

Freedom House, “Managed Democracy” and the 1989 Transition Paradigm

Why didn't democratization in 1989 involve a larger devolution of political power into the hands of the public? Throughout the course of Western involvement in the post-Cold War democratizations in Eastern Europe, the “active citizen” ideal was sidelined, replaced by a notion of the individual that more closely resembled a passive political subject with a civic-minded private life. What my research shows is that, in 1989, democracy was understood as a *technical mechanism* or process of *legal transfer* when it was managed by “experts”, and as an *ethic* or *sensibility* when it was “taught” to private citizens. The ‘transition paradigm’ involved an understanding of democracy which was depoliticized, technically-focused rather than structurally focused, and characterized by an overall private, rather than public, character.¹ Although this transition paradigm may have set the stage for the populist, or anti-democratic regimes we see in places like Poland and Hungary today, it also reveals the changing structure of democracy in the consolidated West.

The limitations of the ‘transition paradigm’ have only become more fully apparent as the global political situation and a growing acknowledgement in the political science literature of “hybrid” regime types such as “competitive authoritarianism”, “managed democracy” and “illiberal democracy” have pushed us to think more clearly about the ways in which thinly defined democratic political institutions, processes and strategies can be used to legitimate non-democratic ends. Recent scholarship on authoritarian politics, as well as a robust literature on populism, has paid attention to the myriad ways in which strategies of cooptation and legitimacy-building in non-democratic regimes can resemble activities previous scholars identified with the consolidation of Western democracy such as building separation-of-power institutions, holding elections, expanding social welfare, and even extending the franchise. What becomes clear after a deep-dive into the 1989 transitions is that political theorists and social scientists alike need a thicker concept for democracy that focuses on how public power is being exercised and contested during and between elections, rather than relying on the existence of political and legal institutions as indicators of their effective use, or democratic legitimacy.

My larger project, of which I provide only a slice here, aims to explore the transnational, historical political mechanisms which may have reinforced these trends in hybrid governance and democratic deficits in both the “West” and the “East”. In this memo, I specifically zoom in on the transformation of the former Soviet Bloc as a starting point for exploring both the state of democracy and ideas about democratization in the post-Cold War world.

From Management to Micromanagement: Comparing the Marshall Plan and the post-Soviet Transition

In 1989, Europe endured its second political reconstruction of the century, again following the fall of a powerful, totalitarian regime. During 1945—the first time around—the architects of the future geopolitical order were wary enough of their recent totalitarian past to design mechanisms against mass mobilizations of the future. As Peter Mair has suggested, European integration was designed to preclude future conflict on the continent and create “a protected sphere from the vagaries of representative democracy”, resulting in the shrinking power of parliamentary organs, a privileging of the deliberative role of experts and courts and the retreat of governance structures from the oversight of citizens, localities etc.² And although Marshall Plan aid in the form of grants—“largely capital assistance to rebuild war-

¹ For example, measuring democracy and political preferences via polling data of private citizens, rather than assessing the situations through public discourse and emerging partisan claims.

² Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2013); Jan-Werner Müller, “The Party’s Over,” *London Review of Books* 36, no. 10 (2014).

damaged infrastructures and industries”³—became one of the paving stones on Western Europe’s path towards relative stability, growth and redistributive social spending, this aid was not unconditionally granted by the United States, but motivated by a fear of Communism’s spread, and included provisions for currency convertibility, reduction in government spending and trade with the United States,⁴ as part of the brand-new Bretton Woods agreement and emerging neoliberal economic order. As Adam Tooze has shown, focusing on the West German settlement of 1952 and the highly contingent negotiations made by Konrad Adenauer on its behalf, “a little-known clause in the post-war aid agreements made Marshall Plan obligations senior to all other financial claims...[giving] the US the power to regulate the terms of the entire settlement.” But ultimately, and crucially, American strategic investment in the viability of Germany as a Cold War ally, as well as German negotiation efforts, would absolve the state of about 56 percent of its Weimar-era obligations and finance its loan postponement on the dime of the American taxpayer. As such, West European governments and even individual statesmen had a huge deal of control over post-war reconstruction budgets, which would be, in important ways, subject to political pressure from citizens demanding their own post-war settlement. As Tooze writes, “by the end of 1950, under massive political pressure, [Finance Minister Fritz Schäffer] had been forced to agree to a 50 per cent wealth tax spread over 30 years...Along with Bonn’s other spending commitments this raised the federal share of total public spending in West Germany from as little as 9 per cent in 1949 to over 42 per cent a year later.”⁵

In 1989, it was a litany of Western consultants would become the architects—or, perhaps more analogously, the sub-contractors and sub-sub-contractors—responsible for distributing the funds and resources foundational to the future East European democratic order. In theory, they would not simply facilitate the transfer of liberal legal institutions and raw capital grants to the countries of the former Soviet Bloc, but would also engage in an “information transfer” and pedagogical project of an unprecedented scale—assisting in the training, development and encouragement of new democratic citizens. Teaching individuals about civic culture and civic values, and relaying information about rights and how to use new legal and political institutions, became the metric and the goal of Western involvement in the new political landscape taking shape behind the freshly fallen Iron Curtain.

Janine Wedel, in her book *Collision and Collusion*, crafts an anthropological account of the interactions between Western “democracy experts”—the administrators appointed by the U.S. to oversee nearly \$1 billion in aid earmarked to “promote the private sector, democratic pluralism, and economic and political stability”—and their Central and East European counterparts, emphasizing the enormous gap in communication between the two groups, and the mistaken assumptions that emerged within the amalgamation of Western officials from different backgrounds and fields.⁶ She writes, “Although few Western officials expressed frustration with their Central and East European counterparts in public, they sometimes denigrated them in private: ‘They just can’t handle it,’ ‘They are so disorganized,’ or ‘They have no sense of democracy.’ Underlying these views was the common Western perception that the new Eastern leaders were either unreformed communists or former dissidents. Neither had any experience with democracy, and all were terribly disorganized.”⁷ The paradox of this transition framework is evident—how to orchestrate a country’s transition to

³ Janine R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe 1989-1998* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 29-30.

⁴ IMF, “Cooperation for Recovery: The Marshall Plan,” International Monetary Fund, www.imf.org.

⁵ Adam Tooze, “Reassessing the Moral Economy of Post-War Reconstruction: The Terms of the West German Settlement in 1952,” *Past & Present* 210, no. 6 (2011).

⁶ Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe 1989-1998*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

democratic self-government when the last thing those concerned are expected to be capable of is self-governance?⁸

Wedel also takes notes of the comparisons to the Marshall Plan made by Western officials and consultants during this heady period, arguing that “as early as May 1990, the United States had ruled out a modern-day Marshall Plan for reviving the economies of the former Communist bloc.”⁹ Yet the ruling out of a second Marshall Plan for Europe was not the result of a lack of political will in the US, or a decision by policymakers to take more of a back seat in the transition process. Instead it emerged out of a changed paradigm for understanding the process of reconstruction. As Wedel notes, “Minister Witold Trzeciakowski, Poland’s aid coordinator from 1989 to 1990, has stated that when he called, in 1989, for a \$10 billion “Marshall Plan” for the former Eastern Bloc, he envisioned not only aid in large amounts, but also an aid package largely of grants, as in the Marshall Plan, not primarily of *technical assistance and loans*.”¹⁰ Indeed, “By the end of 1992, the twilight of the aid push to the former Communist Bloc, the G-24 countries had committed \$48.5 billion in aid,” but “technical assistance though advisers who provided expertise and training made up the bulk of the grant aid.”¹¹

Freedom House and the Transition Paradigm

In my own research, I do a deep-dive into documents from one particular US government-funded, democracy promotion organization: Freedom House. The documents I have examined for content related to theories of democracy promotion span the period from 1987 to 1992, and reveal a similar emphasis on the facilitation of transition through a fragmented, depoliticized and technical process of information transfer. At first, democracy promotion efforts during the chaos of transition were highly reactive, providing, for example, Xerox machines and paper to incipient civil society organizations, or organizing forums for dissidents to brief officials and NGO leaders about events as they unfurled on the ground. But, once elections were scheduled to take place, organizations such as Freedom House (and other democracy promotion organizations receiving money through USAID) found themselves having to assert their lack of partisanship.¹² They remained wedded to an active role in the transitions, but were committed to a strategy of democracy assistance on the basis of an utterly depoliticized “civic education”, partnering with existing “non-political” student groups, professors, and intellectuals (and other individuals “coming from social groups enjoying general respect in the population”). The explicit goal was to identify reliable and civically-responsible but non-ideological locals, and enlarge these “small islands of democratic culture” surrounded by “unknown and potentially dangerous political seas” through a process of awareness-raising about legal institutions and training on processes like election-monitoring, the “idea of the secret ballot” etc.¹³ In a letter to Carl Gershman, the then-President of the US’s National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Penn Kemble and Bruce McCole of Freedom House explain their view that “that non-partisan civil education

⁸ Namely, to go back to the previous list, governance that fits the American standards for stability, private economic freedom and democratic pluralism.

⁹ Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe 1989-1998*, 29-30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16. (italics are mine)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹² For example: “[our Czech colleague Ivan Gabal] asked, in light of USAID’s traditional policy of providing electoral help to non-partisan, non-ideological groups, if there was any problem in their working with the Civic Forum” and “Since USAID does not want to get involved directly with political parties, the only credible source of personnel for a voter registration-education drive is the very active [non-political] student groups and their professors.” Penn Kemble, ““Czechoslovakia”; “Romania”,” in *Freedom House Archives MC#187*, ed. Princeton University (Princeton, New Jersey: Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library).

¹³ Dr. Michael Radu, “Freedom House Romanian Election Monitoring Program: Brief Proposal for Supporting Democracy in Romania,” *ibid.*

is the key to successful outcomes in the cascade of elections soon upon us in Eastern Europe,”¹⁴ and that “even miracles can have disadvantages: the stunning speed with which repressive governments fell in South East Europe left little time for the growth of pro-democratic communities and networks with strong roots among the general population.”¹⁵ Here they treat democracy not as if it were a procedure—a system for dealing with pluralism, majority alternations in government, and dynamic opinion formation in public—but as if it were an ideology and culture that can take hold and spread among networks of like-minded individuals.

Freedom House documents also relay a belief in the ability of practical procedures, technocracy, methodology and proper information transfer to facilitate the development of democracy at the institutional level, not simply the individual one. A discussion paper on strategy for the Freedom House Board of Directors in 1989 reads:

*“Often the most valuable help the United States can give is a practical kind: teaching the lore of democratic politics and parliamentarianism, the methods of private enterprise and finance, the experience of collective bargaining and the grievance procedure, and, of course, the ways of the independent judiciary and the practice of law. Our private sector – business, labor and service—can be encouraged to contribute through its own activities to this purpose”*¹⁶

What is striking here is the confidence with which Freedom House can depict processes that are highly charged with questions of partisanship, power, and politics (such as labor and capital bargaining) as if these merely consisted of methodologies, techniques, and solutions. In fact, individuals with history working with unions, such as Adrian Karatnycky (a former labor historian and previous Assistant to the President of the AFL-CIO who served as Executive Director of Freedom House from 1993-2004), as well as business professors and CEOs, made up the cohort of experts sent to Eastern Europe under Freedom House’s “Free Enterprise Initiative” under the auspices of consensus and pedagogical mission.¹⁷

The Rankings Smokescreen – Micromanagement and the Quantitative Turn

Nadia Urbinati has posited that democratic theorists looking for a concept of political participation that is simultaneously democratic and stable have pushed the democratic ideal in an ‘unpolitical’ direction. By her definition, ‘unpolitical democracy’ entails “a detached form of participation... a form of passive presence”—akin to a “citizen judge”. In this conception of democracy, the power and aim of the citizen is to “make power more transparent and impartial, not more accessible or widespread... Its goal is to devise institutions and rules that can in the long run make political participation less needed.”¹⁸ Urbinati’s argument helps us understand the kernel in democratic theory which might enable, reify or explain the technocratic turn in democratic practice, and the democracy-promotion process. In this sense, her concept is useful in assessing another key element of the post-

¹⁴ Penn Kemble and Bruce McCole, "Civic Education Projects, Spring 1990 Election Period, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria," *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Freedom House, "Us Foreign Policy and the Democratic Revolution: A Discussion Paper on Strategy for the Freedom House Board of Directors Meeting," *ibid.* (September 19, 1989). page 8

¹⁷ "The Free Enterprise Initiative: A Freedom House Program Proposal for Funding," in *Freedom House Records, MC#187*, ed. Princeton University (Princeton, New Jersey: Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, 1991-1994).

¹⁸ Nadia Urbinati, "Unpolitical Democracy," *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 (2010): 70.

Soviet transition framework—the rise in the use of quantitative rankings to assess transition’s success.

The emergence of powerful and oft-cited “rankings and ratings organizations” is clearly related both to the events of the post-Soviet transition period¹⁹ and, more generally, the “adoption of economic approaches and quantitative methods of analysis in political science...” which has attempted to “render policy problems amenable to technocratic solutions...”²⁰. It is precisely the “powerful allure of the technocratic model of policy evaluation and performance accountability...”²¹ that has obfuscated “the clarity of analytical debates about the policy values they purport to serve” and even in some cases acted as a “substitute for judgment in the public policy sphere.”²² One problem with this approach to assessing democracy, as Urbinati says, is that “If objectivity and impartial judgment are the content and goal of politics, citizens’ participation may become irrelevant and actually undesirable because after all, a few competent or virtuous participants can perform better deliberative service than many ordinary citizens.”²³ Even further, disguising normative assessments as somehow objective, unpolitical or uncontestable can cause citizens to react with apathy or disaffection towards politics in general. Anthropologist Jessica Greenberg has noted the myriad ways in which apathy and non-participation can be active responses by citizens with agency to control or contest the political narratives that have been foisted on them. She writes, “Apathy can also be a citizen response to the ways that international policymakers and democratization experts deploy normative models of democratic success and failure in newly emerging democracies.”²⁴

NOTES

- 1) For an interesting discussion about ways of making legal accountability institutions more robust to political accountability and democratic politics see Enrique Peruzzotti.²⁵
- 2) For an interesting discussion about the interaction between the “informational focus” of human rights campaigns and the loss of “structural accounts of social relations” see Samuel Moyn, who critiques human rights agendas for their minimalist, rather than maximalist programs, in ways that parallel and intersect with the human rights and democracy promotion paradigms which civil society mobilized around as the Iron Curtain fell.²⁶

¹⁹ Alexander Cooley, "The Emerging Politics of International Rankings and Ratings," in *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance* ed. Alexander Cooley and Jack Snyder (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

²⁰ Mlada Bukovansky, "Corruption Rankings: Constructing and Contesting the Global Anti-Corruption Agenda" *ibid.*, 63.

²¹ Jack Snyder and Alexander Cooley, "Conclusion," in *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance*, ed. Alexander Cooley and Jack Snyder (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 178.

²² *Ibid.*, 179.

²³ Urbinati, "Unpolitical Democracy," 75.

²⁴ Jessica Greenberg, "'There's Nothing Anyone Can Do About It': Participation, Apathy, and 'Successful' Democratic Transition in Postsocialist Serbia," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 41.

²⁵ Enrique Peruzzotti, "Broadening the Notion of Democratic Accountability: Participatory Innovation in Latin America," *Polity* 44, no. 4 (2012)..

²⁶ Samuel Moyn, "A Powerless Companion: Human Rights in the Age of Neoliberalism," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 77, no. 4 (2014): 159.

- 3) Of course, as Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato point out in their seminal work on the political theory of civil society, East European civil society movements found themselves in a tricky spot in 1989 with regards to their future aims. Should they become part of the state, thus abandoning their civil society classification and the political legitimacy of social movement, or should they self-limit and use mediating structures to remain political, while still separate from the state? Structurally, economic liberalization pushed civil society in the direction of total depoliticization (neither of these two options), because "...the revival of economic liberalism...increased suspicion of societal organizations capable of making demands on new political elites that might translate into unacceptable economic costs... Some held that societal democratization inhibit(ed) the creation of a truly modern state capable of effective decision-making."²⁷

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²⁷ Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 81.

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