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## Political changes in Post-communist Eastern Europe: from totalitarianism to the „gray zone”?

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Oleksii Polegkyi

## **Political changes in Post-communist Eastern Europe: from totalitarianism to the „gray zone”?**

### **Preface**

The collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc in the late 1980s/early 1990s created a unique and unprecedented momentum for political and economic changes in many countries. It was optimistic expectations that autocracies will be transformed to functioning democratic states. The implosion of the Soviet Union was widely hailed as an ideological triumph of democracy over authoritarianism.

Two decades after the collapse of communism, the outcomes in transition countries vary from success stories to the cases of regress on democratic reforms. While the overall policy prescription offered by the Western democracies was unanimous – democratize and introduce free markets – the details of how those broad guidelines were implemented varied.

The recent wave of democratization has created a certain paradigm: democratization means liberal values and a free market, a pro-Western orientation, and a crucial role for civil society in bringing democratic change and consolidation. However, this might be a part of our own fantasy, and we need to see what has really happened. Democracy’s advance had been a broad but shallow phenomenon, democratic culture had in most places failed to put down deep roots. Many countries which is calling „transitional” are not in transition to democracy, they are develop in directions that are difficult to define<sup>1</sup>.

So, what are the lessons learned and what is the relevance of Post-communist transitions to the challenges faced by other countries around the world trying to implement more democratic governance? Can we expect the reversal of democratic development in post-Soviet countries and the emergence of new forms of authoritarian rule?

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<sup>1</sup> F. Zakaria, *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*, „Foreign Affairs” 1997, no. 76, pp. 22-43; T. Carothers, *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, „Journal of Democracy” 2002, no. 13, p. 5-21; R. Kaplan, *Was Democracy Just a Moment?*, „Atlantic Monthly” 1997, no. 12.

## The „transition” paradigm

The theoretical core of many explanations of the collapse of Soviet Communism by Transitionology School was taken from modernization theory which dominated the theories on democratization in the 1950s and 1960s. Modernization theory can be traced to Talcott Parsons, whose interpretation of Weber's approach to social and economic organization resulted in an optimistic brand of thinking premised on rationalization, bureaucratization and routinization, as felicitous features of an inevitable process of modernization<sup>2</sup>.

Taking their theoretical orientation and optimism from Parsons, modernization theorists identified stages of development that all societies will inevitably pass through similar processes and stages. They argued that economic development and increasing education levels inevitable will lead to transitions towards liberal democratic political and economic systems. The expectation was that the communist societies would converge towards a pluralist mass consumption society ready for democracy.

The modernization theory became often criticized for being too deterministic and for not paying attention to the political elites' influence and specific of national political culture over the democratization processes. Much of the criticism was due to the fact that the modernization theory was increasingly unable to explain why some countries – predominantly poor third world countries – succeeded in democratization, while some more developed remained undemocratic. The transition theory became popular mostly in the mid 1980s, as a result comparing the democratization processes in Southern Europe and Latin America<sup>3</sup>.

During last decades of XX century political and economical changes in many regions shared a dominant characteristic simultaneous movement away from dictatorship toward more liberal governance. As a result, they were considered by many observers, „as component parts of a larger whole, a global democratic trend that thanks to Samuel Huntington has widely come to be known as the „third wave” of democracy”<sup>4</sup>. As the third wave was spread to Eastern Europe, democracy promoters extended this model as a universal paradigm for understanding democratization. But it is clear that reality is no longer conforming to the model. Many countries still on „transitional stage”, they are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Akturk, *15 Years after the „Collapse” of Soviet Socialism: The Role of Elite Choices, Class Conflict, and a Critique of Modernization Theory*, [http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/bps\\_/publications\\_/2008\\_02-akturk.pdf](http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/bps_/publications_/2008_02-akturk.pdf) (15 III 2011).

<sup>3</sup> G. O'Donnell & P. C. Schmitter, *Transition from Authoritarianism: Tentative Conclusions and Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore 1986.

<sup>4</sup> T. Carothers, *The End of the Transition Paradigm*, „Journal of Democracy” 2002, no. 1, p. 5-21.

Today „transition paradigm” cannot sufficiently explain the specifics of political and economic developments in Eastern Europe. We need to develop another analytic framework to conceptualize and respond to the ongoing political events. According to T. Carothers, the assumptions of the Transitology School were discredited by the number of regimes that were not liberal democracies and showed no clear signs of becoming fully democratic. Pessimism about the progress of democracy in the developing and post-communist worlds has risen sharply in recent years. Negative developments in a variety of countries, failed elections and the emergence of antidemocratic populist movements, have caused some observers to argue that democracy is in retreat and authoritarianism on the march<sup>5</sup>. Many regimes in former Soviet Union countries have either remained hybrid or moved in an authoritarian direction. It may therefore be time to stop thinking of these cases in terms of transitions to democracy and to begin thinking about the specific types of regimes they actually are.

### **From autocracies to „grey zone”?**

Why have some post-communist countries experienced a successful consolidation of political democracy and not others? Why is it that nations with similar backgrounds and comparable economic means and all gaining independence from communism at that same time, have not been able to achieve democratic governments at similar paces?

Some states such as Central European countries and the Baltic's states were drawn to European Union and quickly embraced democracy and free market economy. Almost all of the new EU member states are consolidated democracies, with the some exception of Bulgaria and Romania, which continue to confront deep corruption and other institutional challenges and are therefore classified as semi-consolidated democracies. Others are still struggling with democratic rule, and some, such as Belarus or Russia have fallen back down to the „modern” authoritarianism.

### **What are the reasons for the specificity of post-Soviet transformation?**

The main difference, which plays an important role, especially in the 90s, was a fact that *revolution of values* in Central European countries occurred much earlier than changes in political system. Of course, it doesn't mean that values was changed absolutely for all people, but it means that consensus on the further democratic

<sup>5</sup> Idem, *Stepping Back From Democratic Pessimism*, „Carnegie Endowment for International Peace” 2009, no. 1 (99), <http://www.carnegieendowment.org> (15 III 2011).

development in the CEE countries was formed long before the anti-communist revolution destroyed the communist system.

For the majority of citizens of CEE democracy function in public consciousness mostly as a value; moreover as a value which is autonomous and fundamental. Such understanding of democracy was a reason for significant changes in political discourse and public opinion. The democracy as a value became a normative power and it is a form of discursive power. In order for it to be effective, the democracy *norms* being promoted must first enter into discourse and political rhetoric of national elites and then society at whole. Social change in countries, organizations etc. is often initiated with new discourses.

That's why periods of considerable social and political changes are always accompanied by transformations in the political philosophy of society. This is why the changes that have occurred in the CEE countries during the period of Post-communist transformations in the public discourse, language and mass media have the character of a watershed and are the institutional consolidation of essential transformations in society's political sphere as a whole. Moreover, as mentioned N. Fairclough: „it is clear that in dealing with *transition*, we are dealing centrally with questions of discourse”<sup>6</sup>.

The importance of language and discourse in processes of *transition* in CEE and elsewhere is quite widely recognized in social research (for instance, N. Fairclough<sup>7</sup> and in the conception of influential neo-liberal models of transition as *discourses* in Bourdieu & Wacquant<sup>8</sup>). But social research has so far produced only a limited understanding of how different discourses figures in processes of *transition*.

According to discursive approach, politics is increasingly being a struggle over ideas and values. This discursive struggle, most certainly bears comparison with the symbolic and cognitive struggle mentioned by Pierre Bourdieu, which to his mind makes up one of the essential dimensions of political struggle: „...is no doubt the form par excellence of the symbolic struggle for the conservation or transformation of the social world through the conservation or transformation of the vision of the social world and of the principles of division of this world”<sup>9</sup>.

The basic tenet of this theoretical framework is that the meaning of social phenomena is socially constructed through language. The language of politics is not a neutral medium that conveys ideas independently formed – suggests W. Connolly – it is an institutionalized structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain directions. This means that the discursive practices, which

<sup>6</sup> N. Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis in trans-disciplinary research on social change: transition, re-scaling, poverty and social inclusion*, „Lodz Papers in Pragmatics” 2005, no. 1, p. 37-58.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bourdieu, L. Wacquant, *New Liberal Speak: notes on the new planetary vulgate*, „Radical Philosophy” 2001, no. 105.

<sup>9</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge 1991, p. 180-181.

dominate the policy formulation process, reflect also the dominant trends in the policy practices<sup>10</sup>.

To claim that politics is a struggle over ideas and values is to claim that what matters is not only facts and events in themselves, but how they are interpreted in public discourse. Political influence is thus achieved by articulating a certain meaning of a concept that others then adopt, making it a socially constructed truth. A discourse is the result of social practice that establishes relations among concepts and thereby their meaning.

On the other hand, democracy was seen by a majority of the people in former Soviet Union republics primarily as a tool to improve their own welfare. In the courtiers of former Soviet Union de-legitimization of the Soviet system was not only on the basis of values, but, first at all, on the basis on its ineffectiveness, inability to solve problems of everyday life of ordinary citizens. Of course, for some part of society the democratic values was very important, but further direction of development was questionable and unclear inside societies. Social ambivalence, defined as a simultaneous commitment of people to opposite, mutually exclusive and incompatible values, is a typical feature of a society in transition. So, it is quite natural that as soon as the reform and transformation in the early 90's faced a very serious and unavoidable in the process of transformation difficulties, the attractiveness of democracy went down. Initially, ideas about democracy, narrowed to a certain set of ceremonial values which are not necessarily followed in practice, especially if they prevent the implementation of some important government reforms<sup>11</sup>.

This is the main difference in post-Soviet instrumental approach to democracy and values orientation of the CEE countries. Value approach is expressed in the willingness of society, despite economic difficulties, to remain faithful to democratic institutions, order and procedures and not wait for the return to social populism and paternalism in the nationalist and authoritarian frames.

Countries with no prior democratic experiences were faced with major difficulties in establishing democracy. This argument is consistent with the assumption that a political culture does not change very easily, regardless of the extent of personal experiences of democratic rule in a country. The values, beliefs and attitudes fostered during communism towards political and legal institutions continue in the countries of former Soviet Union. Most countries in Central Europe had experience of established democratic systems in their history, while the Soviet Union had not.

The *second feature of transformation in post-Soviet space*, compared with CEE countries – is a fundamentally different role of international factors. European Un-

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<sup>10</sup> W. Connolly, *The Terms of political Discourse*, Princeton 1983, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> А. Рябов, *Промежуточные итоги и некоторые особенности постсоветских трансформаций*, <http://polit.ua/lectures/2010/08/12/ryabov.html> (17 III 2011).

ion had a huge positive impact on the development of CEE countries, supporting their movement toward democracy and free markets.

The strong desire to „return to Europe” had urged the newly democratically elected governments in the CEE countries to continue reformation and to take immediate actions to closer cooperation with the EU with the aim of future membership.

The core of Western policy towards Russia and Ukraine was an effort to prevent restoration of communism in any form in those countries.

Such phenomenon's as oligarchy, system corruption, favoritism, „family” privatization was accepted as a price for destruction of communist system. Thus the international factor in relation to Russia, Ukraine etc. in the 90s had a different impact. Such situation of „closed eyes” supported the strengthening of leading position of „new” national elites, which was not interested in real transformation and democratization.

And it was the *third major reason* why democratization process in post Soviet space was failed – the transformation of communist nomenclature into „new” national elites.

Evaluation of the role elites varied in post Communists studies. I agree with, for example, McFaul<sup>12</sup> who claims that the outcome of the transition has been successful in the countries where the democratic forces – often coming from the masses rather than from the elite – intransigently furthered their claims of total democratization, without making any compromises with the incumbent regime. He suggests is that only in the countries in which the democratic forces clearly dominated the transition process, was there a clear break with the past and a successful democratization, while countries in which undemocratic forces, i.e. the old regime dominated, resulted in continued dictatorships. Finally, in countries where the undemocratic and democratic forces were about equally strong, the democratization process seems to have stalled between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship<sup>13</sup>.

For the development of democracy is increasingly important the behavior of the actors involved in the transition. In Soviet Union ruling elites was the ones who initiate and sustain the changes and who manage the transition process. The transformation of the Soviet economy into a market capitalist system in former USSR was a reaction by the Soviet elite to emerging threats to their accumulated privileges and power in the late 1980s.

S. Huntington believes that democratization can only be started when political elites feel that they have a duty or interest in creating democracy. This can mean that they feel their interests would be better served by a democracy, or simply that

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<sup>12</sup> M. McFaul, *The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship. Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World*, „World Politics” 2002, vol. 54, no. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214-228.

they have a duty to create a democratic system. However, without the actions of elites, he argues, democratization cannot occur<sup>14</sup>.

Another important difference between the former Soviet Union and CEE countries – *the problem of institutional weakness*. The chance of successful transition depended on the emergence of strong institutions, which often must be developed from the beginning.

Post-Soviet space in the political sense had long period of destruction of political and social institutions of Soviet type, but most of the new-built institutions are unstable and cannot fulfill successfully its function. The need for the development of strong and stable political institutions and an effective state is a prerequisite for economic reform. This argument that democratic consolidation really involves the creation of durable and effective institutions helps to avoid the problems presented by conceptualizing consolidation as popular acceptance of democracy. The problem in much of the region is that institution building is left to „spontaneous” processes and then informal institutionalization fills the systemic vacuum.

As society was left disoriented and unable to cope with the rapid changes taking place in society, informal networks continued to help individuals during perestroika and during post-communism, as a way to adjust to the collapse of the USSR. What emerged instead were strong informal influence groups, sometimes called *clans*. These formations, not institutions, are the real vehicles of power in post-Soviet countries. Influence groups act as a shadow power structure that intersects both horizontally and vertically with formal institutions. Furthermore, we have to remember disparity between formal arrangements and actual relations in both Soviet and post-Soviet life. The highly structured, formal and democratized state that appears on the formal level bears little correspondence to actual politics in almost all post-Soviet countries.

### The case of Ukraine

When Ukraine's transition from Communism began it was assumed as being, naturally enough, towards democracy. During its post-Soviet transition, Ukraine has developed a pluralistic in some sense and relatively open political environment, relatively free media and elections, and basically secure human rights. Yet the country's system of governance is fragile and inefficient, demonstrating an evident deficit of rule of law.

Independent Ukraine emerged in 1991, largely as a result of political compromise and cooperation between the reformists, pro-independence part of the local

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<sup>14</sup> S. Huntington, *After 20 Years: The Future of the Third Wave*, „Journal of Democracy” 1997, vol. 8, no. 4, p. 7-12.



Communist nomenclatures and the opposition movement ('national elite') that gained some strength during perestroika but was never comparable with the Polish *Solidarnosc* or the Lithuanian *Sajudis*.

It became clear that the post-Soviet nomenclature turned into oligarchy had no vested interest in democratization and Westernization that was likely to undermine its dominance over the country's politics and economy. At the same time, the oligarchic regime had its reasons to maintain good relations with the West, where its business interests were concentrated, and to avoid – as long as possible – direct confrontation with democratic forces within Ukraine<sup>15</sup>.

There has been a growing governmental phenomenon in many developing democracies that some scholars has been labeled „declarative democracy”. Such kind of democracy meets the formal requirements of democracy, but the actual practice resembles that of an authoritarian state<sup>16</sup>.

Transition entails a mixture of old and new elements, rather than a simple replacement of the old by the new. Changing political systems fundamentally is also bound to be difficult, even if the previous system does not work properly. The main reason for this is that the power that is distributed to actors and institutions may easily be used to resist changes that threaten their power.

There is a general and widespread public cynicism about government and politics, and about how much the Ukrainian government's commitments on paper mean in reality, there is a big difference between the „formal rules” and the way most political institution actually work. While the people may still believe in the idea of democracy, their beliefs in the government are not as confident. This creates a vacuum, where the people may elect an official to power legitimately, yet there may still remain little power and few means given to the official power.

The fact is that Ukraine's political parties are often weak and often revolve around one or two personalities. This creates a negative ideology among citizens and results in low legitimacy of the democracy in the nation.

Thomas Carothers<sup>17</sup> offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding the precarious position of Ukraine in the democratization process. He takes issue with what he calls the „transition paradigm” noting its inability to account for the majority of third wave transitional democracies. These democracies completed the transition process; however, they are far from achieving the status of established democracies. He argues most transitional democracies are in a political „gray zone”.

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<sup>15</sup> M. Riabchuk, *The European neighbourhood policy and beyond: facilitating the free movement of people within the framework of EU-Ukraine 'post-revolutionary' relations*, <http://www.ceps.be> (2 IV 2011).

<sup>16</sup> P. Kubicek, *The Limits of Electoral Democracy in Ukraine*, „Democratization” 2001, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 117-139.

<sup>17</sup> T. Carothers, *The End of the Transition...*

As he pointed out, they

suffer from serious democratic deficits, often including poor representation of citizens' interests, low levels of political participation beyond voting, frequent abuse of the law by government officials, elections of uncertain legitimacy, low levels of public confidence in state institutions, and persistently poor institutional performance by the state<sup>18</sup>.

The first syndrome, according to T. Carothers, is feckless pluralism.

Countries whose political life is marked by feckless pluralism tend to have significant amounts of political freedom, regular elections, and alternation of power between genuinely different political groupings. Despite these positive features, however, democracy remains shallow and troubled. Political participation, though broad at election time, extends little beyond voting<sup>19</sup>.

In such countries, political elites mostly perceived by population as corrupt, self-interested, ineffective and not working for their country. The public is seriously disaffected from politics, and while it may still cling to a belief in the ideal of democracy, it is extremely unhappy about the political life of their country. Overall, politics is widely perceived as a corrupt, elite-dominated domain that delivers little good to the country and commands equally little respect.

Another syndrome in the gray zone is the dominant-power politics. Countries with this syndrome have limited but still real political life, some political contestation by opposition groups, and at least most of the basic institutional forms of democracy.

The key political problem in dominant-power countries is the blurring of the line between the state and the ruling political forces. Whereas in feckless pluralism judiciaries are often somewhat independent and elections are often quite free and fair, in dominant-power countries the judiciary is typically cowed, and during elections the ruling group tries to put on a good-enough electoral show to gain the approval of the international community while quietly tilting the electoral playing field far enough in its own favor to ensure victory.

But there is some political openness in these systems, and as suggest T. Carothers:

...the leaders do often feel some pressure from the public about corruption and other abuses of state power. They even may periodically declare their intention to root out corruption and strengthen the rule of law. But their deep seated intolerance for anything more than limited opposition and the basic political configuration over which they preside breed the very problems they publicly commit themselves to tackling<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

During the transition play, the nomenclature was well prepared for takeover of democratic power. At the level of formal political institutions and according to official political rhetoric in Ukraine, there is an acceptance of democracy as the only appropriate system of governance. At the same time, stable and mature institutions that would ensure the rule of law and the consolidation of democratic changes have not yet been built. Ukraine is still a fragile democracy with a strong need to balance power among the branches of governance and develop real civil society.

As mentioned Ukrainian scholar M. Ryabchuk:

At home, the oligarchic regime employed the 'transition' rhetoric and imitated all sorts of reforms and democratic procedures, while on the international level, the regime had talked up Ukraine's 'European choice' and 'Euro-Atlantic integration.' In both cases, however, the shallow words had no substance. Their primary goal, as eventually became clear, was (a) to dispossess the democratic opposition of their slogans and programs; (b) to compromise these slogans and programs in the eyes of the population; and (c) to create a kind of the ideological smoke-screen that would hide their authoritarian, 'non-European' practices and protect the corrupt, undemocratic regime from international isolation<sup>21</sup>.

Some scholars have grappled with the added complication of newly independent states, such as Ukraine or Belarus, not only introducing political and economic reform simultaneously but also building institutions and a state while forging a unified nation-state. T. Kuzio mentioned the quadruple nature of transition in the former USSR and, to a lesser extent, in some Central and Eastern European countries. This quadruple transition includes democratization, marketization, and state institution and civic nation building<sup>22</sup>.

As a result, many transition countries had gone from dictatorship, not closer to democracy, but rather find themselves in such a gray area, quite comfortable for authoritarian rulers. It is comfortable – because they can take advantage of both systems, authoritarian and democratic. On the one hand, preserving authoritarianism, they avoid real political and economic competition, minimizing the likelihood lose power through democratic elections. On the other hand, simulating a democracy, they avoid sanctions and political isolation in the modern world dominated – at least the standard level – the liberal-democratic values<sup>23</sup>.

*Currently post-Soviet countries passed two stages of transformation.* The first stage – was during last decade of the XX century, when the focus of political proc-

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<sup>21</sup> M. Riabchuk, *op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> T. Kuzio, *Transition in Postcommunist States: Triple or Quadruple?*, „Politics” 2001, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 101-110.

<sup>23</sup> М. Рябчук, *Українська посткомуністическа трансформація*, <http://polit.ua/lectures/2010/06/02/rjabchuk.html> (2 III 2011).

esses in those countries was characterized by two key trends: the stabilization and adaptation.

In the 2000's begins a new stage of transformation. It was time of economic growth and as the result the rising levels of public aspirations. But at the same time expands the resource base of domination of post-Soviet elites, who do not want to share their power and property. During this period possibilities of vertical mobility lowered and thus the process of rotation of Ukrainian elites now is much more complicated. Control of resources also allows the ruling elites to build high barrier to access to the political arena the new actors.

According to it, the presence of such factors, puts in the center of Ukrainian politics endless struggle for bureaucratic and other resources and limits the possibility for political and social change. Thus, was created the strong and stable inertial system with a big potential of long stagnation.

## Conclusion

Taking into account the conditions of the Ukrainian transition, it is little surprise then that Ukraine lags far behind in the post-communist transition, especially in light of the following factors: the much longer and much more brutal process of „Sovietization”; the very limited positive impact of international factors; and the very negative impact of local elites (mostly inherited from the Communist past).

Little or no prior democratic experience and traditions, the lack of effective mechanisms for transparency and the absence of market institutions and free media were some of the key issues those countries of former Soviet Union had to grapple with at the outset of reforms. The most common lingering problems in transition countries have been weak public and state institutions, inefficient judicial systems, large informal sector, corruption and weak civil society.

Furthermore, non-democrats have learned democratic rhetoric well, and they use it in challenging democrats on a variety of issues. At the same time, some democratic politicians are also seduced into using populist, non-democratic or fraudulent methods to achieve popular support.

Indeed, the new authoritarianism is distinguished by a recognition that absolute control over information and economic activity is neither possible nor necessary. These regimes have developed methods that allow them to „guide” and „manage” political discourse; selectively suppress or reshape the news and information<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> *Undermining Democracy: 21st Century Authoritarians*, [http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special\\_report/83.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/83.pdf) (15 III 2011).

## **Streszczenie**

Oleksii Polegkyi

### **Polityczne zmiany w postkomunistycznej Europie Wschodniej. Od totalitaryzmu do „szarej strefy”**

Artykuł ten będzie koncentrować się na zmianach, które nastąpiły w społeczeństwach postkomunistycznych krajów Europy Wschodniej, a także różnice w procesie ich transformacji z państwami Europy Środkowej. Dlaczego niektóre kraje postkomunistyczne doświadczyły udanych zmian konsolidacji demokracji, a nie inne? Dlaczego kraje, które miały podobne warunki po upadku komunizmu, nie były w stanie osiągnąć demokratycznych zmian? Również celem niniejszego tekstu jest omówienie roli przemian postkomunistycznych w praktyce politycznej na przykładzie Ukrainy.

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