, it will be argued here, is that it now constitutes a **sui generis** system which is marked by some democratic practices, with stronger or weaker commitments to pluralism, so that both political and economic competition have become a reality. At the same time, anti-democratic ideas and practices are also current and have some roots in society as well as

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legitimizing discourses to back them up. These latter, when coupled with the structural obstacles to democracy imply that the road to the construction of genuine democracy will take a fair period of time (cf. Jowitt 1992).

The assessment of these obstacles should begin with an analysis of the state and of the relationship between society and the state. Historical and functional aspects of the state are intertwined in posing considerable difficulties in the attainment of the desired aim. First, the state machinery inherited from the communist period is overextended in the sense that it lacks the capacity to carry out its ostensible functions. It is handicapped by a series of bureaucracies that have a culture not of legal-rationality but of politicisation and rigid adherence to the rules.

When political and bureaucratic imperatives collide, the bureaucratic regulations generally give way and political or personal influence determines the outcome. Equally, the functioning of the state machinery is handicapped by both over-regulation and by gaps in legislation. Although several of the post-communist states have made considerable strides in updating their legal frameworks in the accordance with the needs of a market economy, lacunae still exist (see White, Batt and Lewis 1993). This state of affairs is exacerbated by another legacy of the past - the weak internalisation of the rule of law. Under communism, rules were adhered to because of coercion or the threat of coercion. The transition from this externalised compliance to an internalised recognition that rules are important and useful in their own right is slow and patchy. By and large there is a sense that the state is a capricious and uncontrollable body, the regulations of which are a resource to be used by those in power against the individual. Another factor which places a major question mark over the establishment of a market economy, contracts are unevenly honoured and property rights are enforced inconsistently.

## **Fragmentation and Moralisation**

Post-communism is marked, furthermore, by a series of fissures in society and between society and the state. The most significant of these is the gap between the public and private spheres. Because of the alien and imposed nature of the communist system, society constructed a series of defences against it, one of which was to regard itself as morally superior. This is in no way unusual in a situation of powerlessness. This sense of a morally "good" society locked in combat with an "evil" state was projected on to the public sphere as a whole and, predictably, has been carried over into post-communism. The consequence is that there is an absence or weakness of impersonal norms and rule application. Whatever is done is interpreted as a moral category. Decisions are not taken at face value, but are scrutinised for their moral dimensions. And because this moral dimension has spilled over into politics, political decisions are especially prone to moralising judgements of this kind. This makes it extremely difficult to legitimate expertise and professionalism, as well as to underpin the autonomy of institutions as genuine. There is a general expectation that rather than follow the rules, one should use personal connections, a pattern which simply strengthens personalisation. That in turn encourages the creation of patron-client networks, which in the Central and East European context tend to be political and politicised - the establishment of new nomenklaturas for all practical purposes, albeit

