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Issues of the Post-Communist Transition

Stephen R. Bowers and Marion T. Doss Jr.

Modern Europe has witnessed much change through the Age of Democratic Revolutions (1776-1848) and the Age of Imperialism (1871-1914). Europe was reconstructed in 1814-1815 following the Napoleonic Wars and largely reorganized with the emergence of unified Italian and German states by 1871. World War I, The Great War, resulted in again redrawing the map of Europe to accommodate the breakup of the great multi-national empires (Ottoman, Austrian, German and Russian) and introduce a period of peace, prosperity, democracy and collective security.

The end of World War II, thought by some to be merely a continuation of the first after a brief respite to catch a new wind, brought about the second great political transformation of the twentieth century. Governmental regimes, state structures, and national boundaries were re-shaped by the post-war cataclysms that swept through Europe and much of the rest of the world. The latest transition was set in motion by events culminating in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the sudden and dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union and its East European allies was the third great 20th century transition in European and World history. While equally significant in terms of its impact on the overall global order, this series of transitions has been characterized by a much greater degree of ambivalence and uncertainty.

For example, in addition to acquiring such visible manifestations of capitalism and democracy as McDonalds and a nominally free press, by 2001, various Western news agencies and television journalists have called attention to what seems to be emerging as one of the many egregious horrors of post-communist society, the exploitation of thousands of East European women who, while searching for legitimate jobs in the West, have found themselves locked in sexual slavery at the hands of criminal organizations exploiting the East European environment during the first decade after the collapse of the region's communist systems. These stories of rapes, beatings and murders are significant not only in and of themselves but also for the disappointment they signal about the difficult transitions of the many nations that freed themselves from communist oppression during the tumultuous period of 1989 to 1991. The most basic lesson, of course, is that the end of an era of dictatorship and economic adversity did not automatically lead to the installation of stable regimes characterized by democratic procedures and widespread economic opportunity.

One of the more remarkable facts about the events of 1989 through 1991 is that the collapse of the communist systems came with an ease unexpected by Western observers. In particular, these revolutionary years found both academics and government officials in the West totally unprepared for the sudden and relatively non-violent overthrow of communist regimes from East Germany to Albania and the complete collapse of the Soviet Union's system of party control. Even state systems themselves, such as those of the USSR, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Yugoslavia, could not withstand this dramatic revolutionary process and found themselves either fractured into new states or, as with the case of East Germany, merging with a neighboring country. For decades, numerous Western security and intelligence agencies developed contingency plans for causing this result. Yet, the circumstances that would have called for

implementation of those operation plans did not take place while the result, seemingly without Western intervention, transpired with unexpected suddenness and high drama.

At the end of the first decade of transition and struggle, it seems appropriate to ascertain what has been achieved thus far and to explore the probable course of future efforts to integrate these former communist nations into the European and global mainstreams. However, the former communist states are so numerous and so diverse that space does not permit an exhaustive, encyclopedic examination of each. Rather this book attempts to focus on selected issues – primarily those relating to state structure, culture or religion, and criminal justice concerns – in the context of specific nations. As such, it is based on a series of studies prepared by scholars affiliated with the William R. Nelson Institute (WRNI) for Public Affairs located at James Madison University in Virginia. The studies variously were written between May, 2000 and May, 2001, utilizing the services of the WRNI offices located in Moldova (Chisinau), Romania (Bucharest), and Russia (Moscow). One common dominator among all of these works is that they reflect local, East European, perspectives, in most cases involving East European scholars among the authors. In others, the American authors relied heavily on interviews with East European scholars or knowledgeable community representatives.

The first section of this book examines structural issues in the post-communist transition process. A fundamental concern explored in these studies is the nature of the state system itself. They explore the question of just how far down the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural scale does one go in determining what may be a viable or legitimate nation-state. In the first study, Barbara Paoletti identifies the classic prerequisites for maintenance of a democratic state and, utilizing the experience gained from her work as assistant to the Honorable Cezlav Ciobanu, Moldovan Ambassador to the United States, evaluates Moldova's development within the context of those prerequisites. In "The Moldovan Confederation Conundrum", Stephen R. Bowers, Valeria Ciobanu, and Marion T. Doss, Jr. provide an account and analysis of the development of political demands by two minority regions of the Moldovan Republic. In this chapter, the authors outline the challenges that post-Soviet Moldova has faced as two small areas of this small nation have attempted to establish separate state identities. Fundamental to this topic is an awareness not only of the difficulty of creating a sense of national identity but also a recognition of the fact that the nation-state concept can only go so far down in terms of cultural specificity as well as size. The goals of Gagauzia and Transnistria, or the Dniester Moldovan Republic (DMR), reflect both political and ethnic concerns and represent a challenge to the Moldovan state system. Oazu Nantoi, Program Coordinator of the Moldovan Institute for Public Policy and a former official in the Moldovan government, is joined by WRNI staff members Marion T. Doss, Jr., and Thomas Houlahan, in evaluating the DMR's prospects for enduring in the uncertain environment of post-Soviet Eastern Europe in "The Stability of the Dniester Moldovan Republic". Valeria Ciobanu and Stephen R. Bowers join their colleagues in offering a post-electoral analysis for the study in order to assess the DMR's prospects after the election of a pro-Russian communist as Moldova's president. The final chapter in section one is "Montenegro: Vassal or Sovereign", written by Octavian Sofranski, who is the Chairman of the European Center in Moldova, and WRNI staff members Stephen Bowers, Marion T. Doss, Jr., and Stephanie E. Cameron. The authors provide insight into the question of Montenegro's push for sovereignty as a long-term historical objective and as a function of both the Milosevic and post-Milosevic eras in Serbia.

Another important issue of the post-communist transition is the enduring character of religion in spite of the determined efforts of Soviet authorities to eradicate all religious elements in communist society. One of the more important factors in resisting the communists' anti-religious efforts in the former USSR was the very nature of Sufism. Today, throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia, Sufism represents an important social and even political force, against both religious and anti-religious extremism. In fact, the Soviet anti-religious campaigns seem to have had almost no lasting impact and, throughout these regions, one of the greatest challenges to authorities is to prevent the intrusion of adherents of a more radical Islamic movement that now threatens to undermine the secular nature of post-Soviet society. The strength of radical Islam now provides Russia and the United States with common concerns about the increasingly violent activities of individuals such as Osama Bin Laden throughout the world.

Section two deals with religion as an issue in the post-communist transition. The first chapter in this section, "Religious Brotherhoods in Chechnya", was written by Professor Yavus Z. Akhmadov, formerly a member of the Chechen State University Faculty and currently an official of the Chechen government, Stephen R. Bowers, and Marion T. Doss, Jr. This paper demonstrates the divisions within the Islamic community in the Caucasus region. Most significant in Chechnya is a division between the Vakhab and Kunta Hadji movements that is driven by deep theological and philosophical differences. There are political implications in this clash and members of the Kunta Hadji movement are more likely than their Vakhabite brethren to support the Russians. In "Islam in the North Caucasus", Professor Akhmadov and WRNI staff members Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss, Jr., and Yulij Kurnosov, continue their examination of the significance of the religious issue. In the North Caucasus, they conclude, suppression of the Vakhabite community has resulted in the emergence of a clandestine Vakhabite network, which increasingly benefits from foreign support. Consequently, Islamic radicals in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East have opened their military training camps to Muslims in the North Caucasus. In this environment, the religious issue has become one of the most explosive for the former USSR during this transitional period.

The difficulty of developing and maintaining legitimate state power is another issue plaguing post-communist society. All political scientists emphasize the necessity of creating legitimate state authority, but the experience of post-communist East Europe demonstrates that state authority is systematically undermined by illegitimate organizations such as the criminal underworld and corrupt government officials. The weakness of the state relative to the growing power and influence of the criminal underworld constitutes a major threat to both the economic and political life of post-communist society.

Recognizing this important fact, criminal justice issues are the focus of section three. Filip Razvan Ghitescu and Mihai Banciu, in "Crime in Romania", examine the role of crime as an inhibiting factor in the development of the post-communist system in Romania. Criminal activities, they conclude, have created a situation in which the market economy is being systematically undermined. Even in the communist era, there was a criminal underworld that developed strategies for evading the requirements of the legal system. The creation of false identities, as Viorica Vladica explains in "Fraud and Corruption in Moldova", has been one of the main tactics for subverting the legal system, undermining legitimate state authority and violating human rights. In her paper, Vladica

examines this problem in post-Soviet Moldova and shows how false documents are essential to the functions of criminal organizations. The "phantom companies" so necessary for manipulating resources and misleading both the general and the official publics could not be created without the utilization of false documentation.

One of the main objectives of this series of studies is to provide East European perspectives on issues that are of great interest among Western scholars. Section four offers two illustrations of local perspectives which have not been altered by placement within a Western academic framework. Both are based entirely on unedited analyses of those disputes written by people who are partisans with regard to the issues that are examined. The first of these is Albert Avdeuev's "A Vahkabite View". Avdeuev, a member of the Chechen diaspora in Moldova, presents the Vahkabite perspective on the role of religion in the Chechen dispute and argues that advocates of the Kunta Hadj movement have ignored historical realities. The second partisan view is given by an Armenian writer, Irene Mkrtchyan, in "The Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast". While Ms. Mkrtchyan considers the NKAO crisis within several contexts, she consistently argues for acceptance of an Armenian position which is, she believes, supported by historical concerns and the requirements of the post-communist transition process.

In an effort to bring together all of these issues, section five consists of a case study, "Northern Ossetia", written by Alexander Dzadziev and Scott Smith. In this chapter, the authors examine the conflicts between the Ossetians and Georgian authorities and identify criminal justice concerns and a threat to the state system as the most prominent threats to a successful transition for Northern Ossetia. Their main suggestion for dealing with these combined problems is a call for the exercise of stronger central authority by Russia.

While it is not a purpose of this book to analyze the causes of the revolutions of 1989-91, it must be noted that the participants in these events were motivated by the expectation these dramatic events would bring them both freedom and prosperity. Ten years later, many observers, in both the East and the West, forget that the East European economies of this period were in complete disarray. Though prices were stable, goods were scarce and the quality of those goods was abysmal. Moreover, relations between groups within the USSR and relations between the Soviet allies in East Europe were far from harmonious. Ethnic strife and political unrest were driven by the unfulfilled promises of the communist system. The communist "social contract," under which citizens had surrendered personal freedoms in exchange for economic security, had become non-functional long before the communist party systems ultimately collapsed. There was never a time when elites, or even non-elites, were able to ask themselves whether they should opt for maintenance of the status quo or leap into some unknown future. The Gorbachev era was based on the assumption, not of rejecting the communist system, but of improving and reforming that system. Reform communists such as Egon Krenz and Hans Modrow, Gorbachev protégés who replaced the Stalinists such as Gustav Husak and Erich Honecker, shared Gorbachev's vision of a reformed, efficient, and even popular communism. They did not call for an up or down vote on communism; the communist system simply collapsed under the weight of unfulfilled promises.

The numerous East European popular fronts, the political vehicles that led to the systematic rejection of communist rule, were united only by their rejection of the status quo. The fronts included communist party members, reformers, democrats, and even sincere nationalists. Unsurprisingly, they embraced no coherent opposition plan for a new

order. In fact, the only element of consensus among this ragtag group was its discontent over the combination of economic adversity and political repression that had plagued both the USSR and its East European allies throughout their existences.

Every revolution brings its promises and the anti-communist revolutions of the late 20th century were no exception. And, like the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 before it, this new revolution has been plagued by much disappointment and disillusionment. A brief examination of the events during this decade of transition reveals a record of disappointment that is, in some ways, very comparable to the disappointing decades of communist rule in this region. Today there are indications that the unfulfilled promise of this revolution may actually spark a reactionary process that will lead much of the post-communist world back to regain what it vaguely remembers as "the good old days" abandoned in 1989-91. The promise of this revolution, from the very start, was threatened by the fact that it was, implemented in many cases by communists who had become, not more democratic, but simply opportunistic. Communist bureaucrats who controlled the collective means of production simply converted them into personal assets for their own benefit. The relaxation of state control made it possible for criminal organizations to bloom and come into their own competing for the new wealth in a privatized economy. Many officials in the new regimes were completely corrupted and worked in conjunction with organized crime to prey upon their fellow citizens.

A brief examination of the leadership of this transition illustrates some of the difficulties faced by the new regimes. For example, few individuals have had a more pronounced impact on Balkan politics during this past decade than Slobodan Milosevic. Once a dogmatic communist who resisted reforms, Milosevic quickly embraced Serbian nationalism as his political leitmotiv and agenda in 1987. Ethnic Albanian activism in Serbian's southern district and the pan-Albanian nationalist tendencies of the Kosovar Albanians demonstrated that virulent nationalism, long forbidden in Tito's Yugoslavia, could propel a charismatic figure into great political prominence and power. Milosevic, realizing the power of this weapon, forgot his communist roots and decided that, underneath his communist skin, he was actually a Serbian nationalist. He was joined by Franjo Tudjman, his nationalist counterpart in Croatia, who organized his nation for war with Serbia. The nationalistic field in Yugoslavia, all the way from Slovenia to Kosovo, suddenly became crowded with ex-communists who suddenly discovered their nationalist impulses.¹ In fact, all of communist East Europe experienced this identical phenomenon. In the eastern region of Czechoslovakia, other communists decided to change their political complexions and, led by Vladimir Meciar, a formerly dogmatic communist who became an equally dogmatic nationalist, worked to create an independent Slovakia. *Romania Mare*, an ultra-nationalistic, anti-Semitic group including many former devotees of Nicolae Ceausescu, emerged as a major force in Romania where it clashed with its extremist Hungarian counterparts in Harghita and Covasna counties. The landscape of the former Soviet Union was covered by a vast array of nationalistic groups that covered the spectrum from those who accepted only things Russian to those rejecting everything Russian.

In addition to the structural and cultural matters that command our attention in most of the chapters in this book, we must note that there are additional factors that are not considered in our brief foray into the study of the post-communist transition. Though

¹ Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804-1999* (New York: Viking Publishers, 2000), pp. 630-33.

beyond the scope of this work, many of them have emerged as key issues in the post-communist transitions. What might be dubbed the "Soviet legacy" constitutes one of the more decisive of these. An important element of this untoward legacy is the "Soviet mindset," an authoritarian tendency that views all forms of opposition as evidence of subversive intent. The widely discussed actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin may be seen as one of the more significant manifestations of the "Soviet mindset" in post-Soviet Russia.

This has been demonstrated by a variety of initiatives including Putin's efforts to silence the independent Russian media so the government can control all information reaching the public and the West concerning the conduct of such affairs as the war in Chechnya and other matters of international concern. This was most emphatically demonstrated by the recent detention of his critic, human rights activist Sergei Grigoryants, to prevent him from attending a conference to examine Russia ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union which was being hosted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC. Susan Glassner quotes Grigoryants as saying: "Russia 10 years after hasn't gone anywhere... It took just one year of Putin to go back 10 years. Now we are going farther and farther back."² This comment aptly illuminates the sub-theme of this book, characterizing the seemingly inevitable ideological shift from reform to reaction.

Relationships within a region and the political dynamics of each of its constituent communities are largely affected by the presence of powerful neighbors. For the new states of Eastern Europe, the presence of a still powerful Russia represents a key concern. In fact, both global powers, Russia and the United States, exercise great emotional appeal within this region. While the American appeal and all that it implies may actually be deeper humanistically speaking, it is more remote to immediate concerns. Therefore, after an initial period of uncertainty and heated debates about the future of the "near abroad", Russia has once again emerged as an influential force, one capable of determining the destinies of many of those small nations that were once immured within the Soviet bloc.

The assorted, post-communist world is characterized by uncertainty and indirection. Today, clearly, there is no universal flight from Russia nor a universal move to reestablish political dependence on Russia. In fact, one of the great ironies of the contemporary environment is that the Chechens, who have long sought political independence from Russia, have been unable to achieve it while the Moldovans, now under communist leadership, seem determined to move back into the Russian sphere after having achieved *de jure* independence in 1991.

A survey of this community of small nations indicates that there are those inclined to look back with nostalgia to that time when Moscow was the dominant actor. For them, this was a time of political predictability and economic stability. It was a period when the price of bread was fixed and, while there might not be much meat in the stores, one could be sure that the suffering of those around them was equal to their own misery. Other states, by contrast, have been able to adapt to the new environment and seem to have persevered and survived the difficult early years of the transition process. Belarus and Poland, for example, illustrate these two extremes in the transitional process. Poland has apparently, after years of economic "shock therapy" and the election of a former communist as president, firmly established its independence from Russia as well as its

² Susan Glassner, "Russians Detain Critic Bound for U.S. Meeting," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2001, A26.

separate existence as a Western state. Belarus, by contrast, had done neither, instead embracing Russia and renouncing all moves toward democracy. It is somewhat ironic that Russia, while taking advantage of this initiative, has abandoned its primary architect, Alexander Lukashenko. Romania, the subject of one of our chapters, falls between the two extremes and, while having twice elected a former communist as president, is working to associate its future with the West rather than to Russia. The fragmented Yugoslav state demonstrates several tendencies, ranging from the modernizing, pro-Western Slovenia to the Serbia of Milosevic which sought closer ties with a reluctant Russian during the 1999 war. Russia's appeal, one must note, is tempered not only by the proximity of Russian frontiers to the state in question but also by the varied Western attitudes. The Western attitude toward Serbia during the time that nation was involved in violent disputes with its southern province was in stark contrast to the West's relative indifference to Russian action in Chechnya.

Several other points may be raised in the context of an examination of the Russian role in the transition process. Among the more important is the difficulty for a small nation to sever dependence upon the great power that has shaped its cultural and economic development during both the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras. This factor may well yet prompt some of the new states to return to the Russian political orbit. Acceptance of this option does not necessarily constitute a statement of political preference but rather is based on the realities of the post-Soviet economic environment.

The collapse of the communist party systems led some academics to conclude that a need for the study of this geographic region had diminished. Many university programs were based on a specialization informally referred to as "Sovietology" and, with the disappearance of the Soviets, the Cold War concerns that motivated so much of the study of East European and Soviet politics had likewise disappeared. Skeptics within the university community argued that the strategic demands that made studies of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies so important in the past were gone and that academic interest could no longer sustain such studies as part of the curriculum.

Yet, the post-communist era, in contrast to such expectations, did not produce either a time or a region of quiet routine and intellectual disinterest. In fact, the transition proved to be even more fascinating than the Cold War years. It was demonstrably more violent and, potentially, just as dangerous as that time in which Western and Soviet forces confronted each other in places such as Berlin and Cuba. While the threat of global thermonuclear war was less prominent, smaller wars proliferated and Western forces soon found themselves with combat missions in the Balkans. Elsewhere, regional stability was disrupted as inter-ethnic and political animosities erupted into full-blown military clashes.

As a result, with the disappearance of "Sovietology", a new specialization increasingly referred to as "transitology" emerged. Like all such efforts in their infancies, this specialization is still incomplete. Professor Stephen Blank, in an examination of the Commonwealth of Independent States, observed that "transitologists" have yet to develop the methodologies necessary to promote an understanding of the contemporary trends toward democratization.³ We have prepared this book in an effort to examine the movements toward democratization in the post-communist states. It is our hope that, by enlisting the support of those who are themselves involved in the transition process, and

³ Stephen Blank, "The CIS and Its Power Structures", *Analyst* (Central Asia and Caucasus Institute), January 17, 2001, pp. 103.

blending their efforts with some of the approaches of Western political science, we will produce as study that make a contribution to the study of post-communist society.

PART ONE:

STRUCTURAL ISSUES IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS