

Post-Communism:

are we in the clear?

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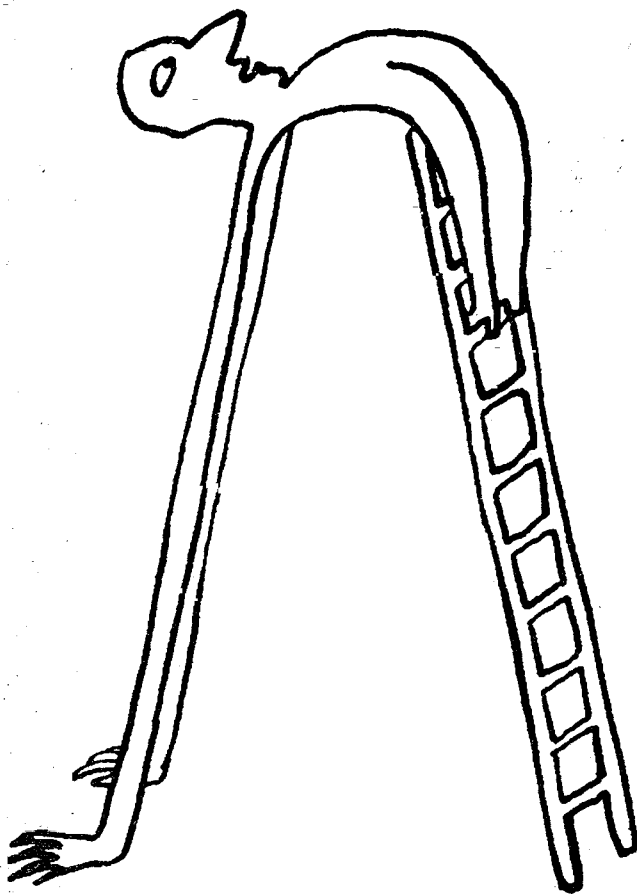
Many politicians of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union dislike and object to the use of the term "post-communism". Such politicians, including President Havel, wish to convince the West that solid foundations of political and economic democracy have already been established here. Others note that we Czechs are already a stable democracy and moreover that the use of the term "post-communism" here is misleading since the Czech Republic is one of the few countries of the former communist bloc where post-communists are not in power. In contrast to these views I submit that the term "post-communism" does in fact capture the situation in which we still find ourselves. As opponents of the term will agree this is not merely a question of terminology but also of how well we understand a situation which we still want to change.

Premier Václav Klaus is clearly right when he warns us against gazing too fixedly into the past while challenging us to look forward. However the preceding system has left its mark on almost everything including the origin and development of our present political and economic system. Therefore many concepts and realities of our democratic present simply cannot be understood without a retrospective analysis which relates the present to the preceding system.

The omnipresent past

As with many terms that use the prefix *post*, it would be intellectually self-indulgent to confine the

concept of post-communism in describing our recent history alone. The term also refers to a new social system in eastern Europe, including our country, which is not yet sufficiently internally unified and dynamic to be able to define itself independently *from within*. Communism is present not only as an overcome past, but above all as a phenomenon which is too alive



to be ignored – for in our reflections on democracy we still relate ourselves to it, and we define our new system in terms of it.

It's enough to look at political institutions and the style of political discourse in our country to support this argument. The fragmentation of the Czech left, caused mainly by the survival of a fossilised form of the neo-stalinist Communist Party of Bohemia and

Moravia, is a reflection of the recent past. This explains the inability of the other post-communist countries to create social democracy *independently*, namely without the reform communists. In these countries the post-communist left has become a substitute for social democracy. By contrast in our country social democracy has succeeded in establishing itself in spite of, and in opposition to, the communist left. However the price of this success has been the inability of Social Democrats to unite the left and it is in this sense that the Czech left remains post-communist.

In political debates the theme of the communist past rises to the surface again and again, especially in discussions between politicians of non-communist parties. Examples of this include the recent exchange of opinions between the Czech Premier and the Leader of the Social Democrats; debates on who was and who was not in the Communist Party; who conformed to the former regime; the efforts of several local ODS organisations to exclude former communists as candidates for the Parliamentary elections; the paradoxical popularity of former communist Vladimír Dlouhý, and so on.

The communist past is simply omnipresent. While one politician uses the fact that he was not "one of them" in order to deal with rivals who were, the most popular Czech politician is a former member of the communist party. How is this possible? It may be because

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Vladimír Dlouhý embodies what a majority of Czechs feel: a certain type of opportunism pursued equally under both the former and the present system, in which we want so much to be "democrats" with the best credentials ".

The extension of the lustration law confirms that we are still a post-communist country defining ourselves in terms of the communist past rather than a standard democracy relying on ourselves. Campaigns against old structures still go on six years after the "Velvet Revolution". While the legal state acts correctly and metes out justice and prosecutes crimes from the past, superficial and amateur witchhunts are proof that society is still living along lines laid down in the past.

Half-way

Another component of a normal democracy is a functioning market economy. In contrast to other post-communist countries the majority of state property in our country has at least formally been transferred to private hands. However the economic system is often not transparent and enterprise "owners" are often not real owners at all but rather managerial cliques developed from connections cultivated in the old regime.

Moreover, despite its political success, voucher privatisation has led to a paradox: share ownership has been transferred to formally private investment funds, but these funds are mostly controlled or owned by banks in which the state has a large or even majority stake. In addition, in many privatised companies the decisive share is held by the National Property Fund - again the state. These opaque property relations indicate that the Czech Republic has only gone half-way in this area.

How do we strengthen democracy?

The concept of post-communism is to a considerable extent synony-

mous with the building of a political and economic democracy on the ruins of the former communist system. This begs the question: what is actually a mature democracy? In our country democracy is regarded simply as the introduction of basic democratic mechanisms, a system of mutually competing political parties and a legal state. Initiatives based on this perspective often "freeze" at a certain level which does not compare with conditions in the West, but in and of itself is nevertheless sufficient in securing admission to the Council of Europe. Post-communist democracy lacks a certain *substantive quality* since it suffers from a shortage of democratic spirit. In particular, certain elements of *civil society* are missing, that is deep-rooted respect for a legal state and real civic commitment. In order to shake off the odium of "post-communism" post-communist countries must achieve a higher level of identification with democratic principles not only at a "psychological" level, but also at the level of civic engagement.

Several Czech politicians including President Havel are aware of this deficit. Unfortunately the emphasis they place upon the development of civil society is opposed by those who undervalue civil society or even regard it as dangerous. In all post-communist countries governing regimes fear that the decentralisation of administration, the development of the non-profit sector and the growth of independent civic activities will either run out of control or undermine the effectiveness of their state administration. Although this fear may be justified in cases where democratic mechanisms are too weak to overcome problems such as nationalist passions or ethnic conflicts, the question remains whether emphasis upon civic principles would actually threaten the state administration or, on the contrary, strengthen it.

The Czech Republic is almost ethnically homogenous, its population enjoys a relatively high standard of living and educational

level and it is not threatened by any militant ideology. Therefore, fears about the "unravelling" of the state administration are misplaced. Despite this civil society in our country has to fight for a privileged position against the very people who ought to be doing all they can to enable us to overcome everything that still identifies us as a member of the post-communist world.

Civil society is not just an instrument which functions in mature countries as a transmission mechanism between the individual and the state; it is also a *school of democracy*. Commitment to a civic initiative, for example an ecological cause, is clearly a more significant experience than mere formal membership in a political party or participation in elections. The internalisation of democratic processes (that is experience and mastery of them) is achieved only by the *active participation* of as many citizens as possible, not just in the political process but above all in those initiatives which give that process content. In this way the word "democracy" acquires real meaning.

The majority of post-communist countries have thus far achieved democracy only at the "macropolitical" level - that is at the level of political parties and constitutionally anchored democratic principles. One can agree with Václav Havel that if this "macrolevel" does not grow from the "living tissue" of civil society it will be in constant danger of degeneration into "partyism" and politicking. Indeed partyism and a paternalistic approach to politics are symptomatic of the post-communist world, in which an unrestricted one-party government transforms into a "tyranny" of political parties or "enlightened" leaders who are not restrained by civil society. As long as the democratic process in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc avoids these pitfalls, it should be able to shed the burden of post-communism. ■