Postcommunism

The concept of postcommunism is disputed, because it merely describes the *previous* regime in a given country but it says nothing about the newly formed regimes subsequent to the collapse of Communism. As such, the concept of postcommunism is imprecise, both as a descriptive and analytical category in social science. It can only be applied to the relative short period of time between the collapse of the old and the establishment of the new regime, in other words, to the period in which the social and political relationships are defined far more so by the legacy of the previous regime than by internal and external factors. The essence of postcommunism is to stress the domination of non-democratic political legacy in new settings after dictatorship. It is for this reason that the concept had been used, first and foremost, in the international political science literature in the 1990s.

Communist regimes operated in the countries that are now termed postcommunist, representing a systemic alternative to liberal democracies. These regimes were based on Marxist-Leninist ideological foundations, or referred to these ideologies, whilst striving to attain global Communism vis-a-vis Western capitalist democracies. The Cold War era, which emerged after 1945, was characterized by the confrontation between „two world sytems", and which in certain cases had threatened with a third World War. The „first world", led by the United States, saw the systems of Soviet Union and China, who dominated the „second world", as Communist.

The extent to which these regimes were Communist in the original, Marxist sense, is disputable, given that market coordination was not replaced by the voluntary collaboration of social communities, but rather by the domination of the party-state. Left-leaning critics of these regimes, precisely for this reason, claimed that the systems that had emerged in the „second world" were not in fact Communist, but rather state capitalist. Others had considered these systems state socialist, arguing that nationalization had only represented the first step in building Communism, after which the process of social reconstruction would need to follow. One could speak of Communist systems, collectively, in the sense that the political leadership in these countries, or the groups thereof, had referred to themselves as Communists: they shared similar ideologies, employed similar political, police and military methods, and

endorsed similar goals for social transformation. Attaining these goals had failed not due to a lack of will, but rather because these political goals were simply unrealistic.

A study of post-totalitarian systems reveals that despite the fact that the term „postcommunism" is imprecise, it nonetheless has achieved a successful career in the international political science literature, the same which cannot be said for the term „postfacism". Often still, many of the ex-Communist countries, even twenty years after the democratic transition, are called postcommunist; meanwhile, it can be recalled that the ex-fascist countries twenty years after World War II were not labeled postfascist. (A Google search for the term „postcommunism" yields 849,000 results, whilst the term „postfascism" only yields 1710). The evolution of these two indicators is clearly related to the Cold War and the confrontation of the two world systems, in which the majority of the once fascist regimes had become democratic and joined the Western political and military organizations, thus confronting the Soviet Union-led political and military bloc. Fascist regimes were relatively short lived, and their collapse was followed by the global confrontation between the forces of communism and democracy. Communist systems, on the other hand, endured for longer periods and their collapse was not followed by confrontation that generated a threat of a world war. The image of a common enemy, and the lack of alternative world systems, enabled the perception of the legacy of Communism to endure, which in turn gave space for the term postcommunism to blossom. East Germany was the first among the ex-Communist countries to shed the stigma of postcommunism, which in 1990, with the reunification of Germany, ceased to exist as an independent state. It is interesting to note that researchers do not label Germany as postcommunist, and the integration of the East German territories appears as a domestic policy issue, much more so than a question of political system.

In the 1990s, the international political science literature used the terms „postcommunist countries" and „new democracies" interchangeably, which for a long time nourished the hope that the end of Communism would eventually lead to democracy in all ex-Communist countries. It took nearly a decade for reseachers to arrive at a consensus and agree that postcommunist countries cannot be treated as a unitary bloc. The expression „postcommunism", as the term Communism had in the past, highlighted the fundamental differences among the countries ranging from Poland to Mongolia, or Slovenia through Turkmenistan. In other words, it harnessed a false image that the political structures in these countries were essential similar. For this reason, the concept of postcommunism could not evolve to become a valid analytical category for all countries that for shorter or longer periods had experienced regimes based on Communist ideologies. The concept suggested that there

are far greater similarities between these countries than differences. Moreover, as we know today, existing similarities do not necessarily stem only from the Communist legacy: precommunist historical traditions, and their long term consequences, are equally important.

The use of the expression postcommunism subsided somewhat after the change of the millenium. This decreased popularity of the term can be linked to events such as the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York in 2001, the ex-Communist East Central European countries joining NATO, or the accession of the ten ex-Communist countries to the European Union in 2004 and 2007. Today, the new member states of the European Union, which include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, are not much described as postcommunist countries any longer, but rather as new member states. Freedom House has classified these countries as full democracies for over a decade, and according to the Human Development Index, they belong to the most advanced group of countries on a global scale. Most of the Balkan countries, with the exception of Bosnia and Kosovo, are on their way in joining the league of the Baltic republics and the Central European countries in terms of democratic development. These countries have become, or are increasingly becoming, a part of the Western political, military and economic integrational frameworks, in a world in which religious fundamentalism and large scale immigration from third world countries have become the most pressing issues. Faced with these challenges, the West has found allies in the East Central European countries, enabling them in turn to shed the term postcommunism and its derogatory connotation.

The term postcommunism continues to be employed widely across those countries in which the process of democratization stalled, or had been reversed, after 1991. For the most part, these countries had been part of the ex-Soviet Union: They range from Belarus to Kazahkstan, Georgia through Kyrgyzstan, and Russia to Armenia. When applied to these countries, the term postcommunism not only serves to describe a common past; rather, it highlights the fact that the process of democratization had come to a halt. The term postcommunism here indicates the most convenient common denominator, based on which the various new, hybrid regimes, ranging from electoral democracies through competitive authoritarianism to almost full authoritarian systems, can be mentioned. The systematic study of these regimes began only after the year 2000 and had produced significant findings in understanding and describing the political and economic transformations in the Caucasian states and the Central Asian countries, as well as in Ukraine and Russia. Yet again, the concept of postcommunism has proven imprecise and much too broad of an umbrella term, by bringing very dissimilar, non-democratic systems under the same hat. Until a broad

consensus concerning the academic classification of the new hybrid regimes is born, it is possible that the concept of postcommunism will continue to be applied to these countries.

The concept of postcommunism cannot serve as a legitimate analytical category for a comprehensive description of consolidated regimes; however, as a modifier, it can be broadly applied for a better understanding of certain social and political processes. Contemporary historians, political scientists and sociologists will most probably analyze, for a long time to come, the various aspects of the historical transformation, which as a modifier can be labeled as postcommunist transition, and which in scientific thinking and historical awareness will doubtless remain one of the fundamental historical narratives of the 20th century.

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Further Readings

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