

The 1989 Revolutions and the Roots of Illiberal Populism

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The deep unfairness of the transition from communism in Central and Eastern Europe fed the illiberal populist rebellion across the region today.

Dimitrina Petrova, *Dissent*, October 24, 2019



Participants in the 1989 roundtable negotiations in Poland

The ideological victory of liberal democracy over communism shaped the way in which historians, politicians, and social scientists made sense of the events of 1989. But there is a strong case today for a revised look at the revolutions of 1989—a critique of the way the prevailing narratives and theories have presented these revolutions as essentially a transition from the tyranny of the party-state to a free and democratic society. A more complex picture of that momentous year reveals not only the eclipse of different possibilities, but how frustrated expectations have shaped post-communist societies in subsequent decades, contributing to the upsurge of illiberal populism in the region over the last decade.

Today's dominant narrative of 1989 gets one important thing right: liberty was the lodestar for many revolutionaries, in particular the intellectual elite. But the majority of the people were more annoyed by the betrayal of the communist promise of equality than by the lack of civil liberties. They came out in the streets and squares of Central and Eastern Europe in the hundreds of thousands because elites that had promised equality had instead built a world of privilege for themselves. The paradox of 1989 is that communism was stormed and brought down from the left, by people with unfulfilled egalitarian aspirations, but the revolutionary road led to a new society that has been experienced as more unfair than communism.

This paradox is rooted in a historical shift that occurred below the revolutionary surface: the liberation of the elite from the economic, political, and ideological restrictions of communism. Studies in European post-communist countries in the early 1990s led by Iván Szelényi showed that a very significant part of the post-1989 elite was made of former nomenklatura families who converted their political assets into economic wealth, which developed alongside the new spoils of cultural and ideological freedom and membership in a borderless global elite.

In October 1989, Bulgaria's most popular dissident group, Ecoglasnost, was campaigning in the streets of Sofia. Among its many posters about the environment, civil liberties, and human rights was one that demanded, "Bulgarian millionaires! Donate to Ecoglasnost!" This doesn't sound like much today, but at the time it was the most daring and thrilling slogan—the one that best captured the spirit of popular discontent and to which passersby responded most vibrantly, with laughter and tears. The very mention of communist millionaires in public disrupted the status quo and signaled a new era. The "people" genuinely wanted freedom, too, but for most this meant most immediately a society freed from nomenklatura privilege.

The Betrayal of the Communist Promise of Equality

During the first three decades of Central and Eastern European communism, postwar majorities benefited from rising living standards and greater socioeconomic mobility (with the exception of Czechoslovakia, which was more advanced economically to begin with). A large part of the predominantly poor agrarian population of the prewar period, further impoverished by the war, enjoyed upward mobility. Most people experienced the industrialization, urbanization, mass education, housing, and other elements of a modernization project as positive achievements of the communist system. Economic growth during these first decades helped produce rising living standards for almost all social groups. On September, 15, 1964, UK Ambassador to Bulgaria William Harpham reported to Foreign Office, "Whatever the mistakes of the regime in this country (which are plentiful), the average Bulgarian who has never been governed well and is not used to live in comfort is better off today than at any point in the past." A similar observation could be made about the average Hungarian, Pole, and even Romanian, before Nicolae Ceaușescu's bizarre economic decisions tanked the Romanian economy. As a result, until the mid-1970s, socioeconomic dissatisfaction in communist Europe was low.

In the realm of communist ideology, equality reigned supreme. But the social structure of Central and Eastern European societies during the communist period was shaped by two forces running in opposite directions—egalitarian social policy on one hand and a new kind of class formation on the other.

Communist social policy led to gains related to income, access to goods and services, housing, healthcare, social welfare, pensions, and—crucially—education, which stood above all else in terms of its social significance. No event was more important in a family than the summer months when children applied for high school and university

admission. Beyond and above special privileges that affected very few young people, the communist regimes established a rather stable educational meritocracy dependent on exam results.

Elsewhere, egalitarian social policy imposed limits. There were restrictions on private ownership expressed in the number of square meters a household could legally own. Salary scales were rather flat, and economic incentives in the workplace were relatively weak. Living standards were low compared to those in the West, but the ordinary person felt a degree of security, and welfare benefits were not dependent on individual economic performance. There was no unemployment, and, as a rule, both spouses worked.

Countervailing these egalitarian policies was the consolidation of a new politically dominant class that, as time passed, became increasingly wealthy. Class difference was generated by the inheritance of formal and informal privileges and a system of “connections”—mutual favors between members of the elite. By the late 1970s, there existed a stable socioeconomic class division in European Communist societies. Individuals who had enjoyed privileges because of their place in the party-state had now passed down their wealth and elevated class position to their descendants. In the 1980s, the prominence of nomenklatura wealth and privilege became as undeniable as it was unacceptable. Popular resentment was directed particularly at the patrimonial element of nomenklatura privilege: “The Politburo are sending their children to Cambridge!” was the ultimate lament of the traditionally egalitarian, education-obsessed average citizen.

The growing gap between poor and rich began to show in art and literature, both in the alternative culture and to some degree in officially sanctioned works of art. The 1983 film *Adj király katonát* (*The Princess*) by Hungarian director Pál Erdöss dramatized the clash between these different classes through the heart-wrenching love story of a youth from the new wealthy class and a girl from the bottom. The best artists managed to convey how some people were condemned to a life in which only the most basic necessities were met, no matter how hard they worked, while others enjoyed a life of wealth and unlimited privilege on account of their parents’ positions.

In the 1980s, these trends led to a rather quick loss of popular legitimacy of the communist regimes on a scale unmatched by earlier periods of resistance. They had not done enough to either meet or weaken egalitarian expectations; indeed, in 1989 the shared feeling was that communists had broken the egalitarian promise, which had been the whole point of communism as far as most people were concerned.

In addition to socioeconomic equality, communism promised equality of status based on gender, ethnicity, geographic residence, and disability. Status inequalities followed their own complex trajectories during the communist period. But, in broad terms, these inequalities tracked with increasing socioeconomic inequality. Policies to increase gender equality and in support of the rights of ethnic minorities were undermined by a gradual rise of new types of inequality during the final decades of Central and Eastern European communism.

The Egalitarianism of the Streets

The people who signed up for the emerging oppositional political organizations in Central and Eastern European countries in the 1980s came from all walks of life; a sizeable segment were still members of Communist parties. In Poland, the membership of Solidarity reflected the composition of the general population. In Bulgaria, Ecoglasnost, which numbered around 100 individual members before November 1989 but delivered the fatal blow to the party-state through the first mass demonstration for democracy on November 3, grew to over 200,000 people in 1990, also reflecting Bulgarian demographics overall. Indignation over the privileges of the nomenklatura was the predominant sentiment animating direct action. In the days after the series of major breakthrough events in each country in the region, millions of people were frenetically engaging in the day-to-day business of revolutionary politics. Very few of them had a stable liberal outlook, but all shared the feeling that communist elites had perverted the ideal of equality.

The egalitarian ideal was rarely attacked before and immediately after regime change. When it was, the critique was addressed at its perceived utopianism and incompatibility with freedom, rather than at its inherent value. In November 1989, only 3 percent of respondents in Czechoslovakia preferred capitalism over socialism, and in December 1989 an overwhelming majority opposed privatization. There was strong support for the vision of worker self-management of the sort explored by Václav Havel in *The Power of the Powerless*—genuine worker participation in economic decision-making that could produce a genuine feeling of responsibility for their collective work. In Poland, self-management (*samorząd*) had been the main demand of Solidarity since 1981. By 1990, it had already disappeared from the agenda of the new elite, but it was still upheld by the majority of the people. According to a general survey in 1990, 61.8 percent of respondents favored worker self-management, 66.9 percent backed a full-employment policy, and 65.9 percent wanted to retain state control of prices. In Romania, too, the build-up of popular fury against the ruling elite had a long socioeconomic pedigree, going back to the 1977 Jiu Valley miners' strike, which ushered in a period of intermittent labor unrest.

Perhaps the best-known participants in the popular uprisings of 1989 were dissident intellectuals who for decades had expressed a moral and social critique of communist governments. Most dissidents did not express, at least before the middle of 1989, any expectation that profound systemic transformation could occur in the near future. The prevailing vision among intellectuals was of a more or less gradual internal liberalization of one-party state socialism, with the goal of a more democratic but still socialist political system. Multi-party pluralist democracy combined with a capitalist market economy did not become a proclaimed objective until the second half of 1989. The programmatic documents of practically all dissident organizations in 1988 and 1989 articulated a liberal platform of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. Freedom of speech, religious freedom, minority rights, and the right to access information were at the center of dissident demands. Equality was not.

Still, concerns about growing socioeconomic inequality were present in many dissident organizations' platforms in the late 1980s, even though these platforms were crafted by members of an alternative elite whose passion was liberty rather than equality. In Bulgaria, the Club for Glasnost and Perestroika, the Social Democratic Party, and the Agrarian Party were critical of the system of "lawful" privilege and the various forms of unlawful corruption that resulted in the enrichment of the top nomenklatura and the impoverishment of large sections of society. In Czechoslovakia, Civic Forum's platform issued on November 26, 1989, bore clear evidence of a lingering adherence to egalitarianism; it condemned the inequality of power and wealth and expressed commitment to equal economic opportunity even while formulating the principles of a capitalist market economy. Polish intellectuals expressed similar sentiments; but their takeover of the major challenge to the regime (which began with a workers' movement) signaled the eclipse of the pro-egalitarian agenda of the revolution. By the time of the 1989 roundtable negotiations, 195 of the 232 participants were intellectuals from both sides.

Large parts of the party elite also saw liberalization as something they could not just tolerate but benefit from. The freedom to make money, to travel, and even to think and speak were increasingly attractive to them, with one important condition: that they could remain part of the elite. In 1989, liberalization—rather than liberal democracy—was the elite common ground. Arguably, it is what made peaceful revolution through roundtable negotiations possible.

The New Inequality

Following the first free multi-party elections, post-communist elites managed the transition in their favor. The new governments accommodated the interests of both old and new elites. The liberation of the dominant class—an economic, political, and ideological emancipation that removed barriers to their further advancement and encouraged their global integration—created a deep sense of unfairness among ordinary people.

The egalitarian agenda was quickly marginalized, and no alternative political actor emerged to champion equality. "The original sin of the postcommunist democracies is that they came into being not as an outcome of the triumph of egalitarianism but as a victory of an antiegalitarian consensus uniting the communist elite and the anticommunist counterelite," wrote Bulgarian scholar Ivan Krastev in 2007. "Ex-communists were anti-egalitarian because of their interests. Liberals were anti-egalitarian because of their ideology."

But while elites and then nearly everyone gave up on the possibility of socioeconomic equality during the 1990s, and a sizable section of the people gave up on equality altogether, people still held to an ideal of fairness—about who gets ahead in life, who becomes a member of the elite. Everyone expected some form of fairness to replace the compromised ideal of communist equality. The battle cry of those years was "normality,"

and a “normal” society had a market economy with democratic elections. But it also meant the sort of society one found in an average Western European country circa 1975 —not just capitalist democracy, but one with the protections of a social welfare state.

Shortly after the revolutionary breakthrough, life in formerly communist Central and Eastern Europe couldn't be more different from that disappearing Western European social welfare state. The strictures of neoliberal economics had settled in, justifying and guiding the Wild West brutality of accumulation in the first years after 1989, leading to the economic dislocation of millions. Shock therapy introduced unregulated prices and, for many, a loss of their lifetime savings. Meanwhile, former nomenklatura members hectically distributed state assets to their allies under shady privatization deals. Unemployment surged. In Poland, it rose from practically zero in 1989 to 16 percent in 1993. Poverty increased from 17.3 percent in 1989 to 31.5 percent in 1990. The Gini coefficient increased from 26.9 in 1989 to 32.7 in 1996 and 35.9 in 2006. A similarly drastic version of shock therapy took place in Bulgaria in 1991–92. Even in Hungary, where shock therapy was postponed until around 1995, the effect was disastrous.

Privatization in all its forms failed to demonstrate even a semblance of fairness. Voucher privatization (in which citizens were allowed to purchase shares in formerly state-owned enterprises) in the Czech Republic (1992–94) was chaotic and rife with illegal practices. Václav Klaus, who was in charge of the reform, delayed the creation of a legal framework for privatization because he was more interested in creating a loyal economic elite than in accommodating public expectations.

Shortages, queues, confusion, and despair became the defining aspects of daily life in the early 1990s. When the dust settled, the winners of the transition were mostly members of the former communist elite joined by newcomers who had managed to take advantage of the massive abuse of power, theft, fraud, fake bankruptcies, racketeering, and mafia account-settling that sprouted in the vacuum created by the absence of established legal rules and authority.

The implementation of capitalist reforms and the way in which new democratic institutions legitimized them generated a new, anti-meritocratic pattern of status mobility. The process was experienced by most people as profoundly unfair. As time passed, many came to blame the new class landscape on the elites who presided over the “transition to democracy.” The process of accession to the European Union in the first years of the twenty-first century only postponed the destruction of elite legitimacy.

In this sense, the formative experience of deep unfairness in the aftermath of 1989 created a dynamic that, a generation later, translated into a specific Central and Eastern European brand of illiberal populist rebellion. It took a generation to reach the point where it was too soon to forget but too late to undo the injustice at the foundation of the new social hierarchies. By around 2010, the redistribution of power was complete. There was no more fishing in muddy waters: stronger laws and regulations had reined in but also ratified the wealth and property accumulated during the “transition.”

It is therefore not correct to say that the root cause of the illiberal surge that started around 2006 and continues to this date is inequality itself; rather, it is the manifestly unfair way in which the new, post-1989 inequality was produced. Today, we face an irony that is the inverse of 1989: in order for equality to make its comeback, a popular mobilization for liberty must open the way.

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