

## **Situations at the time of political changes\***

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*Adam Burakowski – Aleksander Gubrynowicz – Paweł Ukielski:  
1989 – The Final Days of the Communist Regime in East-Central Europe  
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Former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai famously replied to the enquiry of a foreign journalist that it was “too early” to assess the implications of the French revolution of 1789. This unique Eastern wisdom helps shed some light on the dilemma of whether the quarter of a century that has elapsed since the collapse of communism, which was astoundingly rapid according to many, can be regarded as a historical perspective.

The three authors of the book, highly erudite historians, political scientists and lawyers of nearly the same age, experienced themselves during their early teens how time, sluggish until then, suddenly sped up and gave way to many changes that occurred during a single year. A world system believed to be sound fell apart, pulling down the communist ideology along with it. The ideological fundamentals upheld for decades crumbled and red-clad party member books ended up in the wastebin.

The flowingly written and excellently edited book, featuring notes and commentaries, was first published in Polish six years ago and addresses the history of the transition from state socialism to capitalism in each affected country – Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Romania, and Bulgaria – without any trace of nostalgic tones and in great depth. The political changeovers of Albania, Yugoslavia, and the USSR, the leader of the Eastern Bloc, are not discussed in the book due to their different form compared to the aforementioned countries. The expanded and updated Hungarian version of the book follows events until the 2010s with great professionalism, while still remaining accessible.

The triumvirate of authors asserts that the crisis of the communist world system accelerated unstoppably from the mid-1970s and Western loans – over and above the exploitation of the USSR’s rich raw material resources – contributed significantly

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official view of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank.

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to the protraction of the agony caused by economic unviability. The authors identified the following as drivers of the inevitable collapse of the totalitarian regimes covered in the book: the chronically unviable centrally controlled economy, the low level of innovative capacity holding back technical development, the arms race between the two world systems, the growing social crisis coupled with growing economic woes and the resulting demoralisation of the population, and the spread of crime, alcoholism, and apathy.

The key strength of the book, showcasing a unique perspective, is that it refrains from the platitudes typical of studies of this topic. It does not treat the Central and Eastern European region as a uniform entity and presents the situation of the various countries at the time of the political changeover in a nuanced manner, discussing the idiosyncratic events in each country. The book also features rich descriptions, for instance the passage about the disgraceful fall of the Genius of the Carpathians, Nicolae Ceausescu.

The most relevant chapter for Hungarian readers will be the analysis of the events that unfolded in Hungary, written by co-author Gubrynowicz and entitled “From a soft dictatorship to a protracted political changeover”. The chapter paints an accurate picture of the trend so typical of the region, characterised by timid reforms that only managed to delay the coming to light of the internal contradictions of the regime, but were entirely incapable of stopping the collapse. Kadarism longed for subjects different from those of other socialist countries. It withdrew politics from people’s day-to-day lives, did not impose communist ideology, was less patriotic and wary of nationalism, while attempting to improve the welfare of ordinary people, pitiful by Western standards, who were not interested in the past or the future. Thanks to the relative welfare fuelled by loans, Hungary did not experience strikes even in the 1980s, and the launch of the second economy, i.e. economic activities outside state employment, alleviated the social tensions, which were on the rise in other states within the Eastern Bloc, for some time.

While we map the path that led to the demise of the Eastern Bloc with the help of the authors, many questions come to mind. Did the former countries of the Eastern Bloc manage to definitively eradicate the heavy heritage of communism or is this process nowhere near over? Are we taking nationalism, Central and Eastern Europe’s century-old curse, repressed for decades and now rearing its head, seriously enough? Was the political changeover a success or a failure? These are the unanswered questions that render the political changeover, often seen as a hypocritical, a weighty heritage for more than 100 million Eastern Europeans.

The fact that three general secretaries of the USSR passed away over the course of a short period in the early 1980s can be regarded as symbolic. The funeral ceremonies were broadcast in the satellite countries and some suspected that the

actual funeral of the communist leaders will shortly be followed by the allegoric funeral of the communist regime.

It is an undeniable fact that 1989 represents the end of an era, a milestone, a psychological turning point or, as some recall with some pathos, an *annus mirabilis*, or year of wonders. The region shed not only communism, but also a foreign power, artificially created states fell apart, geopolitical power relations definitively changed, deep reforms started to unfold in the post-Soviet states, and most importantly, despite all arguments: 1989 brought freedom, making the year similar to 1848.

In 1989, the unfathomable occurred.