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Media, parties and political transition. Contrasting approaches of sister-disciplines.

We are all accustomed today to the preeminent role of mass media in politics. The success of political parties is typically presumed to depend on how they often adapt to the logic of media. Political events, particularly party congresses, are carefully pre-staged, and the real leaders of the parties are the un-elected media specialists, the so called spin-doctors.

In 1989 in Eastern Europe the mass media was, of course, different than it is today. It was much more amateurish and disorganised. The personal sympathies of particular journalists were often more consequential for what was finally aired on TV or written about in the papers than the central directives issued by the directors of these mediums.

This relative immaturity of the media organizations did not stop them from playing a crucial historical role during the collapse of Communism and the development of liberal democracy. There are some important structural reasons that privileged at that time the media more than ever before or ever after. In 1989 there was a fundamental lack of consensus over norms in Eastern European societies. The socializing agents that normally inculcate values, norms and attitudes in citizens were all in deep crisis. Churches, schools, families, trade unions, etc. were too deeply embedded in the socialist system to provide guidance. Journalists had a past as well, but they had the information about the Western norms and, working in the most modern sector of the society, had the credibility to spread these norms. And they had the possibility to develop a nonpartisan image, to play the role of *vox populi* in the anomic circumstances of 1989.

While parties had to face a very strong anti-party popular mood, journalists were indeed relatively highly regarded. The prestige of the TV typically surpassed that of the parliament. This is a particularly significant fact, given that Eastern European spend more time in front the TV than Western Europeans, while membership in voluntary organizations is well below the Western standards.

Political actors did not forget, even in the most difficult moments, the relevance of the media. In Romania the revolution and the military clashes happened in from of the cameras, and, according to many analysts, for the cameras. In Hungary one of the most important questions for both the old and the new elite was who can stand next to the coffins at the reburial of

Prime Minister Imre Nagy at the Heroes' Square. Political actors knew that their behavior in these well televised moments may determine their political carrier.

One could argue that politicians in 1989 were in general particularly conscious of the fact that they are making history; that they will end up in history books. The concern for the Communist elite about how they will be remembered was one of the reasons for the large scale destruction of files. At the same time the very fact that such a considerable amount of evidence has been destroyed, and, in some cases, falsified, must warn us against taking the remaining documents at their face value.

Next to these conscious efforts of manipulation, media modified the image of reality in many other ways. By nature, mass media personalizes problems that are structural and disregards social processes. Even if it has the best intention, it is unable to have access to certain kinds of information (eg. secret negotiations) and to provide equal access to all relevant players. For all these reasons, historians and history teachers must treat the material produced by 1989 mass media with caution.

At the same time the mass media should not be perceived as an almighty manipulator. The years that followed 1989 proved that political forces that were treated with disdain by the media elite managed to win elections. Popularity among journalists did not guarantee political survival. But it is doubtless, that media played and continues to play an important role in setting the political agenda, lifting the relevance of certain issues and sidelining others.

The sister-disciplines of political science and history can help each in uncovering the true nature of the events of 1989. Before pointing out what historians could learn from political scientists, let me mention something that they should not. One of the biases of political science that historians should not copy is their emphasis on elites. This bias comes from the fact that political scientists are obsessed with the question "why?". And, indeed, the final cause of the political transition lies in Moscow, it is related to the lost arm-race and it was originally manifested by the Glaznost of Gorbachev. But the question "how?" is equally important, and historians are better than political scientists in answering this question. The answer must take into account the masses, represented by demonstrations and by public opinion. The fast pace of the events is largely due to the pressure from below on the decision-makers.

Political science should be praised, however, for treating 1989 in a comparative way, embedding it into the international context. It notices and highlights that the events in various

countries of the region formed a chain, and each new transition was characterized by a decreasing level of uncertainty.

The comparative perspective can have various advantages even when the analysis goes beyond the borders of the region. By comparing Eastern Europe to Southern Europe in the 1970's and 1980's one can demonstrate how profound and comprehensive the post-communist transformation was. New economic system, new political system, new constitutional regimes, and, sometimes, new states were to be built simultaneously. If revolution is defined by radical changes, 1989 presents us with some particularly clear cases of revolution.

The inter-regional comparison helps us to see something that is otherwise non-visible: namely the lack of certain actors. In 1989, with the exception of Romania, the military played a secondary, almost non-existent role. The role of churches was almost negligible. Elite-groups, mass media and civic initiatives that turned into parties were the protagonists.

Parties faced different challenges in this period than when Western and Southern Europe democratized. In Western Europe competitive oligarchic system democratized in the 19th century, while in Southern Europe both mobilization and contestation was at low levels during the authoritarian regimes. In contrast, when democratization reached Eastern Europe, its citizens were already mobilized and politicized. Endowed with the skills of 'cognitive mobilization', they can rely on their own education-based knowledge and on the information provided by the mass media. Therefore, political parties in Eastern Europe have a weaker role in shaping society than in shaping power.

As a result of the specificities of the post-Communist transition, parties had to face the legacy of weak or nonexistent democratic experience, and a complete concentration of power under communism. The developing party politics became characterized by a particularly intense competition, due to the high stakes (new constitutions, privatization, etc.)

Scholarship has recently moved away from emphasizing the underlying commonalities, to accentuate the sub-regional specificities within the world of post-communism. But heterogeneity makes post-communist party politics even more popular as target of research. The similar immediate past and the diverging outcomes in the respective countries promise the researchers the unique possibility to trace the effect of various institutional and cultural factors.

More thoroughly one researches the respective countries, more one realizes that the starting points were in fact different. Communism meant something different in different countries. Accordingly, the post-Communist political oppositions also vary. Even the “ancien regime forces” are structured differently in the various countries: they basically evaporated from some Baltic countries, they remained unreformed but marginalized in Czechoslovakia (and then in the Czech Republic), stayed equally unreformed and yet still play a principal role in Ukraine and Russia, slowly transformed and stayed dominant in Romania, turned nationalist in Serbia, and turned Socialdemocratic in Poland and Hungary.

The staggering variance on these and other issues calls for explanations. The explanation is likely to lie in history. At this point it is the political scientists who must realize that they cannot progress without the help of the historians.