**To What Extent was the Collapse of the Communist Dictatorships in 1989 Inspired by a Desire to “Return to Europe”?**

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To argue that the events of 1989 were motivated by a desire to return to Europe is an excessively simplistic endeavour, and one which is problematised by too many issues. One could of course argue that the countries of Central Europe were never really considered part of a European core, and rather peripheral adjacent countries at best. Perhaps it is best to understand a ‘return to Europe’ as the establishment of civil society and electoral democracy. But most of Central Europe, bar Czechoslovakia, did not have this when communist governments took over, nor was Communism a particularly un-European intellectual endeavour. In this essay, I will argue that it was not in fact a desire to return to Europe which prompted this *annus mirabilis*, but rather a variety of other factors; most importantly among them the desire to return to nationhood and sovereignty.

As any good Marxist would tell you, history must always be understood through economic conditions, and by the 1980s the economies of Central Europe were basket cases. Communist governments had gained a certain amount of legitimacy from the rapid rise in living standards and from the industrialisation they spearheaded after the Second World War. Cities were rebuilt, public services established, and living standards soared. But by the 1980s this had completely dissipated leading to permanent crisis, where even full employment was failing. Living standards were declining and public fury rose accordingly, with communist governments showing no dynamism in adapting to changing conditions. Attempts at reform from state economists were rejected by governments, and by 1989 GDP in Eastern Europe was 40 percent of what it was in the West, compared to 51 percent in 1951. This was compounded by an increasing awareness of what life was like in the West which further encouraged mass disillusionment. The deep rot of the elites accompanied this economic failure, and people were alienated by the extreme corruption of the nomenklatura. The communist elites had gone through a crisis of legitimacy, where they were no longer war heroes and resistance fighters who could fashion themselves as icons of national liberation. There was no real loyalty to the cause of Communism even amongst the elites, and party membership became a cynical ploy to gain a better life and access luxuries. With this new cynicism came a new lack of brutality where the secret police were no longer as ruthless outside of the GDR and Romania, the elites essentially pretended to be communists, and the people pretended to fear them. There is no better illustration of the loss of legitimacy of communist governments than Ceaucescu’s infamous final speech, where his platitudes to the party are met by boos and jeers, something previously unthinkable.

Vladimir Tismaneanu points to the deep crisis of legitimacy inherent to the communist regimes in 1989 where they had lost their ideological fervour and capacity for regeneration. Tismaneanu points to three central myths that collapsed: the infallibility, invincibility, and irreversibility of Communism. In these conditions, revolutionary upheaval became a matter of time when coupled with social, economic, and political conditions. Tismaneanu sees these revolutionary conditions as an empowering force for civil society – which could now agitate to replace the ‘uncivil society’ in government.[[1]](#footnote-1) Organisations like Solidarity, which included 1 in 4 Poles, and figures like Pope John Paul II emerged as a key part of Polish civil society and sought to tell the truth about life under Communism. In the case of Solidarity, a militantly anti-communist trade union replaced the government as legitimate representatives of the workers. Similarly, East German protesters in 1989 sublimated the language of socialism to pro-reunification sentiment when they shifted from shouting ‘wir sind das Volk’ to ‘wir sind ein Volk’. Just like the Catholic Church in Poland, the Lutheran Church in the GDR also acted as a mobilisation point for civil society. Tismaneanu additionally stresses the role of public intellectuals in civil society, but Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe question this, arguing that their prominence has been exaggerated in the West. McDermott and Stibbe instead focus on the power of ideas themselves, rather than intellectuals affiliated with them.[[2]](#footnote-2) Issues that became a matter of mass disaffection: authoritarianism, human rights abuses, environmental destruction – all fuelled new protest movements and encouraged the sharing of ideas through protests, lectures, sit ins, and samizdat. The power of these ideas and their popularity strengthened participation in anti-government activities and hastened the demise of communist regimes.

The importance of Mikhail Gorbachev himself cannot be understated. Certainly to people resigned to militaristic gerontocracy in Moscow, Gorbachev’s youthful reformism was welcomed. But it was his personal insistence that the Soviet Union not intervene in Eastern Europe – despite pleas to do so from hardliners like Todor Zhikov and Eric Honecker – which had a decisive influence on the peoples and protest movements of the region. This showed the delegitimised governments of Eastern Europe to be lacking the ability to enforce their own authority – the one source of genuine fear they had always used to ensure compliance. The certainty that there would be no repeat of 1956 in Hungary or 1968 in Czechoslovakia encouraged further popular protest. Here, we see civil society could flourish due to the lack of military threat from the USSR. This military step-back by Gorbachev was partly the result of enhanced military spending by the USA under Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative which the USSR simply couldn’t match, but it was certainly also the result of personal leadership.

Moreover, it was ultimately a rejection of grand narratives which fuelled much of 1989. If we are to assume this is true, calling 1989 a ‘return to Europe’ is effectively building a grand narrative of Europeanism. The movements of 1989 were deeply pragmatic and rooted in local concerns rather than supra-national ones. It is very easy to project Western European norms and values onto the events of 1989, as is often done in cases of blatant self-aggrandisement, particularly after most of Central Europe has joined the European Union. Central Europe’s development was always very different from that of the West, and particularly so during the time it was behind the iron curtain. As such, a completely different intellectual approach existed which did not necessarily centre the idea of a ‘return to Europe’, but rather a return to nationhood and sovereignty.

It is particularly interesting that in Bulgaria, opposition took so long to form – appearing after Peter Malenkov had deposed Todor Zhikov rather than when Zhikov was in power. Granted, excessive nationalism was one of the reasons the Bulgarian government failed, as the government’s persecution of the Turkish minority and Bulgarian Muslims grew in severity. However, the successful nationalism of the Bulgarian government likely hastened demonstrations. Many Bulgarians did legitimately fear Turkish influence and separatism, and Zhikov successfully weaponised this. Similarly, Ceaucescu weaponised Romanian nationalism to maintain a militarised rule to the very end, and even then his deposition was followed by an outbreak of ethnic violence. Here, communist governments had used nationalism with various degrees of success and failure, but their excesses had been too great.

It would be wrong to reduce the events of 1989 to one single cause, but there were certainly many greater causative factors than a desire to ‘return to Europe’. I would argue that 1989 acted as a new ‘springtime of the peoples’ where national consciousness and a desire for national restoration brought down Communist governments, or in the case of Yugoslavia, mutated them into ultra-nationalist breakaway states. The case of Yugoslavia is particularly illuminating, because it offers a strange answer to just what kind of Europe was being returned to. Certainly, the atrocities of the Yugoslav Wars were a return to Europe at its absolute worst. But during the break-up, Slobodan Milosevic was offering an imagined restoration of Serbia’s royalist past, Alija Izetbegovic promised a return to Bosnia’s Ottoman glory, and Franjo Tudjman promised a return to an idealised Habsburg legacy. Indeed ‘Europe’ here as in other less violent cases, could be whatever a person wished it to be. In a more peaceful example of a return to nationhood, we can see what happened when Hungary opened the border to Austria on September 11th 1989, and 50,000 East Germans poured through until the Berlin Wall fell two months later. Tismaneanu spoke of a ‘rebirth of citizenship’ inherent to the upheavals of 1989, and this applied in every sense, including the ethnic, with results both peaceful and bloody.[[3]](#footnote-3) What every movement was seeking was a return to national sovereignty – a restoration of the nation state after decades of suppression under Communist rule. As Martyn Rady convincingly argued, the socialist apparatus had failed to account for the strength of national movements and identities, and it was the power of this nationalism that was ultimately decisive in ending Communism.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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3. Tismaneanu, “Rethinking 1989”, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martyn Rady, “Review of 1989 and All That”, The Slavonic and East European Review 73, no. 1 (1995): 115-16. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4211718. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)