

Zitierhinweis

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“Almost overnight,” the authors of this important book highlight, 400 million people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia found themselves in transition from state socialism and central planning to free markets and liberal democracy. The results of this unprecedented structural change left much to be desired. For many of these people, the 1990s were a shock in which they saw existing certainties quickly being dismantled. By the end of the decade, 45 % of the population of the post-communist countries lived below the poverty line (\$5.50 per day). The scars of this experience run deep, as the authors stress, and have left a lasting imprint on political preferences. The benefits of transition were “divided so unequally that majorities of the population no longer support the transition paradigm” (15). Rightwing populism, anti-liberalism, and nationalism are among the salient political expressions of widespread dissatisfaction with the outcomes of transition. At the same time, many postsocialist countries have experienced strong Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and, for many people, individual living standards have improved as well. To sew these different developments together is one of the objectives of this book, jointly written by a social anthropologist (Ghodsee) and a political scientist (Orenstein), both based in the U.S. and well-known for their scholarship on postsocialist transformation. Ghodsee and Orenstein stress that transition produced winners as well as losers. Not only their sympathy but also their main research interest is clearly with the latter. In more than 200 pages they bring together vast information from different domains to document the social disruption produced by transition. The amount of data and literature analyzed make this book a valuable reference work—with an important qualification: non-English language publications are left out. Another inherent limitation, that does not reduce the value of

the book, comes with its ambitious scope covering 29 countries: regional and national variations, although mentioned, are of less importance than the overall picture. You cannot write about a forest if you want to describe each tree. So, connoisseurs of the fate of specific countries might be in for some disappointment. The empirical material is organized in five parts. Part One lays out the economic data. The median decline in GDP per capita for the surveyed 29 countries after 1990 was a staggering 40 %, more than during the Great Depression, and it also took longer for the economies to recover. The authors qualify this drop in output as the “worst economic crisis in peacetime ever experienced” (62). The countries that fared better were those closer to Western Europe, i.e., the Visegrád countries, the Baltics, and Slovenia. The authors stress that economic losses, as well as benefits, were very unequally distributed. Considering popular preferences for equality, inequality became the most erosive factor for societal trust—and the book’s central explanatory factor. Part Two provides disillusioning data on demographic development: declining life expectancy of men in the early 1990s, increased mortality and decreased fertility, and high outmigration rates, even from economically stable countries, point to a population crisis in many parts of Eastern Europe, evident in bleak demographic prospects. Parts Three and Four provide valuable information on popular attitudes and evaluations of transition. Ghodsee and Orenstein combed through the major surveys, such as the Life in Transition Survey of 2006 or surveys by the Pew Center, which present representative data. There are certain shifts, especially in East Central Europe, where life satisfaction has been growing of late, but it is still lower than in Western Europe. Majorities or substantial minorities, depending on the country, articulated dissatisfaction with

transition, which translated into a decline of social trust, and an erosion of support for democracy and the market economy. These findings are among the politically most important ones, as they help to explain why anti-democratic and nativist forces find voters. Part Five finally deals with ethnographic evidence, showing many examples of how the “big” transition unsettled communities and individual lives. Here, though, the selection of examples seems biased towards a pre-set assumption, and the lack of non-English sources is disappointing. Anyway, the fact that many people feel nostalgic for the past and mourn the loss of community, solidarity, and reciprocity cannot be denied.

The empirical parts make for a sober reading. They are a timely reminder of the immense social costs that transition has produced. The memories of these can drive opposition against Western-style democracy and lofty rhetoric of European integration when so many of the postsocialist citizens see inequality widen. At the same time, the explanations provided by the authors are somewhat schematic. The blame falls squarely on the Washington Consensus and the West, who together with subservient local elites implemented neoliberal economic policies. While it is certainly true that some of the advice coming from international financial institutions ignored the local context, and that the quick dismantling of universal welfare schemes was a major mistake, it is harder to see the hand of neoliberalism in it. For example, Bulgaria’s economy collapsed in 1997 because a socialist government had continued policies of soft budget constraint, bailing out failing companies. The post-Soviet decline seems less a story of unbridled (neo)liberalism than one of state capture, often by the old communist elites, and in countries experiencing war an almost total erosion of economic governance happened. A closer look at the actual economic policies of the “shock-therapy” textbook examples, such as

Poland, reveals a more important role of the state than contemporary policymakers wanted to signal. There was indeed no “Marshall Plan,” as deplored by the authors, but still, a lot of money from Western governments poured in, especially for European Union accession countries, including substantial debt relief. Furthermore, the authors do not really engage with the total economic failure of communism and its impact on the course of transition, preferring a political to a historical explanation.

In their conclusion, they come up with an even more problematic argument: the gradualist reform approaches of China and Vietnam serve as illustrations that alternatives were available (195-7). Indeed, the economies of China and Vietnam have experienced spectacular growth since the 1990s, but they are still substantially poorer than East Central Europe. Poland had a GDP per capita (in purchasing power parity, constant 2017 international \$) of almost \$37,000 in 2022, China of around \$18,200, and Vietnam of \$11,400.^[1] Much of the growth in the two East Asian countries came from the relocation of rural labor into urban industries, something Eastern Europe had experienced in the post-war period. The verdict on whether China can overcome the middle-income trap is still out. Can we really speak about the “minimization” of the social impact of economic reform in China and Vietnam, where labor protection is notoriously poor and free speech is suppressed? China’s post-1989 trajectory cannot be dissociated from the Tiananmen massacre, which makes it a pretty unpalatable alternative.

Yet, this critique aside, this book is highly recommendable not only for the richness of data presented but also the provocative analysis, which helps to unsettle self-congratulatory accounts of the “triumph of the West.” East Europeans do not like

inequality and unfairness, and their voices need to be heard.