

Freedom

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The fall of the Berlin Wall is usually considered to be the starting point for the “liberation” of first Central and Eastern Europe and then the former Soviet republics. Removal of the physical (and also the political and psychological) barriers between East and West Berlin did indeed play a huge part and in many respects made the “liberation” process irreversible. However, the process itself began not in Berlin and not with the wall’s fall.

A more accurate date from which to start the countdown to the socialist bloc’s “liberation” would be not November 9, 1989, but August 19, 1989, when what was dubbed the “European picnic” took place. A large number of East Germans, anxious to make their way at any cost to West Germany, where they were promised citizenship and a new life, found themselves at that moment in socialist but relatively liberal Hungary, from where they could hope to cross into Austria and onwards into West Germany. The Hungarian government came to their aid, opening the border with Austria first for one day, and then, on September 11 that same year (alas, history has since defiled this date!), for good. No sooner was the decision made than East Germans began streaming into Hungary and Czechoslovakia and from there to West Germany. The East Germans’ desire to seek a new life elsewhere and the Hungarian and Czechoslovak authorities’ refusal to support the East German government and send the would-be émigrés home by force made the wall dividing Berlin an absurdity, and this is what brought the wall down.

I recall these precursory events not out of a pedantic nature, but because if we want to understand subsequent events we first have to trace

them back to their real causes. The Berlin Wall came down not because Berlin and Bonn (and thus Moscow and Washington) agreed to let it fall, but because it had been quite simply bypassed and deprived of its sense, thus turning it into nothing but meaningless bricks and barbed wire. But most important of all is why it was bypassed: East Germans wanted to live on *the other side*. This contradicts another of the explanations of what brought the wall down, namely the idea that it fell because East Germans wanted change in their own country.

When describing the behavior of consumers dissatisfied with this or that product, economists use a model giving consumers two options – “exit” or “voice.” The second option is simpler and requires less cost and effort, but it makes sense only when people think there is a likelihood that their voice will be heard and taken into consideration (and not only by the powers that be). If people see no chance of this, they choose the first, more radical option. Political economist Alfred Hirschman applied this model to the situation in East Germany. I will not go into all the reasons why East Germans chose the “exit” rather than the “voice” option, but will only note that this choice was quite clear and unambiguous.

East Germany was not the only country that saw many of its citizens leave during the totalitarian regime’s rule and after its collapse. Even today, people are still emigrating from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Most of them head for the West in pursuit of money, education, safety, and new opportunities. Of course, people also emigrate from third world countries and from one developed country to another, either more developed or simply offering something different. I say this just to note that there is no reason to reproach East Germans for what was an understandable choice and standard sort of response on their part.

However, at the same time, their choice is noteworthy in that it reflects the essence of the post-communist period, and not just in Germany (less so in Germany, in fact, since East Germany had an advantage that none of the other countries had – it was subsequently absorbed by the Federal Republic of Germany). Flight from one country to another was and still is in many

cases not so much about the search for freedom as the search for a better life. If East Germans sought freedom, it was freedom “from” (oppression, poverty, a drab existence, lack of hope), which is certainly all very important, but it is a very different thing from freedom “to” (express one’s views, exercise political and civil self-government, and help set one’s own country’s policies). Liberal theorists assert that this is all one and the same thing, but the experience of the last twenty years suggests otherwise.

Two decades after the Berlin Wall fell, many speak of a new wall dividing Europe. This new wall is a lot farther east than the old Iron Curtain. It is far easier to penetrate, but causes much harm even so. It divides the countries that have joined the European Union from those that can hope to join only many years down the line, if at all. Analysts note that only the former socialist bloc countries to the west of this new wall have made a successful transition to democracy and a market economy. Some see historical and cultural differences as the explanation, suggesting that some countries are capable of making this transition, while others are not. But experience shows that a different link between cause and effect is in play, and that the European Union was the deciding factor in those countries that made successful transitions.

Whatever the causes and effects involved, the new curtain dividing Europe is largely illusory. It is only as real as people’s (and politicians’) imaginations render it. It does, however, make it hard to see the real similarities between the countries and societies on either side, and for all their seeming differences, these countries do share indisputable similarities.

There is no doubt that the new EU members have a more solid institutional foundation than their eastern neighbors. This is thanks to the EU itself and its *acquis communautaire*, which the Central and Eastern European governments have brought into force over the last almost twenty years. This has created what transition specialists Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan call the “usable state.” The commitment of these countries’ elites to democratic values and procedures is largely a product of their need to prove themselves part of the European family of peoples and countries.

In the years before their countries gained EU membership, almost all of the region's politicians tried to win over voters during election campaigns by asserting that only they, and not their opponents, would take the country faster into the EU.

However, it is one thing to create a usable state and another to establish just to what extent society is ready to "use" it. This concerns not only society in general, but politicians, political parties, the media, civil society, and all other "non-structural" elements making up the democratic system. A state, after all, is not some formal set of constitutionally enshrined institutions, but a system of relations between society and what we call the authorities, as well as relations within society itself. Determining the changes that have taken place since 1989 requires us to look at what has happened to this system of relations between society and the state.

One very important change has taken place: the state is no longer the decisive factor in people's success and prospects. This change has taken place in all of the former socialist bloc countries (with perhaps the partial exception of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). These two countries aside, totalitarianism is dead throughout the region, meaning that ideology plays almost no part today overall. These two changes combined have resulted in fundamental shifts in the relations between society and the state, although not always in favor of freedom, as we will see a little later.

The state no longer tells its citizens where to live, work, study, and rest, what to read, what to wear, and how to interpret the events taking place around them. Even in countries where democracy is weak or altogether absent, basic human rights are observed, and the main difference today in private life for people in the former Soviet Union and in Western Europe is the level of prosperity they enjoy. There are more noticeable differences when it comes to civil and political freedoms. Only in the new EU member countries do people have rights (electoral rights, the freedom to demonstrate, freedom of the media, etc.) comparable to those of people in the "old" Europe.

What does this difference in civil and political freedoms mean? According to surveys conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction

and Development (EBRD), around 4 percent of people in Central and Eastern Europe think that the economic situation in their countries is better now than in 1989. This response was given by the same number of people in the CIS countries, despite these countries' obvious economic backwardness. The political picture is even more paradoxical: around 45 percent of people in the CIS said that the political situation in their country has improved since 1989, while this view was shared by slightly more than 30 percent in Central and Eastern Europe.

Of course, public opinion surveys have to be taken with a grain of salt. Any attempt today to assess the state of affairs twenty years ago will inevitably be subjective. In addition, the degree of political and economic collapse in the Central European countries differed (mostly for the better) from that in the Soviet Union. This dubious "sociology" could be dismissed altogether were it not for other statistical evidence to back it up. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the number of people leaving the former socialist countries has been growing steadily over the last ten years. From 1998 through 2007, the number of people who left Hungary for the OECD countries (wealthy, mostly Western countries) rose by 92 percent and came to 34,900 people in 2007. The figure rose by 137 percent in Poland over the same period (reaching 221,900 people a year). A total of 115,400 people left Ukraine in 2007 – an increase of 238 percent compared to 1998. The only country that stands out is Russia, with 70,300 departures in 2007 – just 4 percent more than in 1998.

Democracy is not the Berlin Wall. It has no barbed wire and no armed guards doing their rounds. It does not hold anyone back. But if you bypass it and run from it in search of a better life, it becomes just as absurd as the Berlin Wall did twenty years ago, and just like the Berlin Wall, it will also fall if it loses its meaning.

You could object, of course, saying that people are running not from democracy, but from one democratic country to another. You could ask where democracy fits into all this anyway, when what we were talking about was freedom. Besides, what kind of freedom is this, if it doesn't include the pos-

sibility of leaving? This is certainly the case, but it does not change the essence of the matter. As before, people are still primarily concerned with their personal well-being (in all its forms, not just the material aspect) and their children's future. Politics is a means for achieving these goals. People saw the Berlin Wall as an obstacle mainly for these reasons, rather than for political ones. The new "democracy" is not an obstacle in people's way, perhaps, but it evidently fails to help them achieve their objectives to the extent they would like, and thus, like the wall, it too can vanish.

It is worth taking a look back at what happened after the wall came down. Gorbachev sent the signal that the Soviet Union would not protect the socialist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe from their own people, who did not want to live under socialism. In this situation, the "voice" option suddenly became a real possibility, and people swiftly showed the communist leaders to the "exit." Some of these leaders stepped aside voluntarily, some not so willingly, and some did not leave at all, but there remain no more communist countries in the region. The new leaders (some of whom were simply the old ones in new guise) learned to play by new rules. There were two rules. First, leaders were chosen by the people in free elections, if only because this system guaranteed that the losers could stay in the game and not end up in prison. Second, the aspiration to join the European Union became the sole basis for legitimacy.

The Central and Eastern European countries wandered the desert for fourteen years until some of them were finally allowed to join the EU. Over these years they had functioning democratic institutions, held elections, changed parties and governments, developed an independent media, and built a market economy. But there was no public politics as such. Former communists (now social democrats) competed against former anti-communists (now center-right) in proving who was more of a technocrat and less of a demagogue. However, they failed to develop party organizations able to bring together and mobilize diverse public interests. If asked where their country's future lay, right and left both chorused "in Europe." All fine and good, but this is not enough. There is no democracy without differences.

Differences in opinion existed, of course, but they were not discussed in the political arena. The politicians and the public probably share the blame for this situation, afraid, no doubt, that if they aired their dirty laundry in public it would lessen their chances of EU membership. Meanwhile, widespread reform began in the education, health and housing sectors, the social and economic stratification of society became more pronounced, and the number of homeless and unemployed grew. Furthermore, some countries simply ceased to exist and new countries emerged in their place. This was a huge test for society in general, as well as for every individual. The EU countries also underwent this whole process recently or before, and to a certain extent are still dealing with the consequences today. Different societies chose different solutions, and so the German state differs greatly from, say, Britain or Italy.

Now that they have become “European,” the people of Central and Eastern Europe have to decide just what kind of Europeans they want to be and what kind of state to build. The seemingly democratic institutions that served them well enough along the path toward EU membership have turned out to be not so well suited for further maneuvers. There are no politicians willing to incorporate into a constructive program the widespread discontent revealed by the EBRD surveys and emigration statistics. Instead, the disenfranchised and confused population is caught up in the embrace of radicals and nationalists with their simple answers. Filled with a sense of having been unjustly cheated, the public follows the aggressive slogans and turns its anger against “outsiders.” Gypsies have been frequent targets of this frustration, and here and there across the “new” Europe synagogues have been set ablaze. People in these countries are trying to speak up, but in the corridors of power it seems that no one is listening, and the threat of a mass movement towards the “exit” is growing anew.

With the exception of the three Baltic countries, people in the former Soviet Union have not become citizens of the united Europe and will not do so in the foreseeable future. Thus, Russian and Ukrainian politicians, ignoring the call of public politics, cannot, like their counterparts in

Central and Eastern Europe, justify themselves by saying that by engaging into politics they can postpone accession to the European Union. By and large no such call has come anyway. The Central European countries wandered for fourteen years through the desert of formal democracy, but at least they picked up some useful habits over this time. The leaders of their neighbors to the east, however, have led their people into somewhat different deserts, where they picked up somewhat different habits, or rather their habits remained pretty much the same as before the eviction from the Soviet “paradise.” The rules that the Central and Eastern European leaders played by do not apply here. There are no rules here at all.

It is noteworthy that the problems on either side of the new curtain are nevertheless almost the same. For all their formal success, the Central and Eastern European countries have not yet sufficiently developed the substance of relations between the state and society, including parliaments, parties, and the press. This means that government is still not accountable to the public, and this is what causes people to head for the “exit,” some emigrating, others moving to the outskirts of the political arena, and still others withdrawing into themselves (with or without the help of alcohol and drugs).

During the Soviet period people also chose the “exit” option. Emigration was difficult, but possible for some groups. Others, who could not emigrate but did not want to live within the limits set by the state, chose what outwardly resembled the “voice” option but in reality differed little from the “exit.” The dissident movement harbored no illusions about the possibility of changing the political regime. Those who did not want to resign themselves to the system, but could not live beyond its physical borders, could at least live beyond its moral borders. This was what they meant by “living a life without lies.” Toward this goal, they would get together and speak the truth, write the truth in their *samizdat* publications, share the truth with Western journalists, and for a brief moment in Red Square even shout the truth to the stones, fir trees and dead leaders, and to the waiting KGB officers.

SAM GREENE.
FREEDOM

Times have changed now. Information travels freely from computer to mobile phone and on around the entire globe. It can easily bypass any wall and penetrate any curtain. The few regimes that keep their people in fear and darkness are doomed. Sooner or later the absurdity of this closed-off life will become too obvious and the walls will tumble down. The peoples of North Korea, Burma and the other handful of totalitarian states will sooner or later gain their freedom, but it will be freedom “from” rather than freedom “to.”

When Hirschman wrote about the political choice between “voice” and “exit,” he assumed that in a free environment, with all other things being equal, people would choose “voice” rather than “exit.” This is because “exit” involves greater costs; after all, the person doing the exiting leaves behind all that is close and familiar and has to adapt to a new way of life. What happens, however, if the “exit” turns out to be closer? What happens if all one has to do to “exit” is to buy a package tour, open the right book or turn on a computer? The result is probably what we see now. “Exit” has become a cheaper and simpler option than “voice.” A dreary and difficult existence becomes more bearable. In theory, people reject the “voice” option only if it is senseless or dangerous. But in the new paradigm, when it is enough to press a button to “exit,” the theory no longer works. In the modern world people renounce the “voice” option just because they are too lazy to become actively involved.

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, with rare and sad exceptions, have obtained freedom “from.” They are now full-fledged citizens of a new globalized world, from which they obtain many benefits. But they are not full-fledged citizens of their own countries and they receive only negligible benefits from being citizens of their countries. Obtaining freedom “to” and public sovereignty over their own country, rather than personal sovereignty beyond its physical or moral borders, is a worthy objective for the next twenty years.