

The Transitions to Democracy

Symposion organized by
Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan
18 and 19 March 1991"

Participants: Laszlo Bruszt (Cornell University), Wjatscheslaw Daschtschew (Academy of Sciences of the USSR), Jon Elster (Universities of Oslo and Chicago), Deyan Kiuranov (Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia), Hans-Dieter Klingemann (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin), Peter Kresak (University of Bratislava), Juan J. Linz (Yale University — Wissenschaftskolleg), Hans-Jürgen Puhle (University of Frankfurt/Main), Alexander Smolar (Member of Parliament, Warszawa), Alfred Stepan (Columbia University).

I organized a symposium in collaboration with Alfred Stepan from Columbia University on The Transitions to Democracy in Europe, with the generous material support of the Kolleg and the assistance of Mr Fred Girod.

The meeting to which the fellows were invited centered on the political aspects, with participation of scholars from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, Germany, and the United States. A manuscript by J. Linz and Alfred Stepan on "Transitions in Comparative Perspective" served as the starting point of the discussion. In that draft manuscript we developed both theoretical questions relevant to all transitions and an application of those formulations to the countries of Eastern Europe.

After an initial presentation, a whole session was devoted to the transition processes in the different countries, including one based on survey research in the three Baltic republics by Professor Klingemann of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin. It was particularly interesting to hear the report by Professor Kiuranov on Bulgaria based on his participation in the process and his research in Bulgaria, since, in contrast to the other countries being discussed, our knowledge of developments there was particularly limited. A lively discussion developed about the nature of the pre-transition regimes in those countries, the concept of post-totalitarianism, and the characterization produced by us of Poland as being more similar to the authoritarian than to the post-totalitarian regimes.

Another session was devoted to the constitutional problems in the

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transitions and the ongoing process of constitution-writing in those countries. Jon Elster of the University of Chicago spoke about his ongoing research project on constitutionalism and law in Eastern Europe. The presence of Professor Peter Kresak of the Department of Constitutional Law of Comenius University in Bratislava led to an interesting debate on the nationalities question in those countries and the implications for the democratization process and the new constitution-making in Czechoslovakia. Alexander Smolar, a member of the Polish parliament, contributed a very lucid analysis of the complexities of the Polish transition from the constitutional perspective. This, in turn, led to a debate on the alternative presidentialism-parliamentarism, and its implications for democratic transitions.

Another theme of our meeting was the comparison of the round table negotiations leading to the transfer of power in the different countries. Professor László Bruszt, who is engaged in a comparative study of the Hungarian and Polish round table negotiations, made an important presentation that led to comparative considerations of the pattern of negotiated transitions, of which the Hungarian was a prime example.

The importance of the nationalities question in many of the countries made this a central theme of our discussions, for which we counted on the contribution of Hans-Jürgen Puhle, who has been working on comparative nationalism. This is one of the great differences between several of the East European transitions and those in Southern Europe and Latin America, with the exception of the Spanish. The complexities of this problem of multi-ethnic societies was highlighted by the interesting public opinion data on the three Baltic republics, presented by Hans-Dieter Klingemann, which led to a more general discussion of the Soviet case.

The transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America, with the exception of Paraguay, have led to the transfer of power to political parties not identified with the previous regime. This is not the case in Bulgaria, Albania, Serbia, and Romania. The presence of Deyan Kiuranov allowed us to explore the conditions under which a successor party of the Communist Party could win a free election and control the transition process, a theme that will require further research. Unfortunately, we were not able to invite a Romanian colleague, and the transition in Albania had not yet taken place.

A lengthy debate developed about the consequences of failures and performance in the new democracies. There were those who expressed serious doubts about the possibility of consolidation of the new regimes unless the governments were able to perform successfully, while others argued about the difference between legitimation of the regime, and, in this case, of the legitimacy of democracy and efficacy. Survey data from the Western tran-

sitions were presented, supporting the second point of view, but several of the participants questioned whether such a distinction between legitimacy and efficacy could be made in Eastern Europe.

The meeting was characterized by a very open and free-floating discussion of both theoretical problems and the complex experience of the countries represented, the questioning of theoretical concepts and the description of particular experiences. It highlighted the similarities and differences between countries which require further analysis. Everyone contributed invaluable information about the events and problems in the different countries.

Professor Jacques Rupnik, who works on Czechoslovakia, unfortunately had to cancel at the last minute, and we therefore had great difficulty in finding persons who could analyze the transitions in Romania and Yugoslavia from a scholarly perspective.