

## 6 The transition in East-Central Europe

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In the course of autumn 1989, the existing regimes in East-Central Europe collapsed. In August, Poland secured the first government in the region for some forty years to be headed by a non-Communist and containing a majority of non-Communist ministers. In September, Hungary allowed thousands of East Germans to leave for West Germany and, in October, it dropped its designation as a People's Republic, effectively ending over forty years of Communist monopoly power. The most dramatic event in the month of November 1989, and indeed in the course of that year, was the fall of the Berlin Wall, heralding the demise of the East German state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In November, Czechoslovakia's Communist leader resigned following increasingly huge anti-governmental demonstrations, as did Bulgaria's long-time Communist party chief – in the latter case as a result of an internal party coup. By the end of December, a leading dissident had been elected president of Czechoslovakia and the Romanian dictator had been summarily executed in the wake of the only mass bloodshed experienced in the region during those momentous months. Every one of these countries scheduled free legislative elections for 1990, with the exception of Poland where elections were to be held in 1991 – it was the partially free elections of June 1989 that had ushered in the Polish changes that year.

The suddenness, the speed, the encompassing nature and the definitiveness of the transformation were bewildering to outside observers and inside participants alike, so much so that commentators have likened the process to the breaking of a dam.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that these events occurred well before the existence of Twitter and social media that have so often been invoked to explain the rapid succession of 'Arab Spring' revolutions. There was no social media, indeed there was no Internet in 1989. Western radio stations, notably the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and Radio Free Europe, transmitted news of events from one country to another but their audience was limited. In the absence of media contagion, the rapid succession and similar outcomes of events in East-Central Europe suggest a common cause, though the modalities of change in each of the countries differed.

The most significant cause of the changes was external to the region. It lay in the reconfiguration of the international system which was largely due to the

initiatives of the recently-elected Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. After attempting timid (and unsuccessful) internal reforms immediately after he came to power in 1985, Gorbachev embarked upon a campaign that shook the very foundations of the bipolar international order that had existed since World War II. There is much discussion about Gorbachev's intentions in launching these initiatives – whether they were a self-interested effort to compensate for Soviet military weakness and internal problems or a more generous attempt to break down years of hostility in order to promote the common interests of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the motivations, Gorbachev inspired rapturous enthusiasm among Western, and particularly some parts of Western European, public opinion though not among East-Central Europeans who were to be the principal beneficiaries of his initiatives. These populations may not have been impressed by such shows of 'new thinking' as Gorbachev's United Nations speech in December 1988 where he promised to withdraw much of the Soviet military presence in East-Central Europe. However, Communist leaders in the region could not fail to note warnings from Moscow that they should not rely on Soviet force to maintain them in power, as it had in Berlin in 1953, in Hungary in 1956 and as it had threatened to do in Poland in 1981 (in Czechoslovakia in 1968 Soviet armed might actually overturned a reformist Communist government, a sort of Gorbachevism *avant la lettre*, to restore a traditional Communist regime). The proof of Soviet intentions in 1989 only came when Moscow gave its blessing to the composition of a non-Communist cabinet in Poland and even more emphatically so when it restrained its own as well as East German forces from quelling the demonstrations that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The 'Gorbachev factor' as it has been aptly named<sup>3</sup> is too diffuse a process to be termed a 'triggering event'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, its weight and even its relevance is hotly contested by East-Central Europeans who are loath to attribute the role of liberator to a leader who they are more likely to see as a prison warden. Even the metaphor of decolonisation, though seductive, does not fit the East-Central European case as these countries were more than nominally sovereign states, not colonies, and the withdrawal of the Soviet presence came about in a tempered manner that does not sufficiently explain the transformation that occurred. The Gorbachev factor may more accurately be considered a necessary but not sufficient framework for the changes that took place in East-Central Europe where the international system dictated the limits of each country's degree of autonomy but did not provide the agency for the actions that each country undertook. These actions differed significantly from one case to another, certainly more so than the apparently seamless sequence and similar outcomes of the events of 1989 would suggest. It is surely an exaggeration to say that there were no revolutions in 1989 only different reactions to the Soviet decision to pull out<sup>5</sup> but the weight of the external factor is undeniable.

## Poland: a crucial and initial case

Poland occupies first place in any account of the transition away from Communism and not only in terms of chronology or because of its regional size – Poland’s population, comparable to that of Spain, is twice that of the next country of concern here, Romania, and at least four times that of most other countries in the region – or its strategic position between Germany and the Soviet Union. In 1989, it was Poland that acted as a trailblazer challenging Soviet authority and testing Soviet commitment to non-intervention. Here, Poland’s primacy built on the role it had played throughout the Communist period. The country had long enjoyed a record of openness: a recognised public profile for the Catholic Church, a non-collectivised agriculture, a degree of intellectual freedom unknown in the other ‘people’s democracies’ of the region. It is for these reasons that Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan describe Poland as ‘the only country in Eastern Europe that was always closer to an authoritarian than to a totalitarian regime’.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Poland was the site of the region’s largest and most protracted opposition to the Communist regime with the rise of Solidarity in 1980–1981, a trade union that became a movement which succeeded in mobilising millions of Poles around a national and democratic agenda.

In 1980–1981 Solidarity represented a powerful example of what can accurately be described as ‘collective action in social movements’.<sup>7</sup> The twist here is that it was not this action that brought about regime change. In the decade that followed the rise of Solidarity, the movement was driven underground by a Pinochet-like assertion of military power. Even more significantly, Solidarity lost its dynamism as well its cohesion.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Communist state found itself paralysed, increasingly incapable of coping with the challenges brought about by a declining and heavily indebted economy and a restive society. It was therefore two weakened parties, still adversaries, that came together early in 1989 in round table negotiations. These were bitterly criticised – by hard core Communists, known in Poland as ‘beton’, by radicals from the Solidarity camp and by the populist right-wing that has since come to power in 2015 – for incarnating what scholars have called ‘elite pact-making’ (see [Chapter 1](#)). The result was the legislative elections of June 1989 with elections to the newly-created Senate entirely free as were thirty-five per cent of seats in the lower chamber. To the surprise of all sides, not least Solidarity campaigning under the banner of a ‘Citizens’ Committee’, Solidarity swept all available seats in both the *Sejm* (the lower chamber) and the Senate, with the exception of a single senate seat. As the Solidarity leader and later president, Lech Walesa, put it, ‘by a stroke of bad luck, we won the elections’.<sup>9</sup> This stunning victory alone was not sufficient to assure Solidarity of a majority in the *Sejm*, as the limit on seats freely contested had been set precisely to avert such an outcome. What tipped the situation in favour of a Solidarity-led government was the defection of two minor ‘bloc’ parties, the Peasant Party and the Democratic Party, to Solidarity.

Here, a brief excursion on the peculiarities of politics in the ‘peoples’ democracies’ is in order. Contrary to the Soviet pattern where, within months, the

Bolshevik party had eliminated its only coalition partner, the Left Social Revolutionaries, in East-Central Europe the coalitions or national fronts established in the immediate aftermath of World War II persevered in a profoundly debilitated and essentially formal guise. There was no doubt about the 'leading role' of the Communist Party or the vigilance of the state security apparatus with regard to these non-Communist elements. Nevertheless, in Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany in particular, non-Communist parties continued to exist, servile and phantom-like. To the surprise of those, both Communists and non-Communists, who held them in contempt, these ghosts came alive in 1989. They provided a breakthrough in the impasse that arose out of the Polish elections of June 1989 and played an ancillary role in the transition from Communism in Czechoslovakia and in East Germany.<sup>10</sup>

The Polish experience was so striking and epoch-making that it has been invoked as a paradigm for the other transitions that were to follow. In fact, it has been argued that the Polish case,<sup>11</sup> and notably the presence of a numerous and mobilised civil society, represents an exception in the East-Central European region. Outside Poland, pre-existing civil society was too anaemic to serve as the spearhead of change. As a result, other modes of transition came into play; these have led scholars to refer to the Polish model as one of transaction, like Brazil, in contrast to Hungary, which experienced reform through extrication.<sup>12</sup>

Yet it is Hungary whose transition experience most closely resembles that of Poland, as it also experienced a 'pacted' transition negotiated at a round table. The difference is that in Hungary the opposition had to be induced by the government, one might say with forceps, to provide an opposite side at the government-sponsored round table. In 1987, reformist Communists and opposition intellectuals came together at a meeting discretely promoted by the government. This meeting engendered several contemporary Hungarian political parties, including today's governing Fidesz or Hungarian Civic Alliance, originally the Alliance of Young Democrats, whose ethos has changed significantly since its foundation. Nevertheless, in June 1988 there were still only a few hundred people at the commemorative ceremony for Imre Nagy, the emblematic figure of the 1956 Hungarian Insurrection. The following year the crowd had swelled to a quarter of a million.

The haste with which Hungary shed its Communist persona is astonishing. The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party dissolved in October 1989 to re-emerge immediately as the Hungarian Socialist Party, the name under which it is still known today, albeit with a neo-liberal ideology that bears little resemblance to that of its Marxist predecessor. Other East-Central European Communist Parties, the most significant exception being the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in the Czech Republic, followed the Hungarian example of discarding their previous names and identities and attempting to place themselves at various points on a non-Marxist spectrum, often claiming a vaguely social democratic inspiration. In Poland, the United Workers' Party disappeared in January 1990 to give way to Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland. In Bulgaria, the same process occurred in April 1990 as the Bulgarian Communist Party became the

Bulgarian Socialist Party. In East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party became the Party of Democratic Socialism in February 1990, whereas in Romania the Communist Party disappeared so comprehensively that it was only several years later that the Party of Social Democracy of Romania emerged as an unacknowledged though powerful successor.

Hungarian alacrity in abandoning communism has been explained in various ways. The weight of the Hungarian external debt was, undoubtedly, a factor. With a debt of US\$20 billion – half of Poland's although in a country with a quarter of Poland's population<sup>13</sup> – as well as a relatively open economy but one that was in free fall and marked by commercial dependence on the West, Hungary was keen to shed the few remaining constraints preventing it from enticing Western capital. One of the side effects of Gorbachev's new approach to his East-Central European allies was that whereas previously lenders to those states had assumed that their loans were guaranteed by the Soviet Union, it became clear that this was no longer a valid assumption. A more penetrating analysis has been provided by one of Hungary's leading sociologists who asked the question directly: why did the Hungarian Communist Party retreat so quickly? The answer he provides points, as in conventional explanations, to economic decline, increasing dependence on Western capital and goodwill and competition for Western resources. Above all, however, the outcome of the analysis is that the process of abandoning communism was, in fact, a conversion of anachronistic bureaucratic power into market assets and real political power. Bureaucrats were eager to transform themselves into entrepreneurs and managers, thus enabling a much more substantial expropriation of wealth than their status as functionaries of state owned firms had allowed.<sup>14</sup> Others have applied the same reasoning to the process that occurred in Poland: 'the nomenklatura [i.e. the communist elite] ... set fire to their own houses.'<sup>15</sup>

Before 1989, Poland and Hungary were the most advanced reformist states of East-Central Europe, leaders in the march away from conformity to Soviet models.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, it is these states that led the way in initiating the revolutions of 1989. What is more surprising is that apparently more stable, orthodox Communist regimes followed in the same path almost immediately. Czechoslovakia is the most striking case in point. Since the failure of the reform experiment in 1968 that had ended in a Soviet invasion, the Czechoslovak leadership had pursued an especially cautious policy averse to political and even economic reform. Both in Hungary and in Czechoslovakia the memory of Soviet invasion, in 1956 and 1968 respectively, loomed large; however, the leadership's reaction was quite different. Hungarian Communists, mindful of the danger of a new bloodbath, offered little resistance to the unleashing of social forces that moved in the direction of privatisation and other manifestations of capitalism. In contrast, the Czech leadership sought to provide consumer satisfaction, in the face of economic difficulties, while introducing as few structural changes as possible in the economic sphere and none in the political sphere. The result was a quiescent society where private car ownership, a key marker of consumerism, more than doubled between 1971 and 1989, and where the opposition

consisted of only a few dissidents, the most prominent of which was Vaclav Havel better known abroad than at home.<sup>17</sup>

Muted rumblings in the late 1980s, notably in the religious sphere in a largely areligious society (this is true of the Czech lands but cannot be said of Slovakia), gave way to more robust demonstrations, notably by Prague and Bratislava students, in the course of November 1989. Police repression and reports of the death of a student (that later proved false and, in fact, a government provocation) had a snowball effect provoking massive mobilisation to which the government responded with panic. As the demonstrations grew in size and encompassed ever broader sections of the population, including the working class of whose loyalty the government had been confident, the Communist Party leadership resigned and the Party soon afterwards gave up its monopoly, giving way to a completely new configuration of power.

The Czech revolution can hardly be explained by the economic situation, stagnant and even deteriorating though it may have been. Czechoslovakia had been negatively affected by the rise in energy prices, dictated by recent Soviet policy, but it still had virtually no foreign debt. Gorbachev's warnings about the conservatism of the Czech leadership and his obvious sympathy for the Prague Spring of 1968 (against which the Czech leadership defined itself) played an important role. Most significant of all, however, was the example set by ongoing events in neighbouring countries, most notably in Germany.

The shadow of Germany has always loomed large over East-Central Europe, in both positive and negative ways. In this context, the GDR occupied a particular position within the Communist bloc. To a large extent, the existence of a Communist bloc in East-Central Europe was the Soviet response to the 'German Question' – the prospect of a resurgent German power made all the more ominous as the Federal Republic of Germany (GFR or West Germany), which had never come to terms with the division of Germany or formally accepted (until 1990) German territorial losses in the East, became a stalwart North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) outpost. As the former epicentre of fascism in a Communist camp that defined itself in anti-fascist terms, the GDR never enjoyed the degree of sovereignty granted by Moscow to its other allies. In time, however, it became an ideologically orthodox pillar of the Soviet security system, held in awe by the other East-Central European states.

Rapid changes in the GDR thus sent tremors throughout its Eastern neighbours. In the summer of 1989, thousands of East Germans on vacation in Hungary passed through the newly opened Hungarian border with Austria to be immediately repatriated to West Germany, which had always considered them its own citizens. Protests from East Berlin that this laxness violated a Hungarian–GDR treaty remained unheeded in Budapest as well as in Moscow. Soon afterwards, a significant number of East Germans crowded into the West German embassy in Prague demanding, and obtaining, repatriation to the GFR. The effect of this mass movement was as demoralising as the regular anti-government demonstrations that were soon to take place throughout East Germany. Then, on 7 November, through a misunderstanding or even an accident by a flustered East



German official, the Berlin Wall was opened in what is considered by many to be the act that ended the Cold War.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Cold War preceded the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 by over a decade, just as the Warsaw Treaty Organization, the Communist bloc's response to NATO, was still in existence when the Wall fell, and the Soviet Union survived for another two years. However, with the fall of the Wall, the process of German reunification got under way and it was to be finalised quickly, putting an end to the basic assumption upon which the Soviet bloc had been founded.

One of the premises of politics and culture in the East-Central Europe region, was that 'Central Europe', meaning Catholic countries with a Habsburg heritage (though often including Protestant and Wilhelminian East Germany), was fundamentally different from the 'Balkans' – countries of predominantly Orthodox religion with an Ottoman past. This thesis had been reinforced during the Communist period as neither of the principal Balkan countries, Romania and Bulgaria, unlike their northern counterparts, had ever initiated a revolt against Soviet power. To be sure, Bulgarian and Romanian policies were quite distinct: the former accepted Soviet hegemony quiescently; the latter pursued virulently nationalist policies with an anti-Soviet edge, though it remained nominally a member of the Soviet camp.

The 'Central Europeans' versus 'Balkan' distinction seemed to be confirmed in 1989 as Bulgaria, Romania (and, within a few months, fiercely independent but Stalinist Albania) followed their northern counterparts in shedding Soviet hegemony but, in contrast to the Central Europeans, retaining Communist power, overtly or in barely disguised form. In the course of November 1989, the Bulgarian Communist Party replaced its long-time leader, the longest serving party chief in the Communist bloc, with its foreign minister who took full charge of the country. The following month witnessed a bloody overthrow, some would say a staged overthrow, in Romania that brought to power a *soi-disant* National Salvation Front led by a sometime Communist formerly at odds with the country's deposed dictator. Significantly, and in sharp contrast to the Central European pattern, the first free elections in Bulgaria and Romania (as in Albania) resulted in the triumph of the revamped and renamed Communist establishments.

A close observer of the region has remarked that the story of 1989 is as much one of unintended consequences as of deliberate actions.<sup>19</sup> He was thinking of the accidental opening of the Berlin Wall and the faked but bungled death of a Czech police informer who was pretending to be a student, but his remark applies more broadly. Just one year before the momentous events of autumn 1989, the same observer had predicted a gradual 'Ottomanisation' of Communist Europe, a slow change measured in decades.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the change took place in a few months and turned out to be more radical than anyone had anticipated.

### **The early 1990s: uncertain prospects for democracy**

With the end of the *annus mirabilis* of 1989, the first phase of the East-Central European transition ended and the second phase, arguably still ongoing, began.

As a leading figure in the Polish opposition, later foreign minister, put it early in 1990: 'the prospects for freedom are secured, but those for democracy remain uncertain'.<sup>21</sup> Transitologists have pointed out that the transition (meaning its first phase) had taken place in Romania and Bulgaria, but also in Czechoslovakia, before any significant domestic change occurred.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, East-Central European events, with the exception of those in Poland, appear to have refuted the suggestion that it is not the lack of legitimacy that threatens dictatorship but the presence of an opposition, inasmuch as the opposition was woefully weak in almost all of the countries in the area.<sup>23</sup> Weak though it may have been, the opposition to the old order had triumphed. With victory over the *ancien régime*, the question of what direction the East-Central states would now take came to the fore.

In contrast to the media and popular enthusiasm stirred by the events of autumn 1989, academic observers took a critical stance.<sup>24</sup> Leading scholars, often those who had previously shown no interest in the area, decreed, as one of their most eminent representatives put it, that 'a peculiar characteristic of this revolution [is] its total lack of ideas that are either innovative or orientated towards the future'.<sup>25</sup> The same illustrious philosopher commented complacently, and with an astonishing assumption of linear historical development, that this was a 'rectifying revolution that had simply put part of Europe back on the path of liberal democracy from which it had accidentally deviated'. A leading German political scientist agreed that this was an 'upheaval without a historical model and revolution without a revolutionary theory'.<sup>26</sup> He cautioned too against 'the suggestive temptation' of analysing East-Central European events with the instruments of transition theory. Lest this view, also expressed by such a notable scholar as Ralf Dahrendorf, be considered a peculiarly German academic obsession with theory, it should be noted that it was shared, in patronising form, by François Furet, the French historian of 1789. Furet also believed the revolutions of 1989 had unearthed no new ideas but he paid them the tribute of stating that they had endowed 'the famous principles of 1789 with a certain freshness and with renewed universality'.<sup>27</sup>

It is certainly true that if one could summarise in a single word the situation in the former Communist bloc at the turn of 1990 it would be in terms of a 'vacuum'. The disappearance of battered regimes, held in contempt by many and, as it turned out, far more brittle than anyone suspected, produced a void, most noticeable in the area of ideas and institutions. This void was rapidly filled by new ideologies that soon held uncontested sway and these ideologies were not invented but borrowed. The events of 1989 only confirmed that Marxism–Leninism, the ideology of 'really existing socialism' (a term which was soon to be used in an ironical way) had long been dead and it was now officially buried. Revisionist Marxism, the belief that socialism could reform itself from within, had finally met its definitive rebuttal in the failure of the 'Prague Spring' of 1968, an event which showed that 'socialism with a human face' could be crushed by Soviet tanks. Thereafter, Marxism–Leninism elicited only opportunistic lip service from some, even as it suffered widespread desertion by intellectuals – a movement long considered a first step towards revolution.<sup>28</sup>



With the abandonment of socialism, there was no longer any need to pretend allegiance to a discredited doctrine. The first successor ideals that came forward were disarmingly vague. They had, in fact, been in circulation, in an undercover way so to speak, even before 1989. The new ideologues in East-Central Europe, often emerging from the ranks of dissidents, demanded that their country, whether it be Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, become a 'normal' country or that it 'rejoin Europe'.<sup>29</sup> A few intellectuals found such slogans, when echoed in the West, patronising,<sup>30</sup> but these individuals were very much a minority. In fact, both demands were self-delusionary inasmuch as 'normal' and 'European' meant attaining political and, above all, material standards attributed to the most prosperous members of the European Community, soon to become the European Union (EU). Historically, East-Central Europe (with the possible exception of Czech Bohemia) had long been a backward European periphery, lagging behind Western Europe in terms of political development and national income.<sup>31</sup> Such demands, 'wish-lists' in fact, readily found hard policy expression in the neo-liberal programmes first adopted in Poland and later endorsed – or at least lip service paid to them – in the rest of the ex-Soviet bloc.

The first non-Communist Polish premier declared that he was looking for his Ludwig Erhard, the architect of West Germany's social market economy. Instead, as one critic puts it acidly, he went to Chicago and Washington, both temples of strict market capitalism.<sup>32</sup> As the former planned economies sought to distance themselves from the Soviet pattern, they found their model, the only available alternative, in the capitalist economies of the West that had just completed the most anti-social decade in their history.<sup>33</sup> True, observers had already noted the earlier turn towards neo-liberalism, in theory for the moment, among Solidarity activists.<sup>34</sup> It should also be said that the socialist model had been totally discredited by the time it was discarded, both reforming and non-reforming economies having suffered the same fate in the Soviet 'co-stagnation sphere'.<sup>35</sup>

It was no use pointing out that the standard of living was still some thirty per cent higher in the East-Central European bloc than in the USSR, and that these economies had enjoyed an implicit Soviet subsidy in the form of energy provision amounting to as much as US\$100 billion, offsetting early Soviet exploitation. More noticeable was the fact that Czechoslovakia's per capita income, close to or higher than Austria's in the interwar period, had dwindled to about half of the latter. All East-Central European countries had experienced rapid economic development in the first decades of socialist rule. Official figures, exaggerated though they certainly are, registered growth rates of as much as twelve per cent and fourteen per cent (for Bulgaria and Romania respectively) at the beginning of the 1950s, though this may be due to their early stage of development in the transition phase and to post-war reconstruction.<sup>36</sup> All the countries had positive, if diminishing, growth rates until the mid-1980s (with the exception of Poland where the economy stopped growing after 1980).

However, the gap with West European economies widened. In 1950, Poland's per capita GDP was some ten per cent higher than that of Spain. By 1973, it was

forty per cent lower and by 1990 Spain's per capita GDP was two and a half times that of Poland.<sup>37</sup> In the face of such failures of centrally-planned economies and the successes of free market capitalism, a radical faith in the salvational properties of a market economy, unhindered by any institutional, social or even economic constraints, took hold of the new decision-makers and, briefly, captured the imagination of broader sections of the population.

Market utopianism thus replaced socialist utopianism as a hegemonic trope, with disastrous immediate results. Most dramatically affected was Poland's economy where, following the introduction of 'shock therapy' in September 1989, industrial output fell by thirty per cent, inflation rose to 630 per cent, and unemployment climbed to close at twenty per cent. It was only in 1992 that the downward spiral in GDP was reversed and inflation was brought down to a mere (!) forty-four per cent – although unemployment continued to hover around fifteen per cent. In other countries where changes were more gradual, the figures were less dramatic. In Hungary, for instance, inflation reached a high of thirty-three per cent in 1991 and unemployment went up to thirteen per cent in 1993. Only in Bulgaria and Romania did inflation exceed 200 per cent (in 1991). As Poland was the first country to undergo deep reforms, it was also the first to recover. GDP started growing again, timidly, in Poland in 1992 whereas Hungary had to wait until 1994. The unemployment rate in Poland never fell much below fourteen per cent.<sup>38</sup>

The social tremors produced by the radical economic changes soon found expression in the political sphere. The belief that 'one could continue to work as under socialism but earn as if one were in America'<sup>39</sup> gave way to profound disillusion. Within a few years, all the East-Central European states had voted out their first post-Communist governments and exchanged them for their ideological opponents. In some countries, such as Poland and Hungary, voters replaced the winners of 1989 (in 1993 and 1994 respectively) with the now re-labelled Communist parties. In the Balkans, the Communists or ex-Communists who had managed to retain power (or, in the case of Romania, seize power) were obliged to give way to their newly organised opponents, though Romania had to wait until 1996 for this to occur.

The first presidents, who had emerged from the ranks of dissidents in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia (as of 1992, the Czech Republic) and Bulgaria, were also victims of the general disillusionment with the outcomes of the revolution that they had prompted. Their defeat was also the end of an idealist strand in politics as potent symbols such as Lech Walesa, the leader of Polish Solidarity, or Vaclav Havel, the charismatic playwright dissident famous in the West, bungled their presidencies and were repudiated by the electorate and outmanoeuvred by their political rivals. To be sure, radically anti-Communist political formations persisted in denouncing anyone who had ties to the previous Soviet regime. All the former peoples' democracies adopted 'lustration' laws, although with varying zeal. These laws often involved 'vetting' of candidates for political office but they were distinct from the vetting applied in Latin America and elsewhere as the main purpose of the lustration laws was to 'name and shame'. The

Czech Republic was the most ardent in applying this policy; Romania and Bulgaria practiced it least. Hungary introduced early but limited lustration and Poland's lustration practices quickly became politicised.<sup>40</sup>

In other respects, anti-Communist and post-Communist parties often pursued the same policies: alignment with the West in all respects, including policies of scaling back the welfare gains of the socialist period. It is perhaps the realisation that both camps, post-Communist and anti-Communist, followed the same line in most regards that explains the quiescence of the East-Central European working class. Workers, whether those who had risen up against Communist power, as in Poland in 1980, or those who had assented to it, passively or actively, fretted over the threats to their jobs but they accepted the harsher conditions of capitalism without resorting to revolt in the hope of avoiding what they feared.<sup>41</sup>

### **'The transition is over'**

More than a quarter of a century after the momentous events of 1989, is the transition still ongoing? Experts appear to be stumped by this question.<sup>42</sup> Vaclav Klaus, Havel's nemesis and successor as Czech president, reportedly declared transition to be over in 1995. Five years was also the timeframe projected by American aid specialists<sup>43</sup> but most observers would agree that US expectations of a speedy transition were excessively optimistic and premature declarations were based on a very limited set of criteria. As the literature stresses, transitions take time,<sup>44</sup> so today the question of transition may still be posed but one must ask whether it is only East-Central Europe that is undergoing a transition towards a fixed point or whether all parts of Europe are interacting and transitioning – towards an unknown destination.

In international terms, the East-Central European countries are presently all firmly enmeshed in a dense network of regional and international organisations. The Council of Europe, a somewhat toothless organisation devoted to human rights, democracy and the rule of law (not to be confused with the EU's European Council), was the first to welcome new members between 1990 (Hungary) and 1993 (Romania). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a successor of the Marshall Plan and now an elite group of advanced market economies, has admitted the four Central European countries and considers Romania and Bulgaria candidates. The real prizes, however, have been NATO and EU membership. Admission to both organisations has taken place in two steps: in 1999 the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO; they, plus Slovakia, joined the EU in 2004. Bulgaria and Romania (and Slovakia) joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. Slovakia's different schedule was dictated by concerns about Slovak authoritarianism until 2002.<sup>45</sup>

It may seem paradoxical that countries which had so recently wrested their freedom from a hegemonic power would hasten to abandon part of their new-found and highly cherished sovereignty. Some have explained this eagerness in terms of a long-standing dependency symptom. One dissident, later Czech ambassador to Washington, suggested that her compatriots 'imagined the United

States to be a kind of rich Soviet Union',<sup>46</sup> within whose fold the East-Central Europeans would rest more comfortably than they had in that of their previous overlord. Others have been more caustic, claiming that inhabitants of ex-Communist countries view the world as a 'milk cow', childishly seeing themselves as eternal victims entitled to the largesse of others.<sup>47</sup> The more prosaic explanations for East-Central European eagerness to join NATO probably lie, first, in the fear provoked by the security vacuum engendered by the disappearance of the Warsaw Treaty Organization in 1991. The security challenges faced at that time involved mostly regional issues, such as tense Hungarian–Romanian relations.

It was the prevalence of these challenges that also prevented the East-Central European countries from cooperating effectively with one other, notwithstanding efforts such as those of the Visegrad group, comprising Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, which has steadily reduced its ambitions and (to a large extent) its rivalries since its creation in 1991. The second reason for hastening to join NATO was the sentiment, confirmed by later events, that NATO membership was an obligatory way station to EU admittance. Some members of the EU are not NATO members but no ex-Communist state has joined the EU without first being admitted to NATO. Finally, the demonisation of NATO in Communist times may have actually rendered NATO more attractive: what a delicious *frisson* one experiences in joining a club that has long been portrayed as forbidding and all-powerful.

Nevertheless, support for NATO membership varied across the area. The Polish president claimed in 1997 that ninety per cent of his people were in favour of membership.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the figure hovered around eighty per cent.<sup>49</sup> Be that as it may, both in Hungary and in the Czech Republic support at the time fell below one-third of the population; support was stronger in Slovakia, Bulgaria and, especially, in Romania, countries that were further from joining NATO. The painful realisation that membership entailed obligations – such as agreement for or participation in the war on Serbia over Kosovo or the war in Afghanistan – cooled enthusiasm. Early in the Kosovo War support for NATO membership in Poland fell to sixty-five per cent.<sup>50</sup> Within a decade of their admittance, however, the new members of NATO were pushing their own security agenda, with the connivance of some powerful older members, notably the US, but against the wishes of others, such as Germany. This more assertive position of some of the Alliance's new members found expression in support for further enlargement eastwards, towards Georgia and Ukraine. In the Ukrainian crisis since the end of 2013, it is Poland which has staked out the most radical position vis-à-vis Russia though it has not been followed by Hungary, the Czech Republic or Slovakia. Regardless of such disagreement and the common front presented by NATO as a whole, one commentator is surely correct in maintaining that 'the countries of the region are all chafing, to one degree or another at the 'adult supervision' provided by these multinational entities [NATO and the EU]'.<sup>51</sup> He might add that these entities or, at least, their older and dominant members, are also chafing at the demands of their new members.

The EU has long been a more popular goal for the ex-Communist countries than NATO. Even here, however, populations have shown apprehension. The number of respondents in favour of EU adhesion generally rose somewhat across these countries from 1993 to 2001; in Slovakia, in particular, it rose from a low of thirty-five per cent to fifty-one per cent. Elsewhere, numbers hovered just below or just above fifty per cent. However, as enlargement approached the number of those opposed grew, reaching twenty per cent in the Czech Republic in 2001 whereas it had stood at only three per cent in 1993, while virtually the same number (forty-five per cent in 1993 and forty-six per cent in 2001) supported accession.<sup>52</sup> The fear of foreigners obtaining property rights, specifically, the fear of Germans returning to claim 'their' property, was particularly salient in Poland and the Czech Republic; it was partially alleviated by transitional measures conceded by the EU. Perhaps the decline of Euro-enthusiasm in the East was due in part to the 'grudging, timid and hypocritical' attitudes of Western Europe that had delayed admission for over a decade.<sup>53</sup> In large part, however, this decline was due to the rise of a powerful new ideology that filled the void left by the discrediting of earlier ideologies, hopes and illusions.

The new ideology that came to the fore was nationalism, understood as a belief in the superior rights of one's own country and ethnic group. Never completely submerged in Communist times, nationalism had been resuscitated selectively as the Communist regimes lost their appeal. After 1989, as a Czech sociologist has argued under the evocative heading of 'The Solidarity of the Culpable', identification with a nationality both bound people together on a non-class basis and excused people for their inevitable complicity with the Communist regimes.<sup>54</sup> As long as the ex-Communist states remained candidates for admission to the EU they respected its anti-nationalist ethos and adhered to European norms of minority protection – part of the Copenhagen Criteria for admission. Accordingly, they signed up to such Council of Europe instruments as the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Since EU admission, however, under the impact of frustrated hopes and the ongoing economic crisis, the new member states have seen the rise of ultra-nationalist, populist parties, such as Jobbik in Hungary and Atak in Bulgaria, that have garnered, respectively, sixteen per cent and seven percent of the vote in recent elections.<sup>55</sup> In Poland, the newly-elected government party, Law and Justice, is very much nationalist, having absorbed smaller nationalist formations through coalition politics and popular appeal. In Hungary, the presence of a nationalist governing party, Fidesz, has not precluded the success of an even more nationalist party (Jobbik). Instead, one may argue that Jobbik has pushed Fidesz even further to the right. Whereas their ideological forefathers would have been anti-Semitic, in Hungary and the Czech Republic in particular, right-wing populist parties aim their exclusionary tactics primarily at the Roma minority. As the only significantly numerous ethnic minority throughout the area and one that also represents a social and economic underclass, the Roma Question is one of the most intractable problems to trouble the new members of the EU and, indeed, spill over into the rest of the Union because of widespread Roma migration.<sup>56</sup>

These developments in the new EU member states – a rise in nationalism, not to say xenophobia, vis-à-vis vulnerable minorities such as Roma as well as the electoral success of populist parties – parallel developments in the old EU. It is difficult to say whether the new EU states have significantly influenced the older members but there is a growing convergence across Europe whereby trends in the East reinforce those in the West regarding the nature of the Union. Whereas the first post-war generation that constructed the European Common Market in the West saw it as a means to prevent war and idealists envisioned the EU as a vast and emerging democratic community, today's EU is based on mutual interest.

The post-Communist states entered the EU not to surrender their sovereignty but to fortify it. It is this understanding that explains why Hungary, Poland and Romania occupy the first three positions regarding the proposition, 'the EU should become a federation of nation-states'.<sup>57</sup> Whatever the intentions of the survey designers and the understanding of other respondents to a 2014 European Commission survey on 'Public Opinion in the European Union', these countries put the emphasis on the perpetuation of 'nation-states'. All the post-Communist states, which are poorer than the average EU member state, have profited immensely from the Union's structural and cohesion funds which transfer vast amounts from its wealthier to its poorer parts. This explains why most East-Central Europeans are more likely than the average EU member to agree that the EU makes quality of life better in Europe; only in Slovakia and Hungary, the least inclined to agree, does forty-five per cent agreement just meet the EU average.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the EU, economic issues are the most pressing concerns of Europeans.<sup>59</sup> Inasmuch as the economy occupies a central place in transition<sup>60</sup> this is particularly true for East-Central Europeans who learned soon after 1989 that 'the value of freedom could not be turned into cash'<sup>61</sup> and that the affluence they were dreaming of remained elusive. In the intervening twenty-five years or so, East-Central Europe has become thoroughly integrated into the world economy though observers may well ask whether the region is developing into a 'new prosperity zone or a new periphery'.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, it is the area with the fastest growing wages in the world, outpacing even Asia; on the other hand, the steep rise reflects the low level of wages under Communism rather than increases in labour productivity which, in any case, have not kept pace with wage rises. Even today, wage levels in the Czech Republic and Poland are only one-third of those in Germany and Bulgarian wages are less than half of those in Poland, though they are higher than wage levels in Asia.

Western firms have taken advantage of low wages and a friendly business environment – what one critic has called a 'race to the bottom'<sup>63</sup> – to shift manufacturing to East-Central Europe, conveniently close to Western markets. To take a prime example, the automobile industry has moved into the region on a large scale. Western firms bought out local car producers, Volkswagen purchasing Skoda in the Czech Republic and Renault buying Dacia in Romania. Fiat built on its Communist-era investment in Poland to produce 600,000 cars annually and Suzuki made the automobile industry the pillar of the Hungarian



manufacturing sector. Such developments created much needed jobs and helped the countries' commercial balances. They did little, however, to promote research and innovation and they proved alarmingly fragile. With the start of the economic crisis in 2008, the automobile market in the West shrivelled and foreign investment shrank. As in the 1930s, the countries of East-Central Europe, once again a capitalist periphery, bore the brunt of recession in the developed West. The pessimistic verdict that the story of Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century was one of trying to catch up by following several models and failing in each<sup>64</sup> appeared to have been projected into the twenty-first century.

Initially, it was Hungary that was the poster child of the transition. For many years, Hungary attracted the lion's share of all direct foreign investment in Central and Eastern Europe – as much as the Russian Federation although its population was barely 7 per cent of Russia's.<sup>65</sup> The Hungarian success story came to an end, however, in 2009, when investment flowed out of the country at an alarming rate; since then Hungary has been trying to scale down its outlays and repay the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan that it was forced to take out. The present economic miracle is Poland which boasts of being 'Europe's most dynamic economy'.<sup>66</sup> In 2009, when the EU economy as a whole contracted by 4.5 per cent, the Polish economy grew by 1.6 per cent, not much in absolute terms but the only country in Europe to register positive growth. However, when examined more closely, the 'Polish miracle' too is fragile.<sup>67</sup> Though Poland is a fairly homogeneous country, the distribution of per capita GDP between the poorest and the richest regions of the country stands at a ratio of one to six. The unemployment rate, though down from its record of almost twenty-one per cent in 2003, was in the range of just above eleven per cent to nearly fourteen per cent during 2014. These figures were above the average EU unemployment rate (10.1 per cent in 2014). In comparison to West European countries (though in line with Bulgaria and Romania), Poland's emigration figures are extraordinarily high and continue to rise. Some 2.2 million Poles now live abroad, mostly beneficiaries of open borders with other EU member states.<sup>68</sup>

Although the 'Polish miracle' thus does have strong limitations, it has given Poland substantial influence within the EU. Further evidence of the reciprocal transformation that is ongoing within the EU as the new members acquire a stronger voice in Brussels is the appointment of the former Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, as President of the European Council. Tusk, who spoke neither French nor English and only some German, gave his first press conference in Polish.

Political changes are, necessarily, concomitant with economic changes.<sup>69</sup> As Poland's star rose economically and politically, that of Hungary fell. The present Hungarian government is decried abroad for its 'authoritarian descent',<sup>70</sup> an assessment that overrides acknowledgement of its 'virtuous' adoption of austerity measures. Within the country, the government's campaign against foreign ownership of the economy enjoys significant popularity. What may be the most pressing issue today in East-Central Europe corruption is seen as both a political and an economic problem in Hungary. In its first ever report on corruption,

issued in 2014, the EU pointed the finger at Bulgaria and Romania, 77th and 69th respectively on Transparency International's index of corruption perception by country (the EU also criticised Croatia, the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Greece). Indeed, corruption has become the way 'the post-communist public talks about politics and the economy, past and future'.<sup>71</sup> Denouncing corruption has become a discourse on the rise of inequality and a way of criticising the government without needing to submit alternatives to its policies; it has been suggested that the level of corruption is the most important determinant of attitudes to undemocratic alternatives. Intriguingly, a study has shown that although nine of the thirteen most corrupt countries in the EU are from among its new members, ten of the twelve EU states where corruption declined between 2004 and 2009 are also new members, whereas corruption increased in twelve old member states.<sup>72</sup>

Even as the costs of transition continued to weigh on post-Communist society, East-Central Europe appeared to have settled into a low-grade democratic routine. In the first free elections, at the start of the 1990s, forty-five parties competed in Hungary, sixty-seven in Poland and seventy-four in Romania.<sup>73</sup> Since then, electoral politics have crystallised around two, rarely more, large blocs, often of post-Communist or anti-Communist inspiration, as well as some minor parties, ethnically defined in the case of Romania and Bulgaria; these parties are sometimes able to acquire importance as 'balancers' between the blocs. A specificity of the region is that the question of completing the 'unfinished revolution' of 1989, that is, of dealing punitively with the Communist past, has again come to the fore.<sup>74</sup> This trend has recently been confirmed in Poland with the staggering victory in October 2015 of the populist party, Law and Justice, which repudiates '1989' entirely. It claims that the events of that year were a 'fraud', that Communists (if not Communism in its recognisable form) continued to hold power and that the Third Polish Republic would only now be able to emerge from the ashes of the 'Smolensk coup', the crash, attributed to Russian perfidy, of a Polish airplane in 2010 which caused the death of the sitting president and much of the country's elite.<sup>75</sup>

Such trends may spell the beginning of a post-transition period which confirms that movement towards liberal democracy is not foreordained. Until now, however, party formations have regularly alternated in government, perhaps disturbingly so as alternation suggests that governments fail to live up to their promises or to popular expectations. The idea of public service is held in low esteem and trust in government is low, as it is throughout the EU. Curiously, East-Central Europeans are more satisfied than the EU average with the workings of democracy in the EU, often considered a notoriously undemocratic institution, and they are more satisfied with democracy in the EU than in their own countries. This does not induce them to vote more readily in EU elections as participation of new members falls well below the EU average. Participation in national parliamentary elections stands much higher, hovering around fifty per cent, which is comparable to France though lower than that of the United Kingdom or Germany.<sup>76</sup>

The refugee crisis of 2015–2016 may prove to be a critical point in the transition process as this was the moment when post-Communist states first openly defied the EU. When asked to take a share of the incoming refugees, according to a quota system elaborated in Brussels, the four new EU members in East-Central Europe declined.<sup>77</sup> Romania and Bulgaria were not involved as they are not part of the Schengen system and therefore cannot act as passageways towards the heart of Europe; in any case, the refugees have not shown any interest in going there. Poland wavered for a brief moment, breaking ranks with its Visegrad allies in agreeing to take in a modest 9,000 refugees. The Prime Minister at the time returned home with the alluring announcement that Poland would receive up to €10,000 for each refugee.<sup>78</sup> With the change of government Poland withdrew its offer, vaguely referring to the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015 but, in fact, confirming an anti-refugee stance that it had taken during the parliamentary election campaign in October, with the leader of the victorious party suggesting that the refugees carried diseases.<sup>79</sup> Presumably, the disease was not Islam though the Poles and other East-Central Europeans treated Islam as if it were such.

The attitude of the East-Central European countries has brought to the fore several characteristics which had been dormant as they sought to adapt to Western expectations of a smooth transition towards liberal democratic norms.<sup>80</sup> First, these countries have confirmed their tenacious attachment to national sovereignty. This may not be so surprising in new states, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which are enjoying sovereignty for the first time or, indeed, in the states of the area which had chafed under the ‘limited sovereignty’ of the Soviet period. It has now become even more apparent that these new members of the EU joined the Union not to give up their sovereignty but to re-enforce it. Quotas imposed by Brussels were seen as a clear infringement of their hard won and very precious national sovereignty.

Second, the East-Central European countries do not share the bad conscience of the West and therefore they do not see themselves as owing a debt to humanity. Whereas in the West, many experience guilt over the colonial experience, exploitation of the Global South and the Holocaust (particularly among political and intellectual elites and especially in Germany which has been most receptive to refugees), East-Central Europeans see themselves, not others, as victims. The prevalent attitude in East-Central Europe is that people there have been victims of Communism as well as of neglect and abandonment by the West. Since 1989, the West has proven to be overbearing in its demands upon ex-Communist candidate countries and reluctant to admit them to the European ‘club’ to which these countries believe they naturally belong, delaying their admission for some fifteen years.

Finally, the East-Central Europeans have little experience of the ‘Other’ and do not consider diversity a value, as it has become among the older members of the EU. The East-Central Europeans are rather proud of their homogeneity, even exaggerating its degree by overlooking the presence of Roma and other minorities. The historical periods when these countries were indeed very diverse, the

age of empires and the pre-World War II period, are not seen as positive references. Today, those who do not belong to the majority population are viewed with suspicion. Whereas West European countries are marked by very significant immigration from former colonial areas and elsewhere that has taken place since World War II, immigration to East-Central Europe, particularly from outside Europe, has been insignificant. During the Communist period this area was impenetrable to immigrants and, since then, has proved unattractive. The result is that whereas in Amsterdam or London seeing a veiled woman or hearing an African speak the local language is an everyday occurrence, this is not the case in East-Central Europe.

## Conclusions

In many ways, East-Central Europe has been undergoing a successful, though fragile, transition to a liberal democratic order which is only now being called into question. After a breathtaking start in 1989, transition proceeded slowly, overcoming obstacles but encountering new ones. Hopes of catching up economically with Western Europe faded, even as the number of ‘losers’ in the transition process among the population declined without disappearing altogether. The pitfalls of integration into the world economy came into sharp focus with the recession of 2008 and the long-awaited goal of joining the EU coincided with widespread disenchantment with the Union within its ranks leading to outright rejection of EU norms in 2015. The danger of authoritarian backtracking has grown, as evidenced by the present course in Hungary and Poland and by the broadening appeal of populist discourse. In his first address as Czechoslovakia’s president, Vaclav Havel lamented the country’s ‘polluted moral environment.’<sup>81</sup> He may have been referring to traits such as cynicism, mutual suspicion or distrust of the public sphere which persist in East-Central Europe; the transition will not be complete until they have been overcome.

## Notes

- 1 Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, p. 3.
- 2 Savranskaya, *Masterpieces of History*.
- 3 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*.
- 4 See [Chapter 2](#).
- 5 Hobsbawm, ‘Eric Hobsbawm remembers Tony Judt’, p. 14.
- 6 Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, p. 255.
- 7 See [Chapter 2](#).
- 8 Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*.
- 9 Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, p. 79.
- 10 In Poland, the bloc parties were the United People’s Party (or Peasant Party) and the Democratic Party, a repository for the intelligentsia. In the GDR, there was the Christian Democratic Union, the Liberal Democratic Party, the National Democratic Party and the Democratic Farmers’ Party. The last Prime Minister of the GDR, Lothar de Mazière, came from the East German Christian Democratic Union, both facilitating and symbolising the transition in that country. In Czechoslovakia, the bloc parties

were the Czechoslovak People's Party, the Slovak Freedom Party and the Party of Slovak Revival. Most of these parties continued after 1989, sometimes under different names.

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- 12 Munck and Skalník Leff, 'Modes of Transition and Democratization'.
- 13 Gati, *The Bloc That Failed*.
- 14 Hankiss, 'Reforms and the Conversion of Power'.
- 15 Kowalik, *From Solidarity to Sellout*.
- 16 Liebich, 'East Europe Today'.
- 17 Brown, *Surge to Freedom*.
- 18 Sarotte, *The Collapse*.
- 19 Ash, '1989!'.
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- 21 Jedlicki, 'The Revolution of 1989'.
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- 29 Reszler, *Rejoindre l'Europe*.
- 30 Heller, 'Twenty Years After 1989'.
- 31 Janos, 'Continuity and Change in Eastern Europe'.
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- 33 Anderson, *The New Old World*.
- 34 Kowalik, *From Solidarity to Sellout*.
- 35 Gati, *The Bloc That Failed*.
- 36 Lavigne, *The Economies of Transition*.
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- 40 Horne, 'The Impact of Lustration on Democratization in Postcommunist Countries'.
- 41 Kowalik, *From Solidarity to Sellout*.
- 42 Lavigne, *The Economies of Transition*.
- 43 Wedel, *Collision and Collusion*.
- 44 See [Chapter 2](#).
- 45 Krause, 'Slovakia's Second Transition'.
- 46 Cited in Wedel, *Collision and Collusion*, p. 23.
- 47 Slavenka Drakulic, 'Die Welt als Milchkuh', *Der Standard* [supplement] November 2007.
- 48 Kwasniewski, 'Poland in NATO'.
- 49 Bebler, *The Challenge of NATO Enlargement*, p. 103.
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- 59 Ibid.
- 60 See [Chapter 2](#).
- 61 Heller, 'Twenty Years After 1989', p. 56.
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