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## Some Interpretations of the Place of the Events of 1989–1990 in 20th Century History. Hungarian Perspectives

**Abstract.** The article is dedicated to the analyses of interpretations of the events that led to the burst out of reform processes in Central Europe 30 years before, in 1989-1990. The author stresses that with the passing of time the focus of digging into the fertile soil of the bottomless depth of the past keeps shifting: political developments, environmental issues, great cultural achievements alike can mark major turning points in the narrations of global regional, national, local pasts. Events of the past can be turned into historical narratives in numerous forms. The guild of historians have their own rules, the performance of politicians in dealing with the past is judged by the support they can gain in their fight for power. Among the major questions of investigation are: what happened in the world, in Europe, in the countries of the Soviet Bloc, in Hungary three decades ago? When does the process that led to the termination of the bipolar world, to the fall of European communist regimes, to the restructuring of power relations from the global to the East Central European local levels begin? How can one define the driving forces of changes and what could be considered to be the most important longer term consequences? He is trying to give a concise summary of some international and Hungarian interpretations of the transition process in Eastern and Central Europe, making also an attempt at pointing out the impact of the interpretations on the process itself.

**Key words:** reforms, transition, opposition, post-communism, system change, new political order, Visegrad countries, Hungary.

Interpreting events of the past is far from being the privilege of historians. Politicians, great and not so great thinkers, influential writers, artists, educators, various groups of public intellectuals use and abuse the explanation of past events of all kinds. With the passing of time the focus of digging into the fertile soil of the bottomless depth of the past keeps shifting: political developments, environmental issues, great cultural achievements alike can mark major turning points in the narrations of global regional, national, local pasts. Events of the past can be turned into historical narratives in numerous forms. The guild of historians have their own rules, the performance of politicians in dealing with the past is judged by the support they can gain in their fight for power. Occasionally a piece of art, a scientific breakthrough or a natural disaster can signal a more important milestone in the evolutionary process of mankind than a major war or any politically important deed.

What happened in the world, in Europe, in the countries of the Soviet Bloc, in Hungary three decades ago? When does the process that led to the termination of the bipolar world, to the fall of European communist regimes, to the restructuring of power relations from the global to the East Central European local levels begin? How can we define the driving forces of changes and what do we consider to be the most important longer term (thirty years) consequences? Is it at all possible to disjoin the political, economic, cultural driving forces and consequences, to analyse the complexity of personal and institutional networks? Historical research always has to be aware of the limits of its analytical force: be it the scarcity or the abundance of sources that is setting the boundaries. Still, if we are trying to follow the examples of the great personalities of our profession, we must not shy away from putting recent developments into longer term processes. In this short paper I am trying to give a concise summary of some international and Hungarian interpretations of the transition process in Eastern and Central Europe, making also an attempt at pointing out the impact of the interpretations on the process itself.

Writing this essay during the troubled spring of 2020, the year of COVID-19, we certainly have to ponder about the relationship between political and non-political issues determining major turning points of modern history. This pandemic showed that social scientists and natural scientists are doomed to cooperation if comprehensive explanations of complex situations are called for (Brooks 2020). Namely, the viruses have their own laws of emerging and spreading but the political, social reactions to their 'attacks' can vary a lot. We should keep this in mind when we think about the great variety of evaluations offered about the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the emergence of a new world order in 1989–1990. Namely, in view of the impact of COVID-19 onto the world, we have to rethink the interdependence of nature-environment and human history. The significance of 1989–1990 was frequently com-

pared to that of 1789, 1848, 1945 or 1968 but without underestimating the importance of these years in shaping the fate of mankind, now under the spell of COVID-19, with many of us working in quarantine, we have to extend our horizon to the history of epidemics, floods and all types of natural disasters when putting political events into a broader context<sup>1</sup>. This is not yet happening in connection with 1989–1990, for the time being we have to limit ourselves to a few selected approaches of historical scholarship and political science.

### Longer term historical context

Most of the best known attempts in the respective international literature at putting the events of 1989–1990 into a broader context come from political science but before summarizing the ones of this discipline that, in my view, also had an impact on Hungarian interpretations, let me refer to the work of those historians who, as far as I can judge, have done the most to present the political and economic context of the transition with a broad horizon! As to the political context, Mark Kramer has the best overview of the materials available in the archives of Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Bloc<sup>2</sup>. Both his work and the publications of his Hungarian colleagues as László Borhi (Borhi 2016) and Csaba Békés (Békés 2019) support the view that the transition process was against the intention of the great powers and well complement Kotkin's point about the 'implosion' (Kotkin 2010) rather than explosion of the Soviet Bloc. From an economic historical perspective the works of Iván. T. Berend trace back the roots of the transition to 1973. His point supported by a whole book is that in order to understand how the events of 1989–1990 could come about, *'we must first unravel, out of the numberless threads that make up the fabric of history, the dramatic changes in economic processes brought about by the shock to the world economy caused by the oil crisis of 1973.*

*The economic base of state socialism was visibly undermined from the 1970s on, accelerating its collapse. For a full understanding of this process, it is important to give a relatively detailed explanation of the international economic situation, the Western reaction to a changing economic world, and the Eastern inability to adjust to it. These developments are not only the main factors in the collapse of socialism, but also explain the requirements and trends of postcommunist transformation. This is, therefore, the proper point of departure for analyzing the two crucially important decades around the turn of the century.*

- 1 The way the Soviet Union dealt with the Chernobyl explosion and natural disasters substantially contributed to its fall in addition to all the other grave failures.
- 2 The Final Years of the USSR: Research Opportunities and Obstacles in the Moscow Archives. URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/final-years-ussr-research-opportunities-and-obstacles-moscow-archives> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

*The year 1973 was indeed the beginning of a new chapter of greater European economic history, which, in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, led to the collapse of their state socialist regimes... (Berend 2009).*

In my view so far the most challenging historical account of the overall European significance of 1989 has been offered by Philipp Ther. He describes the illusions connected to the neoliberal reforms imposed on post-communist Eastern Europe. During the early 1990s it was widely assumed that the market economy and democracy were interconnected. Ther argues that the neoliberal reforms and the shock therapy could be implemented just due to the lack of a full-fledged democracy in these countries. He also connects the East Central European experiences of the early 1990s to the post – 2008 crisis in South Eastern Europe. All these events have substantially shaped the overall post 1990 history of Europe, from Ther's perspective 1989–1990 does not simply mean that the East was trying to catch up with the West but it opened up a period of powerful interactions between the Eastern and Western parts of the continent (Ther 2016).

A more recent comparable synthetic summary of the transition and the major political, economic and social developments of the Visegrád countries up to 2017 by Jan Kren is for the time being available only in Czech (Kren 2019).

### **Problems of legitimacy and agency**

As to the political science interpretations, Timothy Garton Ash introduced the concept of refolution (The Magic Lantern 1990) and the concept made a great career, found its way also to a number of interpretations of the Hungarian transition as well. One of the first comprehensive synthetic works about the Hungarian transition was published by Rudolf Tőkés who, without referring to Ash but in a comparable spirit, presented the transition as a 'negotiated revolution'. In his interpretation the bargaining partners included prominent figures of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and „*three principal clusters of social, cultural and political dissent:*” the populist-nationalist group of literati, the 'democratic opposition' of essentially Budapest-based urban, liberal academic intellectuals and the Marxist, later post – Marxist reform socialist intellectuals. Based on all available written sources and lots of personal interviews, Tőkés argues that the result of the bargaining was an unwritten agreement between the old and the new elites as '*Much of it was a leveraged buyout, albeit a different kind. This time the now voting 'stockholders' were promised freedom, democracy and social justice. The first two were available to anyone but the third mainly to those who had 'convertible' skills or were educated, healthy, lucky, or already provided for by the principals of the transaction*' (Tőkés 1996). In this book and several other articles Tőkés pointed out the lack of non-intellectual support for the various groups of intellectual groups

calling for change. This, he argues, had the consequence that in spite of shared interests of the political elite coming into power after the truly democratic elections of March–April 1989, the new system was fragile. In a recent book Tókécs was especially critical of the Constitutional Court as in his view this institution substantially limited the scope of action of the new parliament and government (A harmadik Magyar... 2014). According to Tókécs' interpretation 1989 was much more the result of the changing relationships among great powers, the decline and fall of the Soviet Union than the outcome of the agency of local oppositions. Therefore the transformation had no internal legitimacy and lacked popular support (contrary to the situation in Poland) and resulted in an inflexible constitutional system. In the longer run, Tókécs argues, one of the worst consequences of the post communist transformations was a large scale exodus, 5 million people from Romania<sup>3</sup>, half of the population from Latvia<sup>4</sup>, about 600 000 people from Hungary<sup>5</sup>.

Iván Bába who was an active agent of dissident movements, tries to combine two seemingly contradictory elements in his description of the system change. On the one hand he emphasizes that socialism in Hungary collapsed not with a single crack but the collapse was the result of the works of tens of thousands of people for several decades. On the other hand he shares Tókes' view about the negotiated revolution and adds that this revolution created legal continuity with real socialism. Extensive further research has to confirm or refute the first point, to examine the extent of critical views and actions versus the socialist system in various layers of the Hungarian society. The second point is supported with lots of evidence also cited in Bába's book (Bába 2015: 180).

András Bozóki's recent book on *'the rolling system change'*<sup>6</sup> is a major contribution to the discussion on the agents of the system change in Hungary. Bozóki adopted a broad historical perspective from the early antecedents to

3 Romania's emigrant population is the fifth largest in the world and growing, OECD report finds. URL: <https://business-review.eu/news/romaniacs-emigrant-population-is-the-fifth-largest-in-the-world-and-growing-oecd-report-finds-203223> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

4 Emigration from Latvia: A Brief History and Driving Forces in the Twenty-First Century. URL: [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-12092-4\\_3](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-12092-4_3) (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

5 URL: <https://www.demografia.hu/hu/tudastar/fogalomtar/9-kivandorlas> ; <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20180727/ebbe-belerokkanhat-magyarorszag-tobb-szazezres-kivandorlasi-hullam-fenyeget-293014> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

6 Gördülő rendszerváltás L1Harmattan-Kiadó-Uránia Ismeretterjesztő Alapítvány Budapest, 2019. A summary in English by A. Bozóki and E. Simon. URL: <https://events.ceu.edu/sites/default/files/media/attachment/abozoki-asimon-dissident-intellectuals-eng-v5a-for-presentation.pdf> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

the aftermath of the changes, differentiating among five periods of dissident intellectual activity between 1977 and 1994: (1) dissent (1977–1987), (2) open network-building (1988), (3) round-table negotiations (1989), parliamentary politics (1990), and (5) new pro-democracy initiatives (1991–1994). Each of these periods is characterized by a distinct domestic political environment, international political climate, and dissident intellectual activity. His main argument is that during this close to two decades about 2 000 personalities were involved in the process but the composition of the avantgarde kept changing and one can observe more discontinuities than continuities in the composition of the agents. The result itself was of a revolutionary nature but the way the transformation was taking place cannot be described as revolutionary. In my view this book is so far the most sophisticated approach to the agents and methods of the transition but respective debates certainly continue.

During the immediate aftermath of 1989 – 1990 for numerous agents of the changes in post- Soviet East Central Europe one of the key questions that arose concerned the extent to which in their respective countries social fabrics and power structures had changed after the first free elections. As János Kis, the perhaps most prestigious leader of the Hungarian liberal party, the Alliance of the Free Democrats put it in early 1991: *‘There were hardly any changes on the middle layers of power, around the time of the elections the members of the communist elite, directors of state owned enterprises, presidents of cooperatives, party secretaries and the like seemed to be a bit insecure but they stabilized their situation quite fast... there were changes on the top of the pyramid but the pyramid itself remained essentially unchanged’* (Kis 1991: 4).

### **Success or failure or both?**

By now the situation has certainly changed, but the long term survival of remnants of the pre 89–90 intellectual elite in cultural and scientific institutions is still an issue of political exchanges on obstacles to the successful defence of Hungarian national interests in the international arena. According to one of the most influential advisors to the Prime Minister, Gyula Tellér, by about the middle of the last decade *‘the system of the system change’* (the inherited wrestling between the inherited postcommunist forces connected to the old system and the driving forces of the system change) had given way to the *‘national system’* (A magyar politikai rendszer 2015: 29). This system makes sure that the foreign *‘INVESTOR’* does not profit disproportionately from the foreign credits imposed on the country. A younger social scientist, Márton Békés, argues that the *‘ballot box revolution’* of 2010 bringing the present ruling party, FIDESZ, into power offered an opportunity to turn the system change into the start of a new conservative age. Békés suggests that this was necessary

as the system change was pushed into a liberal direction for 20 years (from 1990 to 2010) and this was and is to be repaired<sup>7</sup>.

Among Hungarian social scientists István Stumpf exposed the question whether the scenario of the system change in the form of a negotiated revolution, prepared by a well trained professional elite, was a good solution in 1989–1990. Writing in the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century he pondered whether a constitutional assembly could have given more legitimacy to the new political system<sup>8</sup>.

Fukuyama's famous 1992 point about the end of history, the universalisation of Western liberal democracy (*The End of History...* 1992) was and is well known in Hungary but the book's argument was not supported there by any ideological – political rhetoric or empirical research. However, it is remarkable that Fukuyama's 2018 point about the global state of liberalism is quite in line with present day official Hungarian political philosophy. Namely, in 2018 Fukuyama put in an interview when asked about an advancing *'Illiberal International'*. “(Russia, Turkey, Poland, Hungary): *‘What I said back then [1992] is that one of the problems with modern democracy is that it provides peace and prosperity but people want more than that... liberal democracies don't even try to define what a good life is, it's left up to individuals, who feel alienated, without purpose, and that's why joining these (illiberal) identity groups gives them some sense of community’*”<sup>9</sup>. He said he was not happy to admit it, but in his view Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was in fact right about strengthening the border control of his country during the migrant crisis of 2015, the Schengen zone cannot be maintained without the protection of the external borders<sup>10</sup> and in fact illiberal systems turn out to be stronger than the liberal ones!

It is interesting that Robert Kagan's 2007 book (Kagan 2008) about the return of history had less impact in Hungary. Less than two decades after the emergence of a new world order Kagan argued that by then instead of a harmonious global situation based on the world wide implementation of the principle of liberal democracies both the nation-state and the nationalist ambitions and passions remained as strong as ever and in his view the competition among nations were greatly shaping history. A 2015 article by Kagan,

7 Márton B. Az első tíz év értékei. URL: [https://latoszogblog.hu/blog/az\\_első\\_tíz\\_ev\\_ertekei](https://latoszogblog.hu/blog/az_első_tíz_ev_ertekei) (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

8 A politika fontosabb annál, hogy csak a politikusokra bízunk. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070704213213/http://www.mindentudas.hu/magazin2/20050709apolitika.html> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

9 Francis Fukuyama interview: “Socialism ought to come back”. URL: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2018/10/francis-fukuyama-interview-socialism-ought-come-back> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

10 URL: <https://thehungaryjournal.com/2018/05/17/fukuyama-orban-right-about-border-control/> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

however, was picked up by the Hungarian Prime Minister. He cited Kagan as an expert of the Brookings Institute: “*insofar as there is energy in the international system, it comes from the great-power autocracies, China and Russia, and from would-be theocrats pursuing their dream of a new caliphate in the Middle East. For all their many problems and weaknesses, it is still these autocracies and these aspiring religious totalitarians that push forward while the democracies draw back, that act while the democracies react, and that seem increasingly unleashed while the democracies feel increasingly constrained.*” However, Mr. Orbán paid less attention to the overall conclusion of this article: “*Yet it should be clear that the prospects for democracy have been much better under the protection of a liberal world order, supported and defended by a democratic superpower or by a collection of democratic great powers. Today, as always, democracy is a fragile flower. It requires constant support, constant tending, and the plucking of weeds and fencing-off of the jungle that threaten it both from within and without. In the absence of such efforts, the jungle and the weeds may sooner or later come back to reclaim the land*” The return of history can be interpreted as the return of order and this is a critical point in the narrative on 1989–1990 and its consequences. Robert Kagan’s analysis greatly applies to the recent situation in Hungary: “*Democracy’s aura of inevitability seems vanished as great numbers of people rejected the idea that it was a better form of government. Human beings, after all, do not yearn only for freedom, autonomy, individuality, and recognition. Especially in times of difficulty, they yearn also for comfort, security, order, and, importantly, a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, something that submerges autonomy and individuality—all of which autocracies can sometimes provide, or at least appear to provide, better than democracies*” (Kagan 2015: 23).

### **Freedom**

A current bone of contention in scholarly discourses and in present day Hungarian politics alike concerns the interpretation of freedom. Both the governing right and the fractured left agree that the 1989–1990 transition brought about freedom for the countries of the former Soviet Bloc. Still, the leftist and rightist interpretations of the contents of freedom differ greatly. The institutional framework of freedom for the right is the sovereign national state. According to this interpretation Hungary contributes as much or even more to the common European interests as the support it gets from the EU. For most of the left the supranational, federal institutions offer the optimal guarantees for the realization of freedom. Further on, from the perspective of the ruling right order and longer term stability for the protection of freedom could emerge only after 2010 in Hungary, the two previous decades were far too chaotic. It was only the ‘*ballot box Revolution of 2010*’, three subsequent impressive election victories of FIDESZ, the present ruling party, that guaran-

tee the protection of the collective interests of all Hungarians. The left puts the emphasis on individual freedoms guaranteed by international agreements based on general human rights protection.

Most of the influential international interpretations also took it for granted that 1989–90 signalled the victory of freedom, of the open society over communism. Openness meant that the new regimes seemed to be open for introducing democracy, pluralism, civil society. Ash, Dahrendorf or Habermas agreed that the East and Central European countries could not come up with original ideas in the field of politics, economics, international law or international relations. Habermas summarized this approach in the concept of the „*nachholende Revolution*” (catching up revolution). Dahrendorf was more nuanced when he argued that in the countries of the former Soviet bloc following 1990 a constitutional reform might take a mere six months, economic reform six years, but *“sixty years are barely enough to lay the social foundations required”*<sup>11</sup>. He also added that according to historical experience, revolutions created as many problems as they solved, if not more (After 1989... 1997).

Putting the East Central European events of 1989–1990 into the teleological process of gaining freedom can certainly be challenged. A good example for this interpretation in a very global context is offered by Prof. Christoph Boyer from the University of Salzburg. He argues that if we look at the transformation of the global economic system at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, *‘the question would be ...how far ‘1989’ has contributed, as a causal factor, to the accelerated rise of an aggressive and socially irresponsible neoliberal global capitalism, unrivalled ideologically as well as in reality’* (Boyer 2015: 178).

This approach is well taken by scholars in Hungary. Let me cite only two examples, the first by Ferenc Mészlivetz: *‘the economically well integrated neoliberal world order with its carefully maintained fragmented political system of nation-states as its exclusive building stone replaced alternative conceptions of the ‘80s...’* (Mészlivetz).

Or as Jody Jensen put it: *‘According to Immanuel Wallerstein and world systems theory, we have reached the point of disequilibrium and have entered a period of transition, of transformation from one world system to another world system. This is what Zygmunt Baumann called a period of “interregnum,” and is characterized by high uncertainty, instability, and volatility. I like the term “Chaordic Age” that combines the notions of chaos and order. The old system is being replaced by something new, but we do not know what it will look like’* (Jensen 2020).

Samuel P. Huntington’s 1993 warning about the possible upcoming conflicts among civilizations (Huntington 1993) was echoed in Hungary as well,

11 What’s Ahead for Europe. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/21/books/what-s-ahead-for-europe.html> (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

the Eastern border of Hungary being, according to Huntington, a major fault line between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Hungarian political thought has for more than four centuries focused on discussing Eastern and Western elements of Hungarian national identity (Szűcs 1983)<sup>12</sup> and the problem is still with us. Recently a young Hungarian scholar made an interesting comparison between the East-West fault line as presented by Huntington and the six-dimensional model of global value differences by Geert Hofstede<sup>13</sup>, based on the data bank of the World Value Survey. According to Péter Holicza's analysis *'between nations belonging to the Western civilization, (in this case: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia) some cultural differences are clearly demonstrable. According to the trend lines, Croatia and Slovenia have more in common with Romania, Ukraine and Serbia, the Orthodox part of the civilization fault line. Slovakian culture differs the most from the regional average value what Austria represents. Focusing on Hungary, only three dimensions (PDI, IDC, MAS) are significantly different out of the six in total, compared to eastern and southern neighbouring countries. ... three indicators (UAI, LTO, IND) have shown nearly the same results on both sides of the fault line, proposed by Huntington. The 6-D analysis (Hofstede) shows that the existence of a fault line in Central Eastern Europe is confirmed, but the results are mixed, and based on the mutual cultural values, the fault line near Hungary is bridgeable* (Holicza 2016; Haynes 2019) This is in line with the current mainline official historical-political positioning of Hungary's role in the centre of Europe. Hungary's political, moral, cultural strength is to a great extent based on the legacy of the first Hungarian king, Stephen the Saint, who, by the adoption of Christianity, laid down the

12 The internationally best known Hungarian work discussing this problem in a wide European context is Szűcs J. *The Three Historical Regions of Europe: an Outline*. First published in English: *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Vol. 29, No. 2/4 (1983), pp. 131–184 F. Braudel wrote a Preface to the French edition. Less known are the most insightful respective works by L. Péter. See his collection of essays: *Hungary's Long Nineteenth Century. Constitutional and Democratic Traditions in a European Perspective*. *Collected Studies* by L. Péter edited by M. Lojkó. Brill, 2012.

13 Holicza P. *Fault Lines in Central Europe: Analysis of Huntington's Civilian Theory in the Context of Hungary and its Neighborhood*. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317264443\\_Fault\\_Lines\\_in\\_Central\\_Europe\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Huntington%27s\\_Civilian\\_Theory\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_Hungary\\_and\\_it%27s\\_Neighborhood](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317264443_Fault_Lines_in_Central_Europe_Analysis_of_Huntington%27s_Civilian_Theory_in_the_Context_of_Hungary_and_it%27s_Neighborhood) (дата обращения: 21.12.2020).

Hofstede's cultural dimensions:

- Power Distance Index (PDI);
- Individualism versus Collectivism (IDC);
- Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS);
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI);
- Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO);
- Indulgence versus Restraint (IND).

most solid foundations of a Hungarian state. From this perspective the fault line is less between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy but between Christians and non-Christians. As to the long term historical contextualization of the post communist transition, Huntington's theory of the three waves of democratization<sup>14</sup> is more in line with the views of Hungarian scholars who see 1989–1990 as part of a legacy of revolutions calling for the establishment of liberal political and social institutions from 1848 – via the proclamations of the republican form of a statesystem in 1918 and 1946 to the anti-Soviet, anti-communist revolution in 1956. This line of thought has been the topic of extensive discussions among Hungarian social scientists: the key issue being how respective calls for national sovereignty and political, economic, social modernization relate to each other (Litván 2008).

### Politics of memory

Let me conclude this short and very selected survey of interpretations of the 1989–1990 events by returning to the longer term political-historical contextualization. Just a few examples: in Yugoslavia, the commemorations of the 600-th anniversary of the death of Prince Lazar in 1989 meant a return to the founding myths of the Serbian kingdom, which soon replaced the cult of the “Yugoslav” partisans of the Second World War, the return to his homeland of the heart of the Bulgarian Tsar Boris, who died in 1941 in circumstances which remain unclear to this day, was a symbolic break with the Communist legacy in Bulgaria, the reburial of the Hungarian admiral Miklós Horthy, regent of the country from 1920 to 1944, was supposed to indicate the continuity between pre- and post-Communist times, the ceremonial burial of two Polish generals of the “Homeland Army”, Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski and Władisław Sikorski, symbolised the questioning of the legitimacy of the Communist regime in Poland. Many of the monuments put up to the Soviet “liberators” disappeared; new ones were put up which commemorated anti-Communist national heroes like Józef Piłsudski in Poland, Jozef Tiso in Slovakia, Ion Antonescu in Romania, Pál Teleki in Hungary, or acts of violence committed by Soviet foreign policy (in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968). All these measures were strong reactions against the Communists' attempt to engineer a complete break with the traditions of the so-called reactionary past of those peoples then ruled by the Soviet Union, and against the attempt to construct the new “fraternal community” of socialist countries on the basis of

14 The first wave developed slowly from 1828 to 1926, beginning in the United States, the second wave of democratisation began during the Second World War prompted by the victory of The Allies, the end of dictatorship in Portugal in 1974 signalled the beginning of the third wave of democratisation that 89/90 is part of.

their shared “progressive” traditions of class struggle. In the official Communist master-narratives of national history, expressed in political speeches and in centrally controlled schoolbooks, the struggle against the foreign exploiters was always the focal point. According to this rhetoric, the best patriots were those personalities who had pursued goals of national and class struggle in parallel and combined with one another.

Even before the collapse of the Soviet empire, as a result of the lessening of Soviet ideological pressure, there appeared — if not so much in scholarship, then all the more so in journalism and everyday speech — long banished visions of the historical achievements and tragic sacrifices of the East Central European elites in the inter-war period. After the changes of 1989–1990, this process accelerated. To put it sharply, one can say that the chances of a person, a movement, an institution or a political party of winning a prominent place in the new national pantheon were the greater the more anti-Communist they were deemed to have been. This was also a reaction to the Communist ideological practice, which had been to brand all anti-Communists equally as “fascists” (Judt 2005). The great danger now lay in the fact that occasionally representatives of the extreme right were shown in a positive light because of their anti-Communist attitude.

### **The place of communism in history**

In many serious discussions, intellectuals in post-communist East Central Europe asked what place the communist regime had in the continuity of their national histories. Was it really true that communism had been imposed from outside in all countries of the region, or did it also have internal social and political roots in the countries themselves? Could the Communist era be seen as part of national histories at all? Was it not instead, in spite of its many victims, only an unimportant temporary episode, historically speaking, even though it lasted a long time? Is it possible to speak of “organic” national histories which airbrush the communist period? One frequently posed question, which is closely linked to this problem is: was Communism an attempt to overcome the (economic and intellectual) backwardness of the respective region, or, on the contrary, it helped to make the gap between Eastern and Western Europe even wider and deeper than before?

A further part of this complex of problems is the responsibility (or rather, the credit) for the end of communism. Was it the strong and unbreakable backbone of the nations, which had resisted all the maliciousness and demands of the Soviets? Were there true patriots whose unwavering and consistent anti-communism finally led to success? Or was it not instead more the pragmatic and patriotic communists who had recognised that the communist model had no future, and had started to dismantle the system

when the decline of the Soviet Union and the international political situation permitted this?

Nowhere in the former Soviet bloc countries was an appropriate legal framework found for the punishment of the crimes committed by the communist system. No system functions without supporters, but it is difficult to formalise the extent of responsibility of officials at different levels within the hierarchy. As social-psychological research shows, this is hardly avoidable. If we view the trauma of system change as a mass-psychological phenomenon, then the regeneration of a society's capacities after such a trauma is essentially impossible without social cohesion (Mills, Polanowski 1997; Enyedi, Erös 1999). Social-psychological experience teaches that such cohesion is best achieved with the help of scapegoats (Girard 1989; Douglas 1995; Cople 1994: 251–255). The scapegoat function can be transferred onto individuals, smaller or larger groups, but also onto whole countries or ideologies. A decisive part of post-communist historical discourse was therefore devoted to making communism in general fulfil this function. Communism as an ideology, and the personalities, groups and parties which represented it, were made responsible not only for the economic and social decline of the countries which it ruled, but also for national tragedies.

Besides the responsibilities of individual communists and groups of communists, the question of how to evaluate the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War was a further central theme for public discussion in all countries of the former Soviet camp. To what extent was the Soviet Union a liberator? Was it not just a new conqueror? Is Soviet guilt comparable to Nazi guilt? How can one compare the Gulag to the Nazi concentration camps? The themes of the historians' dispute in Germany in the 1980s surfaced, but nowhere in the former Soviet satellite countries did they lead to a cathartic discussion which would have facilitated the post-Communist cohesion of these societies. Instead, it led to new political divisions or deepened old ones.

Even today, more than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, a great number of issues relating to the history of communist rule and the causes and consequences of its collapse are heavily debated in scholarly, political and social forms of 'doing history'. Hereby a few hot issues:

- who initiated the changes, when did the changes start, Other important topics of the discussions:
  - ✓ are the peaceful transitions (velvet and negotiated revolutions) assets or liabilities,
  - ✓ the criminality of communism, the limits and possibilities of retrospective justice,
  - ✓ communism as a deviation from an organic course of history, anti-communism as heroism,

- ✓ how former heroes become villains and former villains become heroes,
- ✓ official reburials, renaming of public spaces,
- ✓ ambiguities concerning the carriers of communist systems and concerning the responsibility for the collapse.

The situation is further complicated by the conflict between the official heroic interpretations of the destruction rather than collapse of communism and the deep going resentments, popular disappointments due to the experiences of ruthless capitalism in post-communist countries.

The long years of theoretical and political efforts by communist ideologues and politicians did not succeed in their attempt to fuse Communist ideas with national ideologies in East Central European societies. It proved impossible to convince those societies that the internationalism of “all proletarians of the world” could be harmonised with the defence of national interests. Practical experience has shown the opposite.

The experience of the system change in East Central Europe, and the process of European integration do, however, show that after the grandiose collapse of communist internationalism, intellectuals in East Central Europe should not be spared the challenge of developing supranational identities. The most difficult question along this line is whether the rejection of communism can serve as a solid basis for the creation of new, cohesive identities, whether anticommunism can become the ‘constituting other’ for a new generation of East Central Europeans, helping them (us) in finding a proper place in Europe and the world full of ambiguities and uncertainties. From the perspective of the spring and early summer of 2020 it seems that we have to deal much more with the peculiarities of capitalism in general and its ability for renewal than with the legacy of communism if we are trying to understand the limits and possibilities of a scope of action for East and Central European nations and states.

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## Некоторые интерпретации места событий 1989–1990 годов в истории XX в. Венгерский подход.

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена анализу интерпретаций событий, приведших к всплеску реформаторских процессов в Центральной Европе 30 лет назад, в 1989–1990 годах. Автор подчеркивает, что с течением времени фокус погружения в плодородную почву глубин прошлого продолжает смещаться: политические события, экологические проблемы, великие культурные достижения могут стать важными поворотными точками в интерпретациях глобального, регионального, национального, локального значения событий прошлого. Они могут быть превращены в исторические повествования в различных формах, в зависимости от того, кто их формирует. У гильдии историков свои правила, о работе политиков в обращении с прошлым судят по поддержке, которую они могут получить в борьбе за власть. Среди основных вопросов, которыми задается автор: что происходило в мире, в Европе, в странах Советского блока, в Венгрии три десятилетия назад? Когда начинается процесс, приведший к завершению биполярного мира, к падению европейских коммунистических режимов, к перестройке властных отношений с глобального на восточно-центральноевропейский и локальный уровни? Как определить движущие силы изменений и что можно считать наиболее важными долгосрочными последствиями? Автор пытается дать краткое изложение некоторых международных и венгерских интерпретаций переходного процесса в Восточной и Центральной Европе, а также указать на влияние этих интерпретаций на сам процесс.

**Ключевые слова:** реформы, переходный период, оппозиция, посткоммунизм, системные изменения, новый политический порядок, Вышеградские страны, Венгрия.