

COMMENT

A Sweet and Sour Victory in Eastern Europe

Arpád Szakolczai and Ágnes Horváth

Sudden and unexpected changes have an air of miracles about them. And the events that are happening right now in Eastern Europe certainly belong to this category. The pace and character of the changes are inexplicable, not only for people unfamiliar with the region, but for the most informed part of its inhabitants as well. It was almost an axiom for intellectuals living in the area that the system was unalterable. If only for this reason, even the most violent dictatorships of Latin America looked less menacing than the grey, dull, senile regimes of Eastern Europe. In Hungary, for example, just in this past winter, when the aura of irreversible changes was present everywhere, it was still possible for leading intellectuals to argue seriously that the single most important factor distinguishing right-wing authoritarian regimes and bolshevik-type party states was that, while the former eventually disintegrate and thus open up the possibility of a more democratic system, the latter – as history shows – never change.

Today these same systems are falling with an unbelievable speed and smoothness. It seems thus necessary that we give up some of the certainties held for decades about the 'nature' of the system. The framework of thought in which we lived and thought about the bolshevik-type party states cannot explain, let alone accommodate, what is happening right now. Not that this framework was just a veil of errors, illusion and ideology; it had its roots in a very real life experience: the fears and repressions of the '50s. Only the framework of thought remained unchanged while, somehow, the actual grounds of these assumptions were altered considerably. If we would like to get some grasp of the events, we should turn first to these changes. This requires a serious work of thought, including work upon ourselves, both in the East and in the West: the questioning of our most cherished axioms and truths; the willingness and ability to overthrow dogmas whose sole justification in the past was the conviction that this system will never be altered substantially.

There are a number of easy answers on our way that should not be rejected, but at least we should not be misled by their pretensions of giving a complete explanation. The fact that so many of the changes happening right now seem to be so easy, peaceful, matter-of-fact may give the impression that the system itself was always weak; that it was a paper tiger; that all this could have happened long ago, if only 'we' wanted it to happen earlier. But the present situation shouldn't be projected backward. Things happened, processes unfolded

in time that made the present changes possible. One would be wrong to argue that all is due to the Gorbachev effect. In one sense, the impact is obvious; in another, it just begs the question. Gorbachev is neither an external agent, nor a messenger of God; he is very much the product of the internal working of the system. His education and career is connected to the party. This is important not as a statement questioning his sincerity or integrity, but as an indication that the realisation of the crisis and the subsequent need for reforms have deep roots inside the party as well. It has a tradition on its own; one only has to refer to Khrushchev. And one can't be satisfied with the often-mentioned opposition between the state (or the party-stage) and the (civil) society, or the similar language that attributes the events to the struggle of the 'people'. The former is unsatisfactory because, in the way it is



used in current political arguments, it assumes a rigid, unchanging concept of the society as separate from the holders of the power, when perhaps the most interesting question now and especially concerning the future is: what will be the type of society emerging from the ashes of communist power, and to what extent will it be shaped, either positively or negatively, by that power? And the latter is not satisfactory either, because it begs all explanation by referring to the mythical-dialectical logic of the struggle. Of course, 'people' didn't like to be oppressed or exploited. They never do. And they particularly did not like it in Central Eastern Europe, where they did wage revolts several times. But the claim that the present changes are somehow the cumulative results of past changes is either an empty truism – as, obviously, if there is no popular pressure in some form, then why would changes occur; or a plain mistake – as more than once the intensification of these struggles in the past only led to the hardening of the system. It cannot explain either the timing or the modality of the present events.

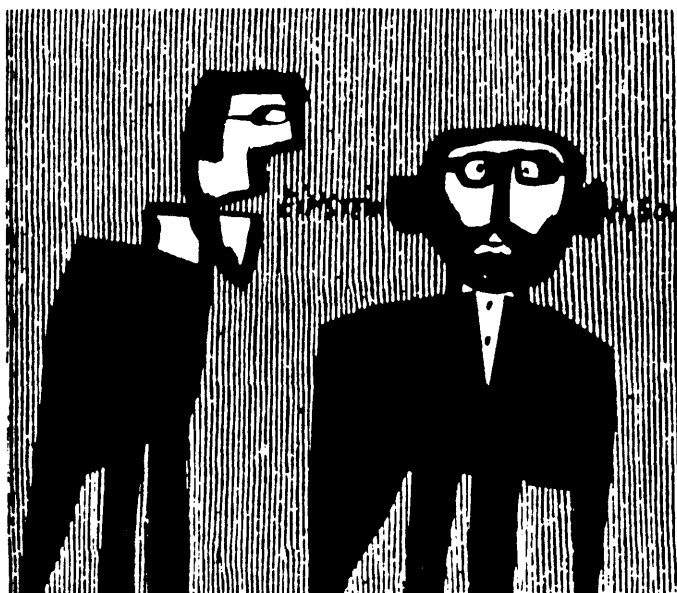
The current changes are basic, almost revolutionary in character; and yet, they are quite uncharacteristic of the way we conceive of social revolutions. These are, almost by definition, violent events. Yet one of the most curious aspects of the current changes in Eastern Europe is that they have been remarkably peaceful, though in the past, the holders of power did not shy away from using violent means even against persons whose 'revolutionary' activity was restricted to the leaving of the country.

It is all the more surprising because, in the past, the gap between the rulers and the ruled in Eastern Europe was enormous. The elite was unapproachable; made decisions completely on its own; often lived a separate and different existence. And now they suddenly descend from the height and mix with the people. The gap once thought to be unbridgeable turns out to be a mere fissure. And, if we refuse to accept the claim that it was always so, there is only one thing to say: somebody must have already bridged it before the final spectacular step could have been made.

Who did it, then? The people, of course, one may say. But something is wrong here. The people, of course, always resisted this power that created and enforced the gap – with due allowance to those who, in different periods, were supporters for one reason or another. But the aim of this type of popular struggle was not the narrowing of this gap, but a better living, or, in political terms, the elimination of the other side, the power elite. The present scenario is simply not compatible with that model. The "people" were undoubtedly a moving force behind the events; but one should explain how and why this was channelled into the present forms and slogans of 'reform'.

If we consider the reformers, we find that most of them are intellectuals, and as the forerunners and shapers of the whole movement, we find party functionaries or intellectuals close to the leading circles of the party. The first reformers were communists – either in Yugoslavia, in Hungary, in the Soviet Union or in Czechoslovakia. Obviously, they were not the first opponents of the communist system, but these others were not talking about 'reform'. And today it is quite obviously the language and reality of reform that is winning out now; even if it turns out to be different from what had been planned by the first reformers.

The central elements of the language of 'reform' are almost unchanged since the early '50s: on the one hand, a more efficient, market-oriented economy; on the other, broader participation in the political decision-making process. It was the first party reformers who were first 'over' with



the creed of Communism. The extra-party opposition was never 'over' with Communism. It was never engaged to it. And, whether we like it or not, we, Eastern or Central-Eastern Europeans were 'engaged' to Communism in the last forty or so years. It is not surprising therefore that the ideas of the first party reformers are stamped all over the present slogans. After all, we'll be living in a 'post-Communist', and not in a 'non-communist' country. The sacred cow of the leading role of the Communist Party will eventually have to be abandoned, and is already disposed of in Poland and in Hungary; but instead of a defeat, shouldn't we consider the question of why it perhaps became superfluous? As this already suggests, we do not intend to provide a definite explanation, but rather to raise some problems that seem to be lost in the present feeling of euphoria. We will mostly refer to the case of Hungary, but argue that it does provide something of a model of 'reformism'.

If we want to understand the character of present changes, the preconditions of the current bridging of gap between rulers and ruled, we have to move beyond the top level of ideology and decision-making. Another fairly important, if unknown, aspect concerns the everyday working of the party, the apparatus. While its exact role and behaviour was and is an enigma, it played a decisive role in bridging the gap, in familiarising the party in society. First, and most obviously, because its pronounced task was to build up all the different links among the members of the society – the individuals, the economic units, the local councils; to put it bluntly, to build up society from scratch. The main purpose of the elimination of existing ties and affiliations and the enforcement of a large gap earlier was to create an opportunity for the build-up of the 'new society'. Even though this project failed, the society nonetheless was changed. Second, the party functionaries had a key role in stopping the Stalinist purges. The hunt for enemies, first directed against the former ruling classes, spread to the population and finally hit the central core of the party apparatus as well. It was at this point that eventually the process was stopped and reversed. In a sense, this provided the first impulse of reformism.

These three things, the party apparatus trying to build up 'new society', the end of the search for enemies and the spread of reformism within and outside the apparatus were combined. This combination provided a reinforcement of the

continuous stream of civil or popular resistance, and was able to accommodate the demands coming from below. This made a silent compromise possible in the past, made life in the system tolerable, and slowly eroded the enormous gap separating the party and the population. On the other hand, at the top level of ideology, politics and the public image of the party, nothing changed. The impact of the '50s did not fade away, and the repressive organs of the state carried the same task of the preservation of the status quo, the maintenance of the gap, as before.

Party and society permeated each other. Party workers no longer fit the old image of being brainwashed, walking with gun in hand and harassing the peasants to join the agricultural cooperatives. They are soft-speaking intellectuals with a degree in economics or law; often in both. And, as the language of reform overtook the discourse about political or economic change, the intellectuals began to dominate the scene in political life as well. From this perspective, it is quite interesting that in Hungary even the leaders and the candidates of the populist party, the Democratic Forum, are intellectuals. According to an article in a popular opposition magazine, one can hardly gain political currency today in Hungary without being an intellectual.

Thus, once the previous rift between rulers and ruled, the party and society has been slowly filled up, it was only a matter of time when this would be effectively realized at the top levels of politics and ideology. Where the rift was not filled up earlier, or where it was doubled over or reopened, the changes are slower to come. In the GDR, the Berlin wall was a visible embodiment and reinforcement of the gap. The changes came slowly, but all the more drastically, as the

separation of the two Germanies was quite obviously artificially and externally maintained. In Czechoslovakia, where the events of the 1968 invasion stopped the intermingling of party and society, reopened the gap and made its subsequent closing impossible, the hard-line leadership still hangs onto the past. And, finally, in Romania, it is the ethnic gap stirred between Rumanians and Hungarians that divided the population itself and helped to justify the Stalinist regime, to maintain the gap, making the scenario of the other countries inconceivable until the very last moment.

Today, there is a lot of talk about the 'demonstration-effect' of the changes in the region. The example of one country serves the others as a model and a stimulant. It is quite true. But without the previous internal 'preparation', this type of change could not have happened. Had this demonstration effect happened in the '60s, the results would have been quite different. But it didn't happen – probably because it couldn't. That is why we have such mixed feelings about the events today. The victory is sweet, as the changes herald the fall of a system which was oppressive and based on a lie. But it is also sour, as it happened at a time when the former adversaries have already thoroughly permeated each other; and it seems as if this interpenetration was the very precondition for the present success.

Árpád Szokolczai is a researcher in the Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest.

Ágnes Horváth works in the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Law, Elte University, Budapest.

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