CHAPTER 11

CIVIL SOCIETY IN POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE

MARC MORJÉ HOWARD

Post-communist Europe presents a deep irony for scholars of civil society. On the one hand, the region is the source of the revitalization of the term "civil society" itself. Indeed, had it not been for Solidarnosc, the Polish opposition movement that mobilized ten million people, and the subsequent "people's revolutions" throughout Eastern Europe and some of the former Soviet Union, the term civil society would almost certainly not have become so widely used by academics or policy makers. On the other hand, post-communist Europe is an area of the democratic world where contemporary civil society is particularly weak. A closer look at the region shows that shortly after the "revolutionary" moment had passed, people left the streets and their civic organizations, leaving their societies largely passive and depoliticized.

Although historical precedents are important for understanding most social phenomena, they are vital for making sense of civil society in post-communist Europe. One simply cannot understand why so few post-communist citizens participate in the public sphere without grappling with the communist past and its combination with the post-communist present. This chapter takes a historical approach to civil society in the post-communist region, showing how the social legacies of communism have adapted and persisted, and how they may even have been reinforced by post-communist developments and experiences. It also addresses the growing differences across the region between countries that are democratic and those that are increasingly authoritarian, and also between countries that have now joined the European Union and those that remain firmly on the outside. The

chapter then raises a broader set of questions about the applicability of the concept of civil society to nondemocratic countries and contexts. It makes the argument that communist and post-communist experiences with civil society show the need to distinguish between *types* of civil society—in particular "oppositional" and "democratic" forms—since otherwise it would make little sense for the strong civil society of the late communist era to have dissipated so quickly after the onset of democratization. Finally, the chapter concludes by assessing the implications of the weakness of post-communist civil society for democracy in the region. It argues that while the weakness of civil society certainly does not portend democracy's demise, it does suggest that post-communist democracy will remain unsettled and somewhat troubled in the foreseeable future.

1. Post-Communist Civil Society in Comparative Perspective

In order to be able to evaluate the strength and quality of civil society in any given region, it is helpful—if not crucial—to begin with a larger comparative perspective. In *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (Howard 2003), I provide an empirical baseline that shows that post-communist citizens have extremely low levels of membership and participation in voluntary organizations. Moreover, when compared to other regions and regime types in the world, variations among post-communist countries are relatively small. Within post-communist Europe, the similarity in levels of organizational membership is especially striking in light of the wide political, economic, and cultural differences that exist between countries.

The drawback of a cross-national measure of civil society is that it focuses on a thin definition and conceptualization of the concept, namely organizational membership. While this approach can be complemented by case studies that go into greater depth, the broad approach nonetheless yields important comparative findings. For example, an analysis of the thirty-one democratic and democratizing countries included in the 1995–97 World Values Survey (WVS) shows that post-communist countries have significantly lower levels of membership and participation than older democracies and post-authoritarian countries, and that these levels actually declined from 1990–91 to 1995–97 (Howard 2003, 62–73). In fact, the WVS shows that citizens in post-communist countries belong to an average of 0.91 organizations per person, exactly half of the 1.82 organizational memberships per person in post-authoritarian countries, and much less than the 2.39 in older democracies (Howard 2003, 80). Moreover, organizational membership in post-communist Europe was lower than in post-authoritarian countries across eight of the nine types of organization that were included in the WVS (the exception being labor unions, which represent a special case in the communist and post-communist context).

Subsequent surveys and studies have not contradicted this basic pattern. An analysis of the next wave of the WVS, conducted in 1999–2003, confirms the same significant distinction between post-communist countries and other regions and prior regime types (Valkov 2009). Moreover, a more rigorous regression analysis that controls for other possible alternative variables—including economic, political-institutional, and "civilizational" factors, as well as several individual-level variables that are central to the literature on political participation and civil society—shows that a country's prior regime type (and in particular a prior communist experience) is the most significant and powerful variable for explaining organizational membership (Howard 2003, 81–90). These findings indicate the need for more in-depth consideration of the specific elements of that prior communist experience, in order to explain *why* post-communist countries have relatively low levels of organizational membership in comparison to older democracies and post-authoritarian countries. In short, in order to understand the common weakness of post-communist civil society, we need to take into consideration the common elements of the communist experience and its enduring legacy.

2. The Transformative Impact of Communist Institutions

Before turning to the contemporary period, it is critical to consider the transformative impact of the communist institutional system, which had a significant, decisive, and in many ways homogenizing effect on societies throughout the region. Prior to the establishment of the communist system—after World War I in Russia and in the early post-World War II period in Eastern Europe—the region consisted of a very diverse group of countries. In addition to having different religious faiths, having belonged to different historical empires, and having fought on different sides in both world wars, they had vastly different levels of industrialization and economic development, and different political traditions. By the 1950s, however, the communist leadership—enforced by the ruthless policies of "Moscow Center"—had succeeded in imposing and enforcing "replica regimes" that were characterized by the same institutional and ideological mechanisms throughout the Soviet bloc (Jowitt 1992). Although the communists certainly incorporated and reinforced pre-existing historical tendencies, over the next thirty years the "party of a new type" also succeeded in creating a "society of a new type."

Ken Jowitt, one of the most astute and original scholars in the field of comparative communism, has argued convincingly that the distinguishing feature of what he calls "Leninist" regimes was the concept of "charismatic impersonalism." In an essay written as far back as 1978 and reprinted in Jowitt (1992), he argued that just like the liberal societies of the West, communist societies were based on impersonal

institutions and norms, but their central and defining feature was the existence of the Communist Party as the locus and core of all social organization, whose authority was transcendent, unquestioned, and charismatic. Although the extent of that authority did vary somewhat across the communist bloc, and it diminished slightly over the decades of communist rule, the institutional charisma of the Communist Party remained a defining feature that distinguished Soviet-type regimes from other forms of nondemocratic rule.

Valerie Bunce (1999, 21–25) also provides a very useful synthesis of the various elements of the communist experience, which she refers to as having been "homogenizing," by focusing on four central factors: 1) "the ideological mission of the ruling elite," 2) "the construction . . . of a conjoined economic and political monopoly that rested in the hands of the Communist Party," 3) "the fusion of not just the polity and the economy, but also the party and the state," and 4) "the extraordinary institutional penetration of the state." All four of these features existed in communist systems across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with the partial exception of the more pluralist Yugoslavia and, to a lesser extent, Poland and Hungary. The fourth of Bunce's elements is the most important for understanding contemporary post-communist civil society, because it involves the party-state's attempt at complete penetration, surveillance, and control of all aspects of society. Unlike authoritarian regimes, which generally allow for the existence of independent social activities that are not directly threatening to the state (Linz and Stepan 1996), the party prevented "the existence of any associational life, political organizations, or social movements that existed separate from the party-state institutional web. As a consequence, mass publics were rendered dependent on the party-state for jobs, income, consumer goods, education, housing, health care, and social and geographic mobility" (Bunce 1999, 24).

Even further, the party actually attempted to supplant and supersede the very need for independent social activity by creating a dense institutional web of groups and organizations in which membership and participation were generally mandatory or coerced. Very few people could avoid this party-state control of the public sphere, since almost every child had to join the official youth organization, and almost every working adult belonged to the official trade union and to other mass organizations. Bunce (1999, 28) provides an evocative description of the "remarkably uniform set of experiences" of communist citizens: "Whether citizens engaged in political, economic, social, or cultural activities, they were controlled in what they could do by the party. Thus, the party did not just orchestrate elite recruitment, voting, attendance at rallies, and the content of the mass media. It also functioned in the economy as the only employer, the only defender of workers' rights (through party-controlled unions), the only setter of production norms, and the only allocator of vacation time (while being the only builder and maintainer of vacation retreats). At the same time, the party allocated all goods and set all prices. Finally, it was the party (sometimes through enterprises) that was the sole distributor of housing, education, health care, transportation, and opportunities for leisure-time activities."

In short, the Communist Party sought to monitor and control virtually every aspect of economic, political, and even social life, and this feature distinguished communism from other non-democratic authoritarian regimes. Another crucial element of the communist experience involves the peculiar social consequences of centralized economic planning. In an economic system with chronic shortages, only a few privileged people—usually elite members of the Communist Party who went shopping at special stores that had a full supply of western goods—could avoid the long lines, bland choices, and frequently missing necessities of daily life, from salt to toilet paper. The economic situation combined with Communist Party control of the public sphere in a mutually reinforcing relationship that constricted and sometimes reshaped the range of possibilities for thought and action. In other words, since the public sphere was so politicized, controlled, and monitored, and since valued goods and services were hard to acquire without connections or help, people developed common patterns of adaptive behavior.

The central characteristic of these social and behavioral patterns was the distinction between the public and private realms (Shlapentokh 1989; Kharkhordin 1999). As Jowitt (1992, 287) writes, restating his own argument from almost twenty years earlier, "the Leninist experience in Eastern Europe…reinforced the exclusive distinction and dichotomic antagonism between the official and private realms." Bunce (1999, 30) adds that "Homogenization also encouraged individuals within socialist systems to divide their personalities into a public and conformist self, on the one hand, and a private and more rebellious self on the other—what was referred to in the East German setting as a *Nischengesellschaft*, or niche society." With a public sphere that was entirely controlled by the Communist Party and its corollary organizational apparatus (including the secret police, trade unions, and many mass membership organizations), most communist citizens developed a cautious relationship to public and formal activities—recall Václav Havel's (1985, 27–29) famous example of the greengrocer who posts the slogan "Workers of the World, Unite!" in his shop in order to show that "I am obedient and therefore have the right to be left in peace."

Private relations, in contrast, became even more vibrant and meaningful, since people could only speak openly in front of others they knew and trusted, and also because connections took on an important role in the shortage economy, where people had to rely on their family, friends, and acquaintances in order to get things done, rather than going through official channels (Wedel 1986; Ledeneva 1998).

To summarize, the communist institutions that were established after 1917 in the Soviet Union and after World War II in Eastern Europe managed to reconfigure and homogenize an otherwise diverse set of peoples, even if not as originally intended. The result of the shortage economy and the Communist Party's ruthless control of the public sphere was that citizens throughout communist Europe developed adaptive mechanisms of behavior, centered on private networks, which augmented the sharp distinction between the public and private spheres.

3. The Social Legacy of Communism and Its Impact on Post-Communist Civil Society

One might have thought that the disappearance of the communist system and its mass organizations would lead to an outpouring of public participation in new organizations that were truly voluntary and autonomous. This is indeed what many analysts expected, especially following the remarkable spontaneous mobilizations that brought about communism's collapse between 1989 and 1991 (see, for example, Di Palma 1991 and Rau 1991). But, as it turns out, these new opportunities have *not* brought about an increase in participation.

The low levels of participation in civil society organizations in contemporary post-communist Europe can best be understood by taking into account the common elements of the communist experience, as well as the events since the collapse of that system. In particular, three important factors are common to the wide array of societies in post-communist Europe: 1) the legacy of mistrust of communist organizations; 2) the persistence of friendship networks; and 3) post-communist disappointment. Taken together, these three factors help to explain the lasting weakness of civil society in the region.

a. Mistrust of Organizations

As discussed above, one of the central features that distinguished communism from authoritarianism was the former's extensive repression of autonomous pluralism. Unlike authoritarian regimes, however, which tolerated nonstate activities so long as they did not threaten the state or the military, communist regimes not only attempted to eliminate any form of independent group activity but they also supplanted it with an intricately organized system of state-controlled organizations, in which participation was often mandatory. As a result, one of the most striking features of state-socialist societies was the clear distinction between formal institutions and informal behaviors that people made use of in their everyday lives. Every communist country was intricately organized with an array of formal organizations in almost the same institutional forms, including youth groups, the Communist Party, trade unions, cultural federations, peasant and worker groups, women's groups, and many others, as well as the less politicized (but still state-controlled) groups and organizations that ranged from sports clubs to book lover's clubs. Most people were members of multiple organizations, but membership itself was often mandatory, coerced, or used for instrumental purposes. In other words—to an increasing degree over the lifespan of communist regimes, as the party lost the legitimacy and popular enthusiasm that it had generated in its earlier stages—people often joined because they had to, because they were told that they could face negative consequences if they did not join, or because joining and participating improved their career chances. Only in the case of less politicized

associations such as book clubs and sports clubs did people join for less coercive or instrumental reasons.

When they participated in quasi-mandatory organizations, most people did very little, aside from paying their small annual dues (which were usually deducted automatically from their salaries), attending a few compulsory meetings, and occasionally receiving some special benefits like vacation packages from the official trade union. Membership was mainly based on obligation, obedience, and external conformity, rather than on internal and voluntary initiatives. Due to this essentially negative experience with state-run organizations during the communist period, majorities of citizens throughout post-communist Europe continue to have a common sense of mistrust of organizations today.

As a direct legacy of the communist experience, most people in post-communist countries still therefore strongly mistrust and avoid any kind of formal organizations, even in newly free and democratic settings. Instead of drawing a clear distinction between the voluntary associations of today and the mass organizations of the communist past, most post-communist citizens view and evaluate organizations with a certain sense of continuity. The distinction they make is that previously they were essentially forced to join, while today they are free to choose *not* to join and *not* to participate.

b. The Persistence of Friendship Networks

The flip side of the public experience of communism—where membership in state-controlled organizations was more of a formality, born out of obligation and expediency rather than being deeply felt—was that relationships in the private sphere were extremely meaningful and genuine. Broadly speaking, there were two main reasons for this. First, because the formal and public sphere was highly politicized and also tightly controlled, people could only express themselves openly within close circles of trusted friends and family. Second, because of the shortage of available goods to buy, personal and social *connections* played an essential role in communist societies, whether used to obtain spare parts for fixing a car, or finding products that were rarely available in stores.

These two reasons also correspond to two different, although sometimes overlapping, *types* of private networks that existed in communist societies. The first encompassed how people socialized and with whom they spent their free time, and the second involved a more instrumental use of connections to acquire goods and services, and to get ahead in general (Ledeneva 1998). The first type of networks consisted primarily of a small number of close and trusted friends and family members, whereas the second included many distant acquaintances or people with whom one only interacted for the purpose of acquiring or receiving something in return. These two types of networks overlapped to the extent that close friends and family also helped each other instrumentally, but only rarely did instrumental acquaintances enter the small and trusted circle of close friends.

Today, long after the collapse of the system that had created and sustained this vibrant private sphere, networks of close friends and family remain extremely prominent and important throughout the post-communist region. These networks of instrumental connections, however, have changed to varying degrees across post-communist countries, since the market economy can eliminate the need to acquire goods and services through informal channels. Overall, however, unlike in many Western societies—where voluntary organizations have become a central part of social and political culture, and where people join organizations in order to meet new people and to expand their horizons through public activities—in post-communist societies, many people are still extremely invested in their own private circles. They simply feel no need, much less desire, to join and participate in organizations when they feel that, socially, they already have everything that they could need or want.

c. Post-Communist Disappointment

The third reason that helps to explain the particularly low levels of public participation in post-communist Europe is the widespread disappointment, and for some even disillusionment, with political and economic developments since the collapse of the state-socialist system. Although it is most pronounced among those people who were personally involved in the movements leading to the creation of a new institutional order, this third factor applies to the wider population as well. For most people throughout the former Soviet bloc, the years 1989–91 represent a unique, momentous, and fascinating time in their lives, when their world was changing rapidly and dramatically. Although they had many fears and uncertainties about where the changes would lead them, most people experienced at least a brief moment of genuine excitement, hope, and idealism during those times of rapid transformation. Moreover, they shared the belief that the end of Communist Party rule, the emergence of new democratic and market institutions, and at long last the freedom and right to speak freely, associate openly with others, and to travel beyond the "iron curtain," would change their lives for the better (Rose 1995).

In the years since those dramatic times, however, many post-communist citizens feel that they have been let down, perhaps even cheated, by the new system that quickly replaced the old one. Even though a vast majority in every post-communist country does not want to go back in time, the political and economic systems that have since taken root seem to have disappointed most people, who had hoped and believed that a new political and economic system would live up to their ideals. This sense of disappointment has only increased demobilization and withdrawal from public activities in the years since the collapse of communism.

Although this chapter has presented a rather homogeneous picture of post-communist civil society, there is also a great deal of perhaps growing—diversity within the region. Leaving countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, which do not fit into the geographic definition of post-communist Europe, there is a significant divide between countries that have been steadily