

Changes in Former Communist States

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July, 1993

Submitted to Encyclopedia Britannica as "Changes in Former Communist States," to replace the section, "Patterns in Communist states," in the chapter on "Political Parties and Interest Groups."

From World War II to 1989, most of the communist nations in Eastern Europe were ruled by a single Communist Party (as in Albania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and the USSR), or by a Communist Party that dominated one or more satellite parties in a hegemonic multiparty system (as in Bulgaria, Poland, and East Germany). Falling somewhere between these categories was Yugoslavia, which was governed by a League of Communists composed of communist parties based in its several ethnic republics. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, these party systems were entirely transformed. By 1990, each country (Albania in 1991) quickly held relatively free elections that shattered the old regime. In most cases, power was transferred to those with little connection to the old leadership or who were dissident communists. In most cases, the former Communist Parties soon disbanded or reformed under different names to compete with new parties for votes and political influence. The parties and party systems in these countries are not yet institutionalized, and they will need time, perhaps decades, to achieve stability and acquire popular value. This slow process is common to countries seeking democratic government after authoritarian rule.

The first wave of elections tended to go heavily against Communist candidates and toward candidates backed by mass popular movements. In Poland, for example, Lech Walesa's labor-based Solidarity movement swept nearly all the offices it contested in 1989. In Czechoslovakia, Pavel Havel's Civic Forum (and its Slovak counterpart) decisively defeated the Communist candidates in the 1990 assembly elections. Old-line Communist rulers were also ousted that year in Hungary and East Germany. Although communist governments were reelected in Albania and Bulgaria, even these hardline regimes were defeated by opposition forces in the second round of elections--Bulgaria in 1991 and Albania in 1992. In Russia itself, only the Communist Party was allowed to participate as a party in 1990 elections for the 1,068 seats in the Congress of People's Deputies. Nevertheless, many candidates were backed by popular fronts, interest groups, and political clubs that had arisen under glasnost, and Democratic Russia, an organization of progressive forces, claimed 190 seats after the election. In Russia's historic popular election for president in 1991, Boris Yeltsin won 57 percent of the vote against five other

candidates, some backed by the CPSU. Only in Romania did voters keep former communists in power through 1992, although old-line communists also won power in most of the former USSR republics. This was particularly true in the Asian republics, where elections were less free and marked by high turnout of government-mobilized voters, but old-line communists also won elections in Ukraine, the largest republic after Russia. However, three small Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), ousted their former communist leaders, most convincingly in Lithuania, where the mass popular movement Sajudis won about 65 percent of the parliamentary seats.

Despite the initial landslides toward mass-based democratic movements in some cases, the most characteristic feature of free elections in these former communist nations was the proliferation of political parties, as political entrepreneurs sought to take advantage of an uprooted electorate. For example, Poland soon had over 100 registered parties, Romania over 80, and Bulgaria over 50. A survey of parties in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union published in 1991 listed over 500 different parties. Most of these parties were known as “couch” parties (the entire membership would fit on a sofa), and they had little structure or staff. The proliferation of ephemeral parties produced political confusion, as voters faced a bewildering array of choices in an unfamiliar market. In Romania, citizens who were new to free elections could choose among the National Democrats, Romanian Democrats, Free Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberal Democrats, Constitutional Democrats, and Christian Democrats—to name a few of the 80+ parties. One consequence was disillusionment with elections and low voter turnout. In Poland, for example, only 42 percent of the eligible electorate voted in the parliamentary elections of 1991, which saw 29 different parties elected to the lower house, including the Beer Lovers Party.

In general terms, the nascent parties that sprouted in the former communist countries can be classified into seven groups. First, there were the parties of mass democratic movements (Solidarity, Civic Forum, and Sajudis), which were often instrumental in forcing the communist authorities to schedule free elections but which themselves dramatically lost support (in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania respectively) in the second wave of elections. Second were the remnants of the former Communist Party operating with names like the Socialist Party (Albania, Bulgaria, and Hungary) or the Party of National Salvation (Romania). (In Lithuania, the former Communists, reorganized as the Democratic Labour Party, actually outpolled the Sajudis in the November 1992 parliamentary election and regained the government.) Third were parties that took up the mantles of pre-World War II parties, such as various farmers and liberal parties. Fourth were nationalist parties pushing ethnic interests, like the Hungarian Party in Slovakia. Fifth were religious parties, typically Christian Democrats. Sixth were parties modeled after western political values, such as environmentalism, feminism, and capitalism. Finally,

there were the frivolous parties, such as the Beer Lovers and Volcano parties in Poland.

As explained above, the nature of the electoral system affects the number of parties that win representation to parliament. Countries using proportional representation, and having few electoral barriers to discourage minor parties, sustained badly fragmented party systems. Poland, for example, did not require parties to achieve any minimum vote (threshold) to gain representation in 1991, and none of its 29 parliamentary parties had more than 12 percent of the vote. This fragmentation in the Polish parliament made it difficult to form a governing coalition. Hungary, on the other hand, required that parties win four percent of the national vote in 1990, and only six parties entered parliament out of 65 registered. Countries that did not use proportional representation, such as Russia, usually required that candidates win an absolute majority of the vote or face a runoff election. This two-ballot system, used in France, also favors party fragmentation by encouraging minor parties to form for the purpose of denying the leading candidate a majority of the vote and bargaining later for favors. The alternative system, used in most Anglo-American democracies, only requires a simple plurality of the vote and tends to produce two-party rather than multiparty systems. The new democracies that have emerged from the former communist countries are certain to experiment with different electoral systems as they seek to develop institutionalized parties and stable party systems.

Addition to Bibliography

Bogdan Szajkowski (ed.), *New Political Parties of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Longman Group UK, 1991), describes more than 500 parties that have emerged in the former communist nations. There are separate chapters on the seven countries in Eastern Europe, the three Baltic republics, and the USSR--now the Commonwealth of Independent States.