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The „round table” as a form of consensus-building in Central and Eastern Europe in the period 1989–1990

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**THE „ROUND TABLE” AS A FORM
OF CONSENSUS-BUILDING IN CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE PERIOD 1989–1990**

1. Introductory remarks

Systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe occurred as part of the third wave of democratization, a process developing in the global scale during the last decade of XX century¹. During the third wave of democratization, initiated in Portugal in 1974 and lasting until 1990, authoritarian or totalitarian systems were replaced by democratic systems in about thirty countries: first in the South of Europe, then in Latin America and Asia, and finally in the countries within the Soviet sphere of influence. The third wave of democratization was characterized by negotiations, compromises and consensus². A historian, Timothy Garton Ash, coined a neologism „refolution” (negotiations)³. The term denotes a situation in which e.g. the Polish model elaborated at the „round table” meant the change of a system by means of building an alliance in support of reforms. The „mixture” of reform and revolution contains a strong and fundamental element of „top-bottom changes”

¹ S. P. Huntington, *Trzecia fala demokracji*, transl. by A. Dziurdzik, Warszawa 1995, p. 9 and ff.

² Changes caused by the external invasion and enforcement of a political regime occurred in two states: in Panama and Grenade; revolutionary situation developed in two cases as well: in Portugal and Romania. In the latter country, a short-lived urban uprising took place which was supported by armed forces. Major armed encounters between the military happened also in the Philippines, in Bolivia and Nicaragua.

³ T. G. Ash, *Wiosna obywateli. Rewolucja 1989 widziana w Warszawie, Budapeszcie, Berlinie i Pradze*, transl. by A. Husarska, Londyn 1990, p. 9, 13–14.

implemented by an enlightened minority of the ruling Communist parties. However, as noted by Ash, there existed another element as well: a universal bottom-up pressure. Cycles of protest and repression in the Communist states led to negotiated agreements between the rulers and the opposition.

Negotiations took place in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria and, following the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu, in Romania as well. Agreements related to the establishment of democracy took multiple forms. In the majority of the discussed countries, the negotiations took place at the „round table”⁴. They were carried out between February 1989 and March 1990 initiating the process of systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Participants, the mode of negotiations and patterns of decision-making

Systemic transformation was initiated by political elites. Two waves of striking in 1988 and the Catholic Church played an important role in Poland where negotiations at the „round table” were begun sooner than in any other country of real socialism. The moment the agreement was being concluded in April 1989, a „round table” of the opposition in Hungary was beginning its operation (22 March – 9 June 1989). Although in the other countries of the Communist block there existed organizations opposing the system, at the time the internal turmoil was only beginning there. For instance in April 1989, the opposition criticized electoral law on the occasion of local elections in the German Democratic Republic and following the elections (7 May) accused the authorities of electoral fraud; demonstrations in support of reforms only then started and people began mass escapes to the German Federal Republic. In Bulgaria, the Turkish minority initiated a mass

⁴ The „round table” is a common name for negotiations that were held in Poland from 6 February to 5 April 1989, constituting the first – since the period of Martial law – official attempt at a direct dialogue between representatives of the governing party and the significant part of the opposition. The talks were conducted according to a previously discussed and pre-arranged agenda, time schedule; they focused on many political, economic and social problems of varying rank; they were concluded with signing an agreement.

exodus. In the Soviet Union, the changes were limited to the sphere of „glasnost” (discussion clubs) but no serious reform of the political system was implemented.

In Hungary there were no mass demonstrations or street fights. Negotiations in the other countries were influenced by the events in Poland (elections in June 1989 lost by PZPR [Polish United Workers’ Party], Mazowiecki’s government comprising members of the opposition) and Hungary, the pressure exercised by the Soviet leaders to introduce personal changes in the authorities and implement reforms in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, people’s demonstrations and turmoil within the Communist parties. In the German Democratic Republic, alongside negotiations at a „round table” (8 December 1989 – 29 January 1990) diplomatic action in favour of unification of Germany took place. Representatives of the German Federal Republic demanded that free parliamentary elections should take place and the monopoly of the Communist party should be abolished.

Both party leaders and leaders of the opposition participated in the negotiations at the „round tables”. The Communists decided to negotiate the basic conditions of the systemic change with leaders of the opposition whom earlier they had imprisoned (Lech Wałęsa, Vaclav Havel). The released politicians in general represented political options enough moderate for them to enter negotiations with the perpetrators⁵.

In all of the countries of „real socialism” the membership of the negotiating teams was similar: representatives of the ruling parties and of the opposition. In Hungary the authorities made the opposition include a third party in a way: apart from representatives of the party and government and of the „round table” of the opposition, a variety of pro-Communist social organizations. Hence, the name of the „triangle table” in the literature.

As far as the course of negotiations is concerned, the mode of negotiations was in part similar everywhere: plenary sessions, committees (tables), expert teams (sub-tables). In all of the countries political issues dominated economic issues.

The negotiations were preceded by preliminary negotiations. In general decisions were taken as regards transparency and agenda of the meetings, timetable of the particular issues to be resolved. Characteristically,

⁵ S. P. Huntington, *Trzecia fala demokratyzacji*, p. 163.

the name of the event was as a rule quite inadequate to the real event⁶. „Round tables” were encounters between parties that were not equal in status. Authorities had at their disposal apparatus of enforcement, had – at least during the first phase of transformation – greater opportunities to influence the public opinion, decided about the timing of the negotiations and ways to implement their conclusions. The statement refers to the situation in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

In the Soviet Union, negotiations were not entered into because Michail Gorbatchev did not have an adequate partner on the side of the opposition and the Church.

3. The scope and scale of the proposed changes

During the first event of the type, in Poland, the Communists entered into a debate concerning reforming socialism. Their strategic aim was clear enough: to save the system, to maintain power and integrate the opposition into the system; to gain legitimacy by means of making a deal with the opposition at the „round table” and introducing reforms controlled from above; sharing responsibility. They had pre-planned objectives to reach at the „round table”: reaching a compromise on the issue of president and rapid, joint parliamentary elections, introducing the opposition to Parliament, agreeing on the results of the elections before they were actually held or, conversely, after they were held, establishing government based on a broad coalition with the participation of „Solidarity” to rule for 4 years, amending law on associations. The limit of acceptable concessions was set: 30%, maximally 35% seats in the Sejm, mandates of counsellors and senators for the opposition, legal recognition of „Solidarity”, possibility to carry out political activities within associations, limited access to mass media. The majority of the objectives were achieved⁷. They had not presupposed a

⁶ The „round table” denotes a meeting of people who are interested in a given problem, a debate, which does not follow a predefined agenda, does not imply predefined positions of the participants in the debate, division into better and worse – in terms of hierarchy – positions. Cf. Z. J. Hirsz, *Między II a III Rzeczpospolitą 1944–1989*, Białystok 1993, p. 258.

⁷ *Stanowisko w sprawie reform politycznych*, [in:] *Porozumienia Okrągłego Stołu, Warszawa 6 luty – 5 kwietnia 1989 r.*, NSZZ „Solidarność” Region Warmińsko-Mazurski 1989, p. 5–7. Only three months before, the Communists were in favour of

radical change of the system. The opposition did not approve of socialism, on its part.

The debate revealed that in terms of liberties and citizen rights PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party] was satisfied with the existing „Konstytucja PRL [Constitution of the Polish People's Republic]”. They did not offer to expand the index of individual, citizen and political rights. At the „round table” the Communists blocked an opportunity for new political parties to emerge. They intended to force the already existing oppositional political parties to continue their legal activities in the framework of associations. It seems that during the „round table” they were not ready to give up the leadership of the PZPR in the country. Political and social pluralism was then understood as including the trade union movement, associations and clubs within the political area. Csaba Békés, a political scientist and a historian, participating in a conference in Miedzeszyn (entitled „Poland 1986–1989: the end of the system”, held on 21–23 October 1999) recalled a meeting of Polish and Hungarian Communists in March 1989 during which the latter had the opportunity to learn about the former's views on the issue of pluralism. The talks held then revealed that the leaders of PZPR hoped for a long transition period, while in the envisaged (for 1991) new constitution they supposed the existence of only three political parties: a Communist one, a peasant one and a democratic one. The changes envisaged by PZPR were not deep. In the nearest future they did not assume that political pluralism would be established in Poland, which was understood as a legal struggle for capturing or maintaining the state power by parties differing in terms of their ideologies and programmes⁸.

a „socialist parliamentary democracy”, which they wanted to build in co-operation with civil society – a mission impossible to carry out. Cf. *Stanowisko KC PZPR w sprawie pluralizmu politycznego i pluralizmu związkowego*, „Trybuna Ludu”, 20 I 1989, no 17, p. 3.

⁸ PZPR lacked the will to introduce political pluralism or, at least, co-operation on equal terms within the framework of the existing coalition, which was confirmed by „Propozycje zasad współdziałania rządu i terenowych organów administracji państwowej z partiami koalicji rządzącej w nowym układzie politycznym” of 28 lutego 1989. Rakowski, head of government, firmly critical of the existing model to exercise the political authority, assumed that in the transition period, PZPR – by virtue of its leading role – would maintain, by means of a coalition agreement, the privilege of initiation and coordination in terms of programme and organization. Chairman of Rada Państwa [the State Council], and President in the future, could play the role of a „referee” in case it

PZPR did not agree to initiate – during the „round table” – preparations for new law on assemblies, which was offered by Hungarian Communists either. The opposition was not able to push through changes concerning law on assemblies, which limited implementation of the constitutional right of people to assemble⁹. PZPR blocked also discussions related to rebirth of territorial self-government. It did not agree to lift the most restrictive principles of the criminal code and the code of infringement, which was postulated by the opposition either. On the issue of rights and civic liberties, it only agreed to broaden the scope of law on associations, trade unions and to grant part of the opposition the inclusion in Parliament and access to mass media.

In general, the coalition-government side of the „round table” foresaw the future of Poland in terms of reforming socialism. The changes implemented in the second half of the 1980s, including the ones leading to the „round table” denoted a significant evolution of the political thought. In the nearest future, the right to free elections or life in a democratic system was excluded. Nevertheless, the „round table” provided many so called new openings¹⁰.

Resolutions adopted at the „round tables” in the other Communist countries went much further for the reason that they occurred after the systemic change had been implemented in Poland. In Hungary thus they aimed at defining the manner in which democracy should be established. In Poland the initiative belonged to the coalition-government party, while in Hungary the negotiations (13 June–18 September) were dominated by the pressure from the opposition. They were prolonged because of the manner in which decisions were taken by the opposition (negotiating stances among the different political parties; in Poland decisions were taken by narrow bodies).

A few important issues were settled in Hungary: (1) free parliamentary, local and presidential elections; (2) freedom of association (political pluralism); (3) full recognition and respect for civic rights;

should be necessary, [in:] *Polska 1986–1989: koniec systemu. Materiały międzynarodowej konferencji*, Miedzeszyn, 21–23 października 1999, t. 3: *Dokumenty*, eds A. Dudek, A. Friszke, Warszawa 2002, p. 212–213.

⁹ *Porozumienia Okrągłego Stołu...*, p. 93–94; P. Smoleński, *Szermierze okrągłego stołu. Zwątpienia i nadzieje*, ed. M. Łukasiewicz, Warszawa 1989, p. 103.

¹⁰ See: K. Trembicka, *Okrągły Stół w Polsce. Studium o porozumieniu politycznym*, Lublin 2003, *passim*.

(4) the rule of law in the state; (5) civil control over the army¹¹. During the negotiations a project of the new constitution and other laws were designed which were to orient Hungary towards parliamentary democracy and multi-party system. The agreement concerned also the mode and timing of presidential elections. The Communists wanted president to be elected by the general vote, before parliamentary elections were held. They were banking on electoral success of Imre Pozsgay. The opposition wanted to delay the elections, in turn¹². On 23 October 1989, the agreements were passed as laws by Parliament. The leadership of the Communist party, dictatorship of Proletariat were then deleted out of the body of the constitution, the office of president was instituted, laws on political parties and parliamentary elections passed, the name of the state was changed into the Hungarian Republic¹³.

In Czechoslovakia it was settled that a new president would be elected by the Federal Assembly¹⁴. After Vaclav Havel was elected president on 29 December 1989, many important and far-reaching reforms were introduced in a short time: the real estate in possession of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was retrieved, laws on civic rights and liberties, on political parties passed, the Security Police was dissolved, the office of censorship abolished. It was decided that parliamentary elections would be held in June 1990.

In Bulgaria the opposition was not numerous and weakly organized. In addition, the Communists managed to react as if in advance and initiated changes themselves. Before negotiations were begun the authorities made concessions in favour of nationalists. It was decided that regions where Turks lived would not be granted autonomy. At a „round table” of 16 January–12 March 1990 talks were held concerning national reconciliation, changes in the political system, rule of law, new electoral law, socio-economic issues¹⁵. The agreements resulted in

¹¹ B Góralczyk, *Transformacja postkomunistyczna 1990–2003*, Warszawa 2003, p. 42 and ff.

¹² T. G. Ash, *Wiosna obywateli*, Londyn 1990, p. 39–41; *Poker z prezydentem. Rozmowa z Elemere Hankissem, ekspertem węgierskiej opozycji*, „Życie Warszawy”, 24 XI 1989.

¹³ See: J. Gorzowski, W. Morawski, *Jesień narodów*, Warszawa 1991, p. 55–57.

¹⁴ *Jesień ludów...*, t. 1, oprac. R. Jurczakowski i in., Warszawa 1990, p. 217.

¹⁵ See: J. Gorzowski, W. Morawski, *Jesień narodów*, p. 103.

deleting the premise of the leadership of the Communist Party from the constitution. Nonetheless, representatives of the authorities who were involved in the negotiations, presenting a conservative stance, did not want to introduce any far-reaching changes before a convention of Bulgarian Communist party was held. The final declarations envisaged that the „round table” would approve important laws before they were presented to the Parliament, regulate the relations between political parties and the state and the participation of the party in the electoral campaign, including its access to mass media. Modelled on Poland and Hungary, political resolutions included establishing the office of president. The Union of Democratic Forces demanded that before the final agreement was signed the Communists should be deprived of power over the Ministry of National Defence and Ministry of Home Affairs, private citizens should be deprived of guns, military and police functionaries should not carry guns except when on duty, law should be observed and authors of appeals and manifestos spreading hate should be prosecuted in courts¹⁶.

Generally, in all of the countries where negotiations were carried out by means of „round” or „triangle” tables, agreements included several issues: establishing the office of president, building a system of parliamentary democracy, new parliamentary elections with participation of the opposition, introducing political pluralism. With the exception of Poland, generally, decisions concerning free and democratic parliamentary elections and changes in the constitution were carried out in the following manner: deleting the premise stating the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist party, dictatorship of Proletariat and introducing political pluralism. In Poland such changes were introduced only after parliamentary elections were lost by PZPR in June 1989.

The situation in Romania developed differently. The opposition formed late there. Only in 1987, a conspiratory, independent trade union was established. The leadership of the Communist Party with Ceausescu did not approve of the changes occurring in the other countries of the block, it tried to organize an intervention of the Warsaw Pact against Poland¹⁷.

The convention of the Romanian Communist Party on 20–24 of November 1989 ended with Ceausescu having the upper hand.

¹⁶ „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 6 VI 1990.

¹⁷ „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 29 IX–1 X 1989.

Meanwhile in all of the other countries, the Communist regime had collapsed, which influenced the attitudes of the Romanian society. Street manifestations in Timisoara on 16 and 17 December 1989, triggered the Romanian revolution. They spread to the country's capital, Bucharest (21 December). The authorities reacted by the use of guns. Striking and demonstrations were treated as a Hungarian plot. The revolution could not be nipped in the bud however because the army took the side of the demonstrators and striking people. A battle between the army and Securitate took place; as a result on 22 December Ceausescu was abolished and imprisoned (on 25 of December he was tried and sentenced to death, the sentence was executed). The Front of National Salvation led by a Communist Ion Iliescu assumed power and – as it was the case in Bulgaria – intercepted the initiative. Iliescu became president. Before a „round table” was convened, to pacify the society who was hostile towards the Communist party, Iliescu agreed to introduce a multi-party system, dissolve Securitate, issued a decree (later withdrawn) dissolving the Romanian Communist Party, declared the date of parliamentary elections.

The „round table” negotiations (27 January – 1 February 1990) did not play in Romania the role they had played in Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia. Only one of the resolutions deserves attention: the opposition gained access to mass media. The most important developments took place within the army and the police. The conflict between them, dubbed as the second (following the December one) revolution, ended with the success of the army.

4. Conclusions

The change of the system of power in Central and Eastern Europe occurred in the discussed period within the span of not even a complete year. The initial phases of the transformation were characterised by moderate tactics and politics, giving up violence as a political means, application of political compromise. The events in Romania were exceptional. Negotiations and agreements at the „round” and „triangle” tables marked the beginning of a road to democracy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The process of transformation was supported by the Soviet Union. It is not really known how far-reaching reforms were supported and envisaged by Mikchail Gorbachev. It seems that three types of action were relevant in this respect. First, attempts to get rid of the ruling Communist leaders in some countries: Erich Honecker in the German Democratic Republic, Todor Zivkov in Bulgaria and Miklos Jakes in Czechoslovakia and to replace them with politicians capable of introducing reforms who, simultaneously, would be allies. The new approach on part of the Soviet Union created an opening to remove the old leaders. Second, the Soviet leader encouraged the authorities to make reforms. In Czechoslovakia Gorbachev encouraged Jakes and Ladislav Adamec to introduce reforms in summer 1989. Third, he also persuaded the Polish Communists to participate in the cabinet headed by Tadeusz Mazowiecki¹⁸. Gorbachev was keen on evolutionary changes of the system, social peace in the states of Central and Eastern Europe. To develop good relations of the Soviet Union with the USA was his priority.

In two of the countries, Poland and Hungary, compromises struck during negotiations, proved to be troublesome for the political leaders. In Poland, the long-lasting supporters of „Solidarity” and PZPR felt alienated from the organizations when the compromise was struck. Both Wojciech Jaruzelski and Lech Wałęsa were attacked. The former for giving up too much power, the latter for both entering into the negotiations and for making too big concessions.

In Poland and Hungary, the societies did not approve of the results of the agreements between the authorities and the opposition. In Poland, the first round of parliamentary elections (to the Sejm and Senate) which was held on 4 June 1989 turned out to be a sweeping success of the opposition. Out of 161 Sejm seats, agreed upon during the negotiations, the opposition won 160, while it also won 92 out of 100 Senate seats. The coalition-government party managed to win only 3 Sejm seats during the first round. Apart from 2 individuals (Mikołaj Koza-kiewicz and Adam Zieliński) all candidates listed within the so called national list had lost. The results of the elections were thus rightly interpreted by PZPR as a clear verdict in favour of „Solidarność” and, at the same time, a decided negation and rejection of the existing system

¹⁸ S. P. Huntington, *Trzecia fala demokratyzacji*, p. 107–108.

of government by the society¹⁹. The results of the elections testified also to the fact that the society did not approve of the essence of the deal struck at the „round table”, which – the results of the elections notwithstanding – guaranteed the rulers majority in the Parliament. The results of the June elections in 1989 and a new wave of striking which in a way resulted in establishing Mazowiecki’s cabinet, accelerated the process of changes. It turned out that social aspirations, at least those related to political issues, went further than the final documents of the „round table” had envisaged.

The political elite in Poland ignored the results of the June elections and implemented the deal. Two courses of action were undertaken which went against the will of the society: 1) the rules of the game were changed during the elections, as exemplified by an amendment to the electoral law between the first and the second round of the elections, which was introduced so as the 33 mandates lost by the coalition-government party were transferred from the national list to constituencies; at the threshold of transformation, approved by the democratic opposition, a precedence was created: in the name of a political rationale one could manipulate law; 2) part of the opposition supported electing General Jaruzelski president; as a result (with simultaneous pacification of the movement of Komitety Obywatelskie [Citizens’ Committees]) social enthusiasm so needed to introduce far-reaching reforms in a short time was destroyed.

The Hungarian nation made the key decision by means of a referendum. On 26 November 1989, the society rejected the resolutions concluding the negotiations of the „triangle table” according to which general, direct presidential elections were to be held before elections to the national assembly (the Communists and moderate opposition favoured this solution). In accordance with proposals by ZWD and ZMD during the referendum the conception of free parliamentary elections to be held in the first place and followed by presidential elections was approved, which prevented Imre Pozsgay, a Communist reformer, from being elected president. Therefore, the agreement between part of the opposition and the Communists concerning the issue of electing president was blocked. Democratic

¹⁹ *Informacja Wydziału Pracy KC PZPR na temat II tury wyborów do Sejmu i Senatu z 15 czerwca 1989 r.*, [in:] *Polska 1986–1989: koniec systemu*, t. 3..., p. 275.

parliamentary elections were thus to be held first, which occurred on 25 March 1990²⁰.

Towards the end of 1989, the pace of changes in Central and Eastern Europe accelerated. In October 1989 the Communist regime in the GDR collapsed. In November, the Communist government in Bulgaria also started the process of liberalization. In 1990, elections were held.

Resulting from negotiations between the rulers and the opposition, in some of the countries on the basis of agreements the structure of executive power was transformed by means of establishing coalition cabinets. S. P. Huntington sees the coalition form of government introduced then as a way to secure the interest of the Communists and the opposition in the period of transformation. Typically, in the period of transformation, the ruling almost never faced any punishment.

²⁰ J. Gorzowski, W. Morawski, *Jesień narodów*, p. 58.