

Expecting More from Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

by Charles Krupnick

INTRODUCTION

Central and Eastern Europe is without question the Third Wave's most successfully democratized region.¹ Most of the countries in this region have had numerous free and arguably fair elections, and almost as many peaceful transitions of power, well beyond Samuel Huntington's two-turnover criteria.² Democratic processes have become routine, countering fears that communist-era legacies, such as bureaucratic rigor, economic leveling, and destruction of free civil society, would prevent democracy from taking hold.³ Vigorous economic growth has become a recent fixture in the region as well, to reward years of painful reform and contribute to democracy's advance.

Yet democracy remains a work in progress in Central and Eastern Europe. Governments are often reviled, in part because of the economic austerity programs they have implemented to prepare for EU membership, but also reflecting the arrogance of politicians and the relative ubiquity of corruption. The national political leadership in eight of the ten countries discussed in this article has changed since May 2004, when most of them joined the European Union, with a ninth pending; ruling political parties also did poorly in the June 2004 European Parliament elections, providing a further indictment of their persona and performance.

This article briefly looks at democracy in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—the countries of the region that have joined NATO⁴ and, except for Bulgaria and Romania, the European Union. It begins with discussion of elite behavior, political party system stability, and civil society development—three attributes important to democratic consolidation—and then offers country-by-country assessment of these and other characteristics of democratization. The analysis comes to a generally optimistic conclusion about democracy's progress, although a number of troublesome problems and hazards remain.

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ELITES, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The dominant “transition” approach to democratization, associated with Guillermo O’Donnell, Juan Linz, and Alfred Stepan, views it as a three-step process: liberalization of authoritarian regimes; transition through multiparty elections; and consolidation through the strengthening of democratic institutions and culture. To use Linz and Stepan’s celebrated phrase, democracy is consolidated when it becomes “the only game in town.”⁵ Larry Diamond adds that normalization of democracy “requires the expansion of citizen access, development of democratic citizenship and culture, broadening of leadership recruitment and training, and other functions that civil society performs.”⁶

Elites

Elite transformation, either by changes in the attitudes and actions of existing elite or by replacement with new people, is particularly important to democratic consolidation. Democracies require competitive elites that are nonetheless committed to perpetuating the fair and open processes of liberal governance. Highly antagonistic elites can undercut democracy, while too much consensus can lead to authoritarianism.⁷

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Post-Cold War elites in Central and Eastern Europe have changed in various ways and at varying speeds. Former communists have held key positions in every country and hence perpetuated the antagonism between themselves and anti-communists. Elite continuity promoted stability but also allowed clientelism—the creation of informal networks that provided rewards to associates regardless of competence or electoral preferences—to flourish. According to John Higley et al., many communist-era elites made political and commercial preparations for regime change by negotiating places for themselves in postcommunist governments or privatized enterprises, with some moving into mafia-like activities.⁸ Transparency in Central and Eastern Europe remains a problem, and the boundaries between politics, business, and even organized crime are sometimes murky. Every government in the region has been affected by corruption scandals, often over privatization or public procurement issues, and resulting in public cynicism and disaffection or alienation. As old generation reformers and communists depart and other institutions, such as foreign-owned businesses, transformed militaries, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) intrude on the levers of power, elite behavior will doubtlessly change. Integration into Western structures requires higher standards of public service, yet regressive models of elite behavior are available to the East where authoritarianism in Russia and Belarus seems to be holding its own or re-consolidating, at least for now.

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Political Parties

The willingness of political elites to cooperate with each other and to represent the public interest instead of their own also influences the character of political parties and party systems. Western Europe's relatively disciplined and ideological "programmatic parties" are adept at using but not abusing the tools of governance when in power and at supporting democratic institutions with policy alternatives when in opposition. Strong but loyal parties link government to the public at large, adding to state capacity and stabilizing democracy. The alternatives to programmatic parties, as Jeffrey Kopstein points out, are weakly structured clientelist parties and parties dominated by charismatic leaders.⁹ These are common in Central and Eastern Europe and contribute to political instability. Most countries have multiparty systems with a traditional left-right divide, sometimes between former communist and anti-communist groups. Political parties in a number of countries in the region form, split, merge, and go out of existence with regularity; governing coalitions usually bring together three or more parties, often with competing agendas. Voters consequently can have a difficult time evaluating a party's record and whether or not the party represents their best interests.

Tomas Kostelecky notes a gradual shift toward more Western-style political parties, with increased emphasis on representing vested interests and developing relationships with civil society.¹⁰ Individual parties have thrived in a number of countries and party systems are generally more developed than a decade ago, but instability remains common because of rivalries among party leadership and continuing party fragmentation. EU membership has coincided with a rather surprising decrease in party system stability in a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland and the Czech Republic. Local issues dominate political configurations, but party leadership must also adjust to the demands and opportunities of greater integration with the rest of Europe. On the other hand, they might consider taking more populist positions when finally a part of the European Union.

Civil Society

Another part of democratic consolidation is the development of civil society. Gordon White defines civil society as

an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of the society to protect or extend their interests or values.¹¹

Labor unions, fraternal organizations, church groups, and issue-specific NGOs are some examples. These support democratic principles and provide opportunities to learn and practice democratic processes, but also act as counterweights to the potentially pervasive power of government. In a Madisonian sense, civil society can help unify a country by encouraging cross-cutting linkages, so that divisive loyalties of ideology, religion, ethnicity, and geography are not reinforced.¹²

A robust civil society can strengthen democracy but, according to indices like the World Values Survey, it remains weak in Central and Eastern Europe. Marc

Morje Howard identifies three factors to explain this. The first is the legacy of mistrust remaining from totalitarian rule. Communist regimes eliminated autonomous organizations and replaced them with state-controlled ones, often with mandatory memberships. A frequent reaction today is to avoid such obligation. The second reason is the existence of friendship networks. Central and Eastern Europeans are convivial people, but direct their attention toward family and friends rather than formal organizations. These networks were developed during the Communist era as alternatives to state-sponsored organizations and continue to survive, in part because of unattractive alternatives. This leads to the third reason—postcommunist disappointment. Many Central and Eastern Europeans have experienced only hardship and anxiety since the end of the Cold War, which has caused them to withdraw from public activities. Howard concludes that the weakness of civil society in the region is indicative of citizenship alienation and is likely to persist for decades.¹³

EVALUATING DEMOCRATIZATION

Bulgaria

Bulgaria's post-Cold War democratic progress was stimulated primarily by outside forces, such as the prospect of NATO and EU membership, but also by internal economic decline. The country's elites are a mix of former communists and anti-communists, operating in a competitive system of power and privilege. Political and economic change have been particularly difficult because, according to Sten Berglund et al., national leaders must cope with "the clientelistic heritage in that particular region [the Balkans]" where authoritarian features are resilient and political process can be overshadowed by other actors with privileged connections to government.¹⁴

Bulgaria's Communist Party changed its name to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) but retained some of its pre-transition character and apparatus. The liberal opposition developed slowly as the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and alternated in power with BSP, but lacked the coherence and popular support necessary to implement meaningful change in domestic policies.¹⁵ Failure to reform finally caught up with the country and led to the financial crisis of 1996-1997. Ivan Kostov and a UDF-led coalition replaced a BSP government and implemented an economic program that had an immediate stabilizing effect. These and other reforms have led to Bulgarian membership in NATO in 2004 and a 2007 date to join the European Union.¹⁶

Yet high unemployment and corruption caused the Kostov government to lose favor and allowed a political movement created by former monarch Simeon Saxcoburggotski to turn public frustration into electoral victory in 2001. The National Movement Simeon II (NMS) led a center-right coalition that continued much of Kostov's reform agenda. The coalition included the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedom Party (MRF), an indicator of the improvement in minority relations within Bulgaria since the end of the Cold War.

After four years of rule, the NMS government had lost substantial public support and was bested in the June 2005 election by BSP, but not by the expected margin, leaving the composition and character of a new government uncertain. A return of the BSP carries some risk for EU accession in 2007, although a continuation of current economic policies seems most likely. These have resulted recently in high growth rates and expected increases in foreign direct investment, although unemployment remains very high.¹⁷ The meteoric rise of NMS in 2001 displays the weakness and volatility of the political party system despite expectations of greater stability; while the country's under-developed civil society and economic weakness make the consolidation of democracy more difficult.¹⁸ Yet Bulgarians have done a remarkable job of getting ready for EU membership and the country's democracy should benefit greatly from it.

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Czech Republic

The unreformed Communist Party of Czechoslovakia held on to the very end of the Cold War. It collapsed in 1990 and was replaced by a reform-minded opposition led by the Civic Forum. When the Czech Republic split from Slovakia on January 1, 1993, politics were simplified and radical economic reform made easier; with its rich democratic and capitalistic traditions, the country was able to make a clean break from totalitarianism.

Many Czech politicians have roots in the Civic Forum, while others are technocrats from the former communist regime like Vaclav Klaus. Unlike high ranking communist party officials, these were not excluded from governance and helped ease the transition to democracy and capitalism.¹⁹ As the Civic Forum itself dissolved into more traditional parties, Klaus and his Civic Democratic Party (ODS) came to power with a center-right coalition and implemented a market-centered reform policy and rapid privatization. The left alternative was fragmented until the mid-1990s when Social Democratic Party (CSSD) leader Milos Zeman gathered enough support to challenge ODS. Following a monetary crisis in 1997, CSSD entered a grand coalition with ODS and then gained a mandate to lead after the 1998 election. This continued after the 2002 elections with Vladimir Spidla as prime minister.²⁰ Following heavy losses in the June 2004 European elections, Spidla was replaced by Stanislav Gross—a young and ambitious politician symbolic, at least, of a new generation of leadership emerging in Central and Eastern Europe. Gross almost immediately developed public image problems because of financial issues regarding his Prague apartment, causing

further damage to CSSD and its prospects for continued leadership of the Czech government. He resigned in April 2005 and Jiri Paroubek—a long time CSSD party leader—became prime minister in May, but significant difficulties in governance remain.

The Czech Republic's major parties dominated the political scene in what was, until recently, a relatively stable party system, but slim majorities discouraged major initiatives. With CSSD's decline since EU membership and the surprising rise of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, the Czech party system has become less stable and dependably reformist. Predictions on the government that will emerge after the next election range from a CSSD government with communist support, to an OSD-led coalition, and on to a CSSD-OSD grand coalition.

Despite the obvious successes of the Czech Republic in transition from communist rule, two-thirds of Czechs still consider democracy in their country to be fragile.

Participation in civil society is better than most countries in the region, and public discourse confirms the country's position as one of the most advanced democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.²¹ Foreign investment has reached record levels and the economy continues to grow, yet privatization was poorly executed in some sectors and corruption remains a surprisingly large problem. Difficult domestic and foreign policy issues await Czech democracy, such as reduction of public debt, improving the welfare of the Roma population, and addressing demands from German groups for compensation as a result of the post-World War II Benes decrees.²² Freedom House has considered the Czech Republic a consolidated democracy for years and, as with most other new EU members in the region, improved its civil liberties evaluation for 2005 because of the incorporation of EU standards.²³ Despite the obvious successes of the Czech Republic in transition from communist rule, two-thirds of Czechs still consider democracy in their country to be fragile.²⁴

Estonia

Elites in Estonia often have links to groups, such as the Popular Front of Estonia and the Estonian Congress, which helped lead the country to independence. A large number of parties grounded in the independence movement participated in the early democratic elections and in Estonia's early post-transition governments. The Soviet Communist Party was banned, but the Estonian Communist Party was allowed to participate in the democratic transition and post-independence governance. Voting rule changes and natural attrition have led to some party consolidation, but the party system remains volatile, with elite disputes and occasional scandals leading to numerous government failures.²⁵ The coalition formed after the 2003 elections featured Juhan Parts as prime minister and his center-right Res Publica in coalition with the center-

right Estonian Reform party and the center-left Estonian People's Union; the Center Party was the most prominent opposition. The government fell in March 2005, following a no-confidence vote dealing with a justice minister and a proposal to use quotas in a government anti-corruption drive.²⁶ A new government was formed in April 2005 by Andrus Ansip of the Reform Party and included the People's Union and Center Party in a coalition.

All previous Estonian governments have pursued neo-liberal economic policies that have been exceptionally beneficial to the country's prosperity and have successfully harmonized its economy with the European Union; according to a 2003 *Economist Intelligence Unit* report, Estonia has the strongest business environment in Central and Eastern Europe.²⁷ The commitment to reform is complemented by the country's relatively low level of corruption.

Political parties reflect the continued dominance of the political process by ethnic Estonians. And herein lays a significant domestic and international challenge for Estonia: the relative disenfranchisement of the 29 percent of the population who are ethnic Slavs—mostly Russian speakers. The country's 1992 language law makes citizenship and membership in political parties difficult for them, although some liberalization has occurred in recent years. The inclusion of the Center Party in the new government may bode well for the Slavic community because of its association with Russian speaking political groups, but it could provoke more divisive politics as well.

Civil society is relatively undeveloped, with few Estonians enlisted in trade unions or committed to religious practice.²⁸ Estonia's international support from Finland and its burgeoning economy provide special advantages for democratization, while the large and only partially assimilated Russian speaking minority population and proximity to Russia present particular challenges.²⁹

Hungary

Like the Czech Republic, Hungary has been considered a consolidated democracy for several years. Hungary's pre-1989 communist leaders were part of the political and economic changes that took place at the end of the Cold War, having pursued liberalization in one form or another for many years before that. Anti-communist movements such as the Alliance of Free Democrats, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, and the Federation of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) were pushing for change as well and came to power in 1990.

The former communists, rebadged the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), took control of the government in 1994 and continued a reform agenda.³⁰ Corruption scandals, along with public dissatisfaction with reform, caused HSP to lose public support while reconciliation efforts with neighboring countries made it a target for the increasingly nationalistic FIDESZ. Viktor Orban, one of Central and Eastern Europe's most charismatic leaders, changed FIDESZ from an anti-communist movement into a centralized party with a populist edge; the Hungarian Diaspora in neighboring countries, primarily in Serbia, Slovakia, and Romania and a legacy of

the post-World War I Treaty of Trianon, can be a potent political issue in Hungary. FIDESZ won the 1998 election and formed a center-right government, but was ousted in 2002 by HSP with Peter Medgyessy as prime minister. Medgyessy himself was forced to resign in August 2004 following a coalition dispute, but the HSP-led coalition continues in power under millionaire Ferenc Gyurcsany—another new generation leader in Central and Eastern Europe and one who may have the personality to campaign effectively against Orban.³¹

Of the Central and Eastern European countries, Latvia has perhaps the most difficult democracy and state-building tasks ahead of it.

The party system in Hungary is fairly stable, in part because of partial single member district voting procedures and the relative dominance of HSP and FIDESZ in providing left and right alternatives. The two large parties have been able to lead smaller parties in relatively secure coalitions, although there is concern about political maturity in a political landscape dominated—at least until recently—by Orban and Medgyessy.³² The economy is doing well, but the government must deal with rising economic expectations and a delicate currency. World Values Survey data suggests that Hungary's civil society remains relatively underdeveloped. Of concern is the continuation of a "Greater Hungary" sentiment, manifested recently in a failed initiative to grant citizenship in Hungary to ethnic Hungarians living in other countries. Domestic Hungarian rhetoric and political action can have a substantial regional effect.

Latvia

Of the Central and Eastern European countries, Latvia has perhaps the most difficult democracy and state-building tasks ahead of it. It has a Slavic minority of about 39 percent and, unlike its Baltic neighbors—Estonia has a close relationship with Finland and Lithuania has a claim to Central European affiliation—Latvia has often stood alone in the post-Cold War era, at times to confront giant Russia. Latvia has a political process that privileges ethnic Latvians, but the influence of Russian speakers is substantial in business and through their predominance in the capital, Riga. The Latvian elite is a conglomerate of former communists and anti-communists, generally committed to building the Latvian state and to political pluralism, but also operating in a difficult atmosphere of informal connections and perceptions of corrupt activity. Coalition building in Latvia can be difficult, and political leadership has been frequently under attack. Vilis Kristopans was forced to resign as prime minister in 1999 because of an "atmosphere of distrust" in his government; a center-right four party coalition led by Prime Minister Einars Repse took power in 2002, but fell in early 2004 following disputes over fiscal mismanagement despite pledges to clean up corruption.³³ A three party coalition followed, led by Prime Minister Indulis Emsis—the first Green Party official to head a government in Europe—but

collapsed in late October 2004 over budgetary issues. The current right wing coalition was formed in December 2004, built around Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis and his People's Party, the New Era Party, Latvia's First Party, and the Greens and Farmers Union.

Although many Latvian elites and political parties are nationalistic regarding Slavic minority rights and relations with Russia, they have successfully kept the country more or less in the good graces of the international community and democracy moving forward. Economic activity has picked up as reforms take hold and Latvia connects to the prosperity of greater Europe and Russia. Corruption has been widespread, and attitudes toward democratization were disturbingly low, according to a 1998 NEBS Democratic Index.³⁴ While the challenges that remain are substantial, NATO and EU memberships are great opportunities for Latvia and should help solidify its democracy.

Lithuania

Lithuania has a special history as the country that triggered the collapse of the Soviet Union and paid for its independence with blood. Independence was led by the Sajudis movement, centered in Vilnius and personified by Vytautas Landsbergis, the liberated country's first head of state. Sajudis won an overwhelming majority in the pre-independence 1990 elections but, as with other umbrella reform movements, it soon fell apart. Lithuania's Communist Party was able to reformulate itself prior to independence and gained an overwhelming victory in 1992 as the Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party (LDLP).

Political parties in Lithuania are elite-driven, with some having links to the communist era, but consensus is hard to find; the party system is fragmented and corruption is a persistent concern.

By 1996, LDLP's popularity had plummeted because of corruption scandals and a declining economy. The electorate swung to the right and brought to power various unstable center-right and centrist coalitions until 2001, when the center-left returned to power, this time organized around the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party—created in part from the LDLP.³⁵ Instability reemerged with the April 2004 impeachment of President Rolandas Paksas on charges of connections with Russian organized crime. The October 2004 elections made the new Labor Party by far the largest group in parliament, but created problems for coalition formation because of Labor Party leader Viktor Uspaskich's ties to Russia via energy giant Gazprom.³⁶ In the end, a four-party coalition was formed, including the Labor Party, the New Union Party, and the Union of Farmers and New Democracy Parties, but with the aging Algirdas Brazauskas of the Social Democratic Party as prime minister, as he has been since 2001.

Political parties in Lithuania are elite-driven, with some having links to the communist era, but consensus is hard to find; the party system is fragmented and corruption is a persistent concern. For 2005, Freedom House judged that Lithuania's political rights had suffered a setback from the previous year because of the impeachment of President Paksas.³⁷ Civil society is considered weak by the World Values Survey but, as in Poland's case, the Catholic Church plays a role in Lithuanian life and attitudes. Although the economy is growing, Lithuania's unstable politics, problems with corruption, and disputes with the European Union and Russia—often over energy issues—forecast some rough patches; as in Latvia, NATO and EU memberships should strengthen Lithuanian democracy.

Poland

Poland's Solidarity labor union was a genuine people's movement. In alliance with dissident intellectuals and the Catholic Church, the union forced change on Poland's communist government and indeed the entire Soviet bloc. Elites in contemporary Poland have both communist and anti-communist origins, and the competition for power is vigorous.

Economic growth and EU membership have rewarded Poland's years of sacrifice, yet the country seems to be facing one of its greatest political crisis since the end of the Cold War.

Solidarity's political allies and other non-communist parties initially led the government, but cooperation was difficult and the economic transition created severe hardships for the Polish people, leading to a loss of coalition popularity and cohesion. On the left, the Communist Party had essentially collapsed until Aleksander Kwasniewski, the current Polish president, was able to create a moderate left alternative to Solidarity, the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SDRP) party, from the pro-reform remnants of the Communist Party. The SDRP became the greater portion of the Democratic Left Alliance (DLA) that came to power in coalition in 1993. But like the previous ruling parties, the DLA could not reform the economy and provide social relief at the same time. Public despair and corruption scandals led to its defeat in 1997 and the accession of a center-right coalition of Christian democrats and market liberal successors to Solidarity.³⁸ But the main center-right party, the Solidarity Electoral Action, essentially collapsed before the next election and allowed the DLA to return to power in 2001 with Leszek Miller as prime minister. Following a similar cycle, economic policies needed for EU accession and a string of scandals weakened the DLA at the same time that the Civic Platform (PO, a new liberal-conservative grouping) and the populist Self-Defense Party were growing in popularity.³⁹ In order to save the center-left coalition, Miller resigned as prime minister in May 2004, just after Poland joined the European Union, and was succeeded by

Marek Belka, a former finance minister and supporter of continued economic reform. DLA has nonetheless virtually collapsed as well because of continued scandals and blame for the country's high unemployment. Belka has abandoned DLA and seems ready to join a new centrist Democratic Party, with hopes of countering the emerging populist alternatives. Parliamentary elections are expected in autumn 2005, along with presidential elections and a possible referendum on the EU constitution.⁴⁰

The prospect of EU membership has been a crucial incentive for democratic consolidation in Romania and forced the country to address deficiencies in its market economy and the administration of its justice system.

Economic growth and EU membership have rewarded Poland's years of sacrifice, yet the country seems to be facing one of its greatest political crises since the end of the Cold War. The party system, which had been evolving toward larger and more stable political groupings, has fragmented. Corruption remains a problem, and the country is reexamining "who did what" during the communist era, with sometimes negative reflection on the country's leadership. Civil society remains weak except for active labor unions and the Catholic Church, while discourse suggests a broad commitment to democracy. Poland's democracy is turbulent and fully challenged by integration with Europe; its atomized party system bodes ill for political stability at least for the near term.

Romania

The communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was removed from his position following a rebellion by dissident communist officials and military leaders; he and his wife were executed on Christmas Day, 1989. Ion Iliescu was subsequently elected president and his National Salvation Front (NSF), a party dominated by former communist officials, gained control of the parliament. According to Tom Gallagher,

*Iliescu and his circle were essentially mediocre politicians looking for some sort of modus vivendi with the West in the hope that they could still enjoy the autonomy to pursue a semi-authoritarian course in Romania.*⁴¹

With a poor record of governance and a terrible economy, plus a better organized opposition, Iliescu lost the presidency to Emil Constantinescu in 1996, and the NSF successor and allied parties lost control of parliament. The new government introduced more vigorous economic reform and took steps to reduce the influence of former security operatives, but proved relatively ineffective at policy implementation and susceptible to vested interests.⁴² Iliescu was reelected president in 2000, and the Social Democratic Party (PSD—an NSF successor), along with allied parties, took control of parliament with Adrian Nastase as prime minister. But scandals and continued poverty reduced PSD support, and Nastase's run for the presidency in

November 2004 was unexpectedly derailed by Bucharest mayor Traian Basescu.⁴³ In the parliament, Calin Tariceanu—another rich new leader, though at fifty-two years old, perhaps not from a new generation—became prime minister and organized a centrist ruling coalition made up of his own National Liberal Party, the Democratic Party, the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania, and the Humanist Party, excluding PSD from power even though it was the largest party.

The prospect of EU membership has been a crucial incentive for democratic consolidation in Romania and forced the country to address deficiencies in its market economy and the administration of its justice system. After considerable uncertainty and last minute effort, Romania received a positive endorsement from the European Parliament in April 2005 and seems set to enter the European Union in 2007. By supporting a cabinet made up of people “educated and trained after the December 1989 revolution,” President Basescu hopes to reduce corruption—probably the country’s gravest challenge.⁴⁴ Civil society remains weak in Romania, except for trade unions, and Freedom House lowered Romania’s political rights score for 2005 because of irregularities during the first round of the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections.⁴⁵ Although substantial challenges remain, the Basescu regime is expected to continue the country’s reform program and democratic consolidation.

Slovakia

Slovakia’s political elite encompass both anti-communists and reformed communists, with the latter decidedly dominating numerically. Unlike the Czech Republic, lustration laws (decommunization—removing communist from government positions) were not enforced in Slovakia. The country’s early years were dominated by Vladimir Meciar, a former communist official who led the republic both before and after separation from the Czech Republic. His political party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), and its nationalist allies were superficially committed to democracy and the free market, but abused the rule of law and used privatization to benefit political allies.⁴⁶ Opposition parties were uncooperative with each other and did not present a winning electoral alternative.

Faced with NATO and EU rejection in 1997 and a deteriorating economy, the people of Slovakia overwhelmingly rejected Meciar in 1998 parliamentary elections; the previously fractured opposition coalesced into a four-party coalition with Mikulas Dzurinda as prime minister. The new government represented the political spectrum from left to right, including the party coalition representing the Hungarian minority. By 2002, the government’s reform program had transformed the country sufficiently for it to join the front runners for EU membership. But Dzurinda and his coalition allies had become exceedingly unpopular because of economic hardship, corruption scandals, and political infighting; opposition leaders Meciar and Robert Fico of the new Smer party far exceeded Dzurinda in popularity. To the astonishment of most observers, Dzurinda emerged victorious from the September 2002 election as head of a new four-party center-right coalition, becoming one of the few prime ministers in the region to be reappointed since the end of the Cold War. Continued political

maneuvering has caused the coalition to lose its majority in parliament and popularity among Slovak citizens, yet it still manages to govern, at times with the tacit approval of Meciar's HZDS party.

Civil society in the country is fairly well developed for the region, but corruption remains a significant problem. Economic growth and foreign investment are recent success stories: Slovakia will soon be the world's largest per capita manufacturer of automobiles and was named the world's top economic reform country in 2004 by the World Bank.⁴⁷ There remains, however, a significant disparity between the prosperity of Bratislava, the capital and most developed region, and the rest of the country. Slovakia's international political standing received a boost from the February 2005 Bush-Putin summit meeting held in Bratislava.⁴⁸

While ethnic issues remain salient, democracy has made important advances since the people of Slovakia ousted Meciar.

With its relatively large Hungarian minority, Slovakia is sensitive to initiatives by the Hungarian government, and from its own Hungarian minority leadership. Hungary-Slovakia relations have cooled following EU membership because of the Hungarian referendum to extend citizenship in Hungary to ethnic Hungarians living in other countries. There are also disputes over possible compensation for Hungarians displaced under the Benes decrees. Political maneuvering in parts of the country seems designed to weaken the influence of the Hungarian coalition (SMK) at the regional level, which may be an indication of how SMK will be welcomed in the national government after the next election. A large Roma population is concentrated in the southeastern portion of the country and has not benefited from the economic and social changes of post-Communist Slovakia. While ethnic issues remain salient, democracy has made important advances since the people of Slovakia ousted Meciar.

Slovenia

Slovenia has had a longer and more gradual transition from authoritarian rule than the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. As a former Yugoslav republic, it had considerable autonomy under a politically and economically mild version of communism.⁴⁹ An independence movement began in 1987 and won the 1990 elections, bringing the Democratic Opposition of Slovenia (DEMOS) coalition to power. With Serb leaders in Belgrade focused on centralization and keeping the federation together, political confrontation and war became necessary preludes to independence.

DEMOS fractured after independence and was followed by coalitions almost always led by reformed communists of the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia Party (LDS). Milan Kucan, an ex-communist leader of the independence movement, served two terms as president until 2002 and provided important leadership for the new country. He was succeeded by Janez Drnovsek, who had served as prime minister during LDS coalitions.⁵⁰ But the voters rejected LDS during October 2004

parliamentary elections and made the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDP, a center-right descendent of DEMOS) the largest party. SDP leader Janez Jansa became prime minister and formed a ruling coalition with the New Slovenia—Christian People's Party (NSi), the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), and the Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS).⁵¹

Civil society has actually weakened in recent years while corruption has been less pervasive than in most countries of the region.⁵² Cooperation among elites who shared a communist past smoothed the democratic transition but also may have preserved privileged connections among political and business leaders. The alternation of government away from LDS was probably a positive development for Slovenian democracy. With the highest GDP per capita in Central and Eastern Europe, relative political stability, and substantial personal freedom, democracy is doing well in Slovenia.

CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRACY

Central and Eastern Europe has made good progress toward democratic consolidation since the end of the Cold War, with the ten countries examined overcoming enormous obstacles in moving toward Western-style political systems and free market economies. Yet problems remain. Poland's political instability is perhaps the most alarming recent development and could lead to a weak or even regressive leadership in the region's most important state. Ruling coalition troubles may emerge in Lithuania and elsewhere—adding to the regional political instability experienced since EU accession. Corruption remains a major concern in Romania and most other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, while economic angst burdens Romania, Bulgaria, and significant population segments in other countries of the region. Several societal issues, such as Hungarians living outside of Hungary and Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, remain politically important both domestically and internationally; at the same time, the Roma living in the region remain impoverished and politically marginalized.

National leaders in Central and Eastern Europe should make renewed commitments to public service, constituent needs, and civil society; they must also resist populist and nationalist excess—a temptation remaining and perhaps encouraged by EU accession. Corruption, low living standards, and societal problems will not go away anytime soon, but they can be addressed by democratic means. By taking on difficult issues through open and accepted political, judicial, and administrative processes, governments can change democracy from abstract principles to working level practices; managing problems, even those with no apparent solution, becomes the norm and democracy turns into “the only game in town.”

Notes

¹ Samuel Huntington's first wave of democratization began with the American and French Revolutions of the late-18th century and continued through the European liberalizations of the early-20th century; his second wave included European countries democratized as a result of World War II and those in Africa and Asia up to the early 1960s that made some progress in democracy after

decolonization; his third wave began in 1974 in Portugal, spread to elsewhere in Europe and then to Latin America and Asia in the 1980s—concluding with the end of communism in the former Soviet bloc into the 1990s. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 16-26. Some political analysts place Central and Eastern European transitional democracies in a Fourth Wave. See for instance, Michael McPaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 2, January 2002, 212-244. Regardless of the wave in which they are included, the salient point is that Central and Eastern European countries have been relatively successful in their democratization efforts.

² Under Huntington’s two-turnover criteria a democracy would be viewed as consolidated if “the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of [democratic] transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election.” Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 266-267.

³ Jeffrey Kopstein reviews several books concerning these and related issues in “Postcommunist Democracy: Legacies and Outcomes,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 2, January 2003, 231-250.

⁴ The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO on March 12, 1999. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined on March 29, 2004.

⁵ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3-5.

⁶ Stephen E. Hanson, “Defining Democratic Consolidation,” in Richard D. Anderson, Jr., M. Steven Fish, Stephen E. Hanson, Philip G. Roeder, eds., *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 129.

⁷ See John Higley, Jan Pakulski, and Włodzimierz Wesolowski, *Postcommunist Elites and Democracy in Eastern Europe* (London, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 1-7, for theoretical discussion of elites and democracy.

⁸ John Higley, Judith Kullberg, and Jan Pakulski, “The Persistence of Postcommunist Elites,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, April 1996, 137-138.

⁹ Kopstein, “Postcommunist Democracy,” 236.

¹⁰ Tomas Kostelecky, *Political Parties after Communism: Development in East-Central Europe* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002), 157.

¹¹ Gordon White, “Civil Society, Democratization and Development (I): Clearing the Analytical Ground,” *Democratization*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Autumn 1994, 397, as cited in Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, eds., *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 9.

¹² Civil society is not without its critics. Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers point out that “the concept of the virtuous civil society has long coexisted uneasily with doubts about the ability of democratic governments to stand up to special interest groups and lobbyists.” Ottaway and Carothers, *Funding Virtue*, 294. In Central and Eastern Europe as elsewhere, some organizations promote intolerance and may threaten other groups; NGOs advocating democracy, on the other hand, have been beneficial to democratic consolidation in several countries of the region.

¹³ Marc Morje Howard, “The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2002, 161-164. The World Values Survey index 1997 documents the average number of organizational memberships per person in each country as well as many other measures of social and political behavior. World Values Survey data used in this article was drawn from Howard’s article; for further information on the World Values Survey, see www.worldvaluessurvey.org/statistics/index.html.

¹⁴ Sten Berglund, Tomas Hellen, and Frank Aarebrot, eds., *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1998), 366. See also, Kopstein, “Postcommunist Democracy,” 237-241.

¹⁵ Janusz Bugajski, *Political Parties of Eastern Europe* (Armonk, NY: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002), 776-779.

¹⁶ John S. Dryzek and Leslie Holmes, *Post-Communist Democratization: Political Discourses across Thirteen Countries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 207-208.

¹⁷ “Moody’s Rates Bulgaria Below Investment Grade on Overheating Worries,” *SeeNews*, November 17, 2004, available at www.lexis.com, accessed March 19, 2005.

- ¹⁸ Zoltan Barany, "Bulgaria's Royal Elections," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, April 2002, 153, however, considers civil society robust in Bulgaria.
- ¹⁹ Carmen González Enriquez, "Elites and Decommunization in Eastern Europe," in John Higley, Jan Pakulski, and Włodzimierz Wesolowski, eds., *Postcommunist Elites and Democracy in Eastern Europe* (London, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 284-285.
- ²⁰ Bugajski, *Political Parties of Eastern Europe*, 236-241.
- ²¹ Martin Weiss, "Czech Republic," in Adrian Karatnycky, Alexander J. Motyl, and Amanda Schnetzer, eds., (Freedom House) *Nations in Transit 2003: Democratization in East Central Europe and Eurasia* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 223; Dryzek and Holmes, *Post-Communist Democratization*, 240-252.
- ²² The Benes decrees, issued by President Edvard Benes in 1945 after World War II, expelled ethnic Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovakia and seized their property in retribution for their support of Nazi Germany during the war.
- ²³ Freedom House scores political rights and civil liberties on a seven point scale with seven being the worst and one being the best which can be achieved. "Civic Power and Electoral Politics," *Freedom in the World 2005, A Report from Freedom House*, 6, available at www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2005/essay2005.pdf, accessed April 20, 2005.
- ²⁴ "Czechs, Slovaks Rather Trust Local Than Central Bodies," *CTK National News Wire*, February 2, 2005, available at www.lexis.com, accessed March 19, 2005.
- ²⁵ Bugajski, *Political Parties of Eastern Europe*, 48-55.
- ²⁶ "Estonia on brink of new crisis over anti-corruption drive," *Agence France Presse*, March 15, 2005, available at www.lexis.com, accessed March 19, 2005.
- ²⁷ "Baltic States: Country Outlook," *EIU ViewsWire*, October 29, 2003, available at www.nexis.com, accessed March 19, 2005.
- ²⁸ Sten Berglund, Frank H. Aarebrot, Henri Vogt, and Georgi Karasimeonov, *Challenges to Democracy: Eastern Europe Ten Years after the Collapse of Communism* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001), 152-157.
- ²⁹ For more on Baltic issues, see Gazina Miniotaite, "The Baltic States: In Search of Security and Identity," in Charles Krupnick, ed., *Almost NATO: Partners and Players in Central and Eastern European Security* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 261-296.
- ³⁰ Bugajski, *Political Parties of Eastern Europe*, 342-349.
- ³¹ "PM, Chief Rival Held Back Plenty of Ammunition in Dueling," *Hungarian News Agency (MTI)*, February 17, 2005, available at www.lexis.com, accessed April 18, 2005.
- ³² Robert Wright, "Overshadowed by two big personalities," *Financial Times*, May 27, 2003, II.
- ³³ Bugajski, *Political Parties in Eastern Europe*, 97; "Latvia politics: Turmoil following premier's exit," *EIU ViewsWire*, February 16, 2004, available at www.lexis.com, accessed April 18, 2005.
- ³⁴ The Democratic Index created by Richard Rose, Christian W. Haerpfer, and others for the New Europe Barometer Surveys (NEBS) is the sum of nine indexes based on individual level questions about democracy in particular countries. Less than forty means "transforming society;" greater than forty means "emerging democracy;" and, greater than sixty means "consolidated democracy." Latvia scored eighteen. Christian W. Haerpfer, *Democracy and Enlargement in Post-Communist Europe: The democratization of the general public in fifteen Central and Eastern European countries* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), Table 3.7, 44.
- ³⁵ Bugajski, *Political Parties in Eastern Europe*, 130-135.
- ³⁶ "Opposition Leads Lithuania Poll," *CNN.com*, October 11, 2004, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/10/10/lithuania.election.reut/>, accessed April 18, 2005.
- ³⁷ "Civic Power," Freedom House, 7.
- ³⁸ Bugajski, *Political Parties in Eastern Europe*, 165-167.
- ³⁹ "One more chapter in Miller's tale," *EIU ViewsWire*, February 18, 2004; "Polish opposition rejects austerity plan, putting government at risk," *Agence France Presse*, March 1, 2004, available at www.nexis.com, accessed April 18, 2005.
- ⁴⁰ "Poland's president sets parliamentary elections for Sept. 25," *Associated Press Worldstream*, May 18, 2005, available at www.lexis.com, accessed July 1, 2005.

⁴¹ Tom Gallagher, "History [Romania]," *Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States 1999*, 4th ed. (London, UK: Europa Publications Limited, 1998), 610. The presidency has considerable power in Romania, unlike most countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁴² See V. G. Baleanu, *Romania's November 2000 Elections: A Future Return to the Past?*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Occasional Brief No. 80, November 17, 2000, for further analysis of Romanian politics.

⁴³ "Romanian Politics: Political Outlook," *EIU ViewsWire*, February 19, 2004, available at www.nexis.com, accessed April 18, 2005.

⁴⁴ "Romanian parliament meets to vote on new centre-right government," *The All I Need (AFP)*, 2004, available at www.theallineed.com/news/0412/283766.htm, accessed March 27, 2005.

⁴⁵ "Civic Power," Freedom House, 7.

⁴⁶ For more on the Meciar regime, see Charles Krupnick and Carol Atkinson, "Slovakia and Security at the Center of Europe," in Charles Krupnick, ed., *Almost NATO: Partners and Players in Central and Eastern European Security* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 50-52.

⁴⁷ Slovakia received this designation alongside Colombia. "Doing Business 2005: Poor Nations Struggle To Reduce Red Tape For Business, Miss Large Growth Opportunities," *World Bank Group News & Broadcast*, September 8, 2004, available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:20250634~menuPK:34463~pagePK:64003015~piPK:64003012~theSitePK:4607,00.html>, accessed June 15, 2005.

⁴⁸ Brian Whitmore, "For Slovaks, Bush Visit Fuels a New Legitimacy, 'Reliable Ally' has Coming-out Party," *Boston Globe*, February 25, 2005, available at www.lexis.com, accessed March 27, 2005.

⁴⁹ Anton Bebler, "Slovenia's Smooth Transition," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2002, 128-129.

⁵⁰ Bugajski, *Political Parties in Eastern Europe*, 637-647.

⁵¹ Slovene government website, available at www.vlada.si/nadlani/index.php?lng=eng&vie=cnt&gr1=prdVld&gr2=clt, accessed June 15, 2005.

⁵² Bebler, "Slovenia's Smooth Transition," 134-137.