



No Answer (for the Economic Dynamism and Civic Freedoms of post-WWII Western Europe)

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Given the uncivil reception that *Uncivil Society* has received from the academic establishment, the worry expressed in this forum that my analysis might be assigned in classrooms or even “become definitive” could be seen as witty. The dominant civil-society and dissident-centric interpretation of 1989 strikes me as far too congenial to the worldview and sentiments of scholars to ever be displaced. Still, a debate is a welcome turn. For the honor of organizing a discussion of my book and challenging me with substantive criticisms and questions, I thank the editors of *East Central Europe* and the four contributors. Please allow me to take them in order.

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Vladimir Tismăneanu is an intellectual hero of mine—there is no other way to state it, and it is not flattery. The incitement of my interest in, let alone my understanding of, Romania under Stalinism belongs to his writings. His work illuminates like a floodlight, in all directions, but especially in the realm of ideas and political philosophy. What is more, he is able to *hear* opposing views and to assimilate counter-arguments into his own, which he has deftly done with *Uncivil Society*. It would be easy to accept his coveted praise and his reformulations and, well, beam. And yet, I would like to try to specify our differences of emphasis.

Let me begin with his suggestion that “Kotkin’s interpretation of the context of 1989, the upheaval in Eastern Europe was the ironical vindication of Lenin’s famous definition of a revolutionary situation: those at the top cannot rule in the old ways, and those at the bottom do not want to accept these ways anymore.” This seems the opposite of what I am arguing. History is littered with instances whereby “those at the bottom do not accept,” and

those at the top persevere. Consider Lenin himself, in 1920 and 1921, when “those at the bottom,” including the working class, had turned on the Bolsheviks and Lenin’s response was not to accede to widespread popular sentiment but to repress, adjust a bit, and hold onto monopoly power. In the face of seemingly insurmountable opposition and difficulties, he exhibited resolve.

Who does not recognize the resolve of the opponents of Communism? “Living within the truth”—the moral stance against communism’s moral squalor—justifiably cast a spell for decades, and it captivates to this day. But Eastern Europe was “living within Europe.” That was the key. There existed this other Europe, Western, and after World War II it had turned out to be rich and free, with wealth and civil liberties that cast a spell over the inhabitants living under Communist regimes—and tormented the uncivil society. The latter found themselves in a position of marking their status by the very world—luxury goods produced by capitalist wage slavery—whose moral and political repudiation was the identity of the Communist systems they were leading. This was not foreseen, and bizarre. If the pope paraded around the Vatican marking his leadership of Catholicism by possession of a Quran imported from Mecca, the Catholic Church hierarchy would not be long for this world.

Prof. Tismăneanu is patently correct that Communism was an idea—he was emphasizing this when I was in grade school—and that as a result Communist systems were vulnerable on the field of ideas. Having an official ideology empowers a regime, while the ideas have purchase, but also makes that regime potentially brittle, for the ideas can fail and disappoint. Particularly utopias. “Although the Communist revolution may start with the most idealistic concepts, calling for heroism and gigantic effort, it sows the greatest and most permanent illusions,” as the apostate Milovan Djilas famously wrote (1957: 30). That is a venerable insight duly noted in *Uncivil Society*. But here’s the rub: the ideology has hollowed out in Communist China, too. In China, too, the utopian impulse is a dead letter, but the regime is going strong, Communist party membership is greater than ever, and they continue to make good use of the nomenklatura lists and appointment system.

Simplifying, we face one of two possibilities here. First proposition: Prof. Tismăneanu is offering a general theory of revolution. If so, what are the cases where dissidents showed unbreakable grit, mass societal mobilization occurred under the rallying cry of civil society, but the elites did not give up, and *there was revolution anyway*? Second proposition: Prof.

Tismăneanu is asserting that the lands between the Baltic and the Adriatic are special. If so, then what is his reading of Communist China? Are the dissidents in China less courageous than their counterparts in Eastern Europe? Are the Chinese in the opposition not availing themselves of the instruments of “civil society” and “living within the truth”? In fact, dissidents in Communist China use those and other tools to desacralize the Chinese Communist regime with singular resolve, but the regime holds firm! In Eastern Europe, it is surely the capitulation of the uncivil society that stands out.

Prof. Tismăneanu is liable to counter that the dissidents contributed *significantly* to that capitulation. Perhaps. But I would submit that while Communist regimes in Eastern Europe had some brutal answers for the ranks of dissidents—pressure on their employment and families, beatings, internal exile or isolation, imprisonment, expulsion—those regimes ultimately had no answer for the economic dynamism and civic freedoms of post-WWII Western Europe. This is our disagreement of emphasis. But if the debate is to be engaged about the factors contributing to “the mystery of the political suicide of the power-holders, the communist nomenklatura’s readiness to give up its monopoly on power,” as he puts it—that would constitute an historiographical shift and a fresh research agenda.

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Poland’s Protracted Transition (1996), by Kazimierz Z. Poznański, exerted a profound influence on me, which should surprise no one, given its sophisticated argument about the onset of transition well before 1989. Still, he and I seem to disagree about 1989 itself. Let me begin by stating again: 1989 was a revolution. Communist party political monopolies were dissolved. Communist economic systems were dismantled. Civil societies became possible. Whatever the ongoing disappointments, legal private property, legal markets, legal non-Communist assembly, non-Communist judiciaries, and much else came into existence—a profound turnabout. Important aspects of this transition, pace Prof. Poznański, did not begin in 1989, but 1989 accelerated and radically deepened the changes.

My book argued not that Communist systems economically failed but that Western European capitalist economic systems crushed them, and did so in a competition from which the east bloc could not walk away. As the Leipzig tailor’s son Walter Ulbrich (quoted in *Uncivil Society*) wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, “West Germany has turned out to be economically

powerful ... In the final analysis, we cannot choose against whom we would like to compete. We are simply forced to square off against West Germany. However, the GDR does not have enough economic power to do this alone.” Of course, had West Germany’s GDP not been growing by 10 percent or more every year, but contracting instead, uncivil society might not have lost its earlier self-confidence. Had there been a second Great Depression after the war, as many observers expected—from Stalin to Truman—the outcome of world history would have been different. The problem of Eastern European regimes, and not just in East Germany, was that socialism had no reason for being other than a claimed superiority to capitalism. But it became evident, pretty early on, that the opposite was true, which is where the taking on of debt, payable only in hard currency, came in. Western Europe’s phenomenal success threatened, indeed mocked, the slogans of Eastern Europe’s uncivil society. The latter were frauds, failures *in that sense*. True, even after elites became conscious of their historical defeat they could, and indeed did, hang on. But when the populace came out into the streets or crossed the borders in 1989, and it was time for these regimes to show their teeth and demonstrate the price they would pay to hold on, they folded.

Prof. Poznański poses a poignant question: “How it is that the apparently incompetent elites of these countries, as well as the rest of the bloc, were able to preclude the revolution and thus save, so to say, their own skins?” But again, they did not prevent revolution: the economic-political system changed fundamentally. As to why often incompetent elites did well in the property redistribution, does that present a conundrum? Privatization everywhere was a political process, unavoidably, and those with political position were prime beneficiaries. They held the state resources in their hands already, they had the access, the connections, they were an organized society unto themselves. It would have taken a foreign occupation—as was the case de facto with the GDR—to prevent the well placed from taking advantage. Therefore, I see no discrepancy between pre-1989 incompetence and post-1989 self-enrichment, except to note that greater competence would not necessarily have saved these systems, because the uncivil society would still have had no control over the performance of Western Europe. Greater competence could even have made the self-interest—so evident after 1989—crystallize earlier, making the system’s termination more by design than by fumbling.

Prof. Poznański takes me to task for failing to grasp that Communist systems in Eastern Europe “imploded under circumstances of the existence

of an alternative set of values that could and did inspire and spark independent reflection, autonomous initiatives, and mass protest. In other words, the upheaval of 1989 was not only the result of the agency (set of decisions) of the uncivil society.” Well, that very argument is set out in *Uncivil Society*. Here, let me offer a further point: the uncivil society might have folded even without the people testing their mettle by demonstrating en masse.

Prof. Poznański’s point that many among both the elites and masses, including protest movements, did not necessarily seek to bring about private property and markets, is very important. People in Eastern Europe craved a better life, with the kinds of goods and services that seemed widely available under capitalism, but they looked skeptically upon many aspects of capitalism and retained a deep adherence to social justice. That is a proposition *Uncivil Society* addresses, but inadequately.

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Veljko Vujačić is an expert on nationalism, but that is not the question he raises of *Uncivil Society* (which could have had more to say on this subject). Let me begin by responding to his prompt concerning Jan Gross. In terms of the published book, Jan’s principal written contributions were sections on elite “negative selection,” the absence of conflict resolution mechanisms, and Poland’s elections in 1989. Otherwise, I ended up doing the writing, including the bulk of the chapter on Poland. At the same time, without the seminar discussions there would have been no book. So his contribution was greater than the sections he wrote.

Prof. Vujačić has adroitly furnished an accurate summary of the book’s argument in a single paragraph. When he writes that “by comparing themselves with Western capitalist countries in developmental terms, communist regimes could not hide from their populations (not in the long term, in any case) the inferiority of their social systems,” I would only add that Communist elites could not hide that system inferiority from themselves. He finds, however, that my analysis “often reads as if communist regimes were structurally doomed from the outset,” but I intended no such implication. To repeat: my claim pivots on relative performance, which could not be foreseen from the outset, so there was plenty of contingency. In the event, the capitalist West *did* evolve, it did undergo structural reforms, with bouts of significant pain. Eastern European regimes were challenged to do that, and failed to do so successfully.

When Prof. Vujačić asks whether “communist regimes produced social constituencies that could not just be ‘ruled’ in Stalinist fashion,” he seems to be offering a variant on the thesis that modernization bursts rigid political systems (society becomes educated, the economy becomes more complex). If one examines authoritarian regimes today, however, many have educated populations and complex economies and continue to survive, and in some cases thrive. Authoritarian regimes have proven that they can refuse to significantly open up. I have attended far too many conferences in the past twenty years on the “democratization of the Middle East” that examined such topics as the ineluctability of democratization in the face of the Internet. To be sure, many such regimes are hopeless and fold at the least societal pressure. But many other authoritarian regimes have proven they can learn and adapt, coopt and manipulate, whether of the Internet or multicandidate elections. Where there is a will, and some skill, there has been a way.

Communist regimes, though, discovered that when they tried to move away from Stalinism, they fell into quicksand. Reform attempts consistently precipitated the onset of system disappearance. That was the dramatic lesson of 1956 and 1968 and of Gorbachev. Whether this tendency to auto-liquidation as a consequence of reform meant these systems could never have adapted is a hypothetical, rather than, historical question. Historically, empirically, in the specific circumstances of the post-WWII West—middle-class prosperity, democracy, and peace, contrasted with pre-WWII depression, dictatorship, and militarism—Communism never managed to find a stable reform equilibrium. So, *once Western Europe performed the way it did*, the options for uncivil society in Eastern Europe seemed to narrow: wait, and wait, and wait some more, for the (eventual) capitalist crash. Instead, what happened? A reform cum auto-liquidation was launched—and this time out of Moscow, the Eastern European Communism’s back-stop. Who needed dissidents or demonstrations when there was Gorbachev on one side and Western Europe on the other?

A further thought: The Chinese Communist regime has never lived right on top of or measured itself against Western Europe. It lived in the shadow of the post-WWII Japanese miracle, and of Taiwan, took those lessons to heart, accepted markets (mostly generated by peasants amid the chaos), sought East Asian FDI, and gained export access to the US domestic market. But if it had not been for the spectacular misrule of the CCP, there would not have been any space for the market revolutionaries. Equally clear is that by the early 1980s the sons and daughters of high-ranking cadre

began joining the (still tiny) market economy, thereby defecting from the system their parents had set up (while still benefitting from it). At the top legalization of markets often came grudgingly, and the regime abjured political liberalization. Success was scarcely foreseen. Still, China's Leninist market economy retrospectively haunts the history of Eastern European Communism.

Finally, let me sign on to Prof. Vujačić's summons to further conceptualize not just the uncivil society—which was the subject of my book—but the entire society. In that connection, as he notes, I am taken by the term “the second society” coined by Elemér Hankiss, and I need to do more thinking about it.

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Arista Maria Cirtautas, referring to Eastern Europe, writes of “the remarkable *civil* resistance and peaceful mobilization that these ordinary citizens engaged in.” Well, in Iran in the summer of 2009, 3 million (!) protesters marched through the streets of Tehran with peaceful intent (they were attacked by regime thugs). Was this mobilization of ordinary citizens not remarkable? (Three million was more than marched in Eastern Europe, and in Iran they continued to march for some time even after the Iranian regime inflicted violence on them.) But, of course, the Iranian regime is still standing. In June 1989, a million remarkable and peaceful Chinese gathered in Tiananmen Square—but the Communist regime, under Deng Xiaoping, proved willing and capable of forcing them out. That is what *Uncivil Society* is about.

Dr. Cirtautas takes me to task for leaving out Czechoslovakia, where the societal mobilization was so late—November!—that many Czechs remain embarrassed to this day, as well as Hungary, where the Communist regime had to help assemble the opposition that sat across from it at the roundtable. The main shortcoming of *Uncivil Society*, at least to my mind, is actually the absence of a 1989 China chapter, which I had contemplated writing, but, under deadline pressure, skipped. Mistake.

For some reason, Dr. Cirtautas asserts that I follow “firmly in the footsteps of Theda Skocpol whose structural account of social revolutions ‘thoroughly deromanticized – and to some degree devillainized – revolutions’ by denying the purposive actions of ‘willful individuals and acting groups.’” Come again? *Uncivil Society* is chock-full of historical agency. Dr. Cirtautas herself goes on to note my reliance on Steven Pfaff and Peter

Siani-Davies, “who analyze the dynamics of social mobilization in the absence of social organization in the East German and Romanian cases respectively.” I deny not historical agency but that dissidents in one region of the world could have brought down heavily armed police states when dissidents in other parts of the world have not been able to do so, despite trying just as hard.

Dr. Cirtautas is spot on to remind us that Eastern Europe’s “self-governing, self-disciplining” protesters behaved inspiringly. But most crowds are not mobs (and they do not need to be civilized by “dissidents and their organizations”). Protesters almost everywhere are dignified people looking to reclaim their dignity. We recently saw this in Mubarak’s Egypt. We also saw in Mubarak’s Egypt that the dictator was 82 years old and infirm, that his son was not taken seriously as successor, and therefore that the establishment (uncivil society) had no secure future, making the regime inherently unstable. During the course of massive street protests, the Egyptian military moved, slowly, belatedly, to push Mubarak out, but did not yield power. Egypt’s military sacrificed its ruler but not his system, while entering into a roundtable-equivalent with the Muslim Brotherhood opposition. Does Dr. Cirtautas believe that the impressive protesters in Egypt brought about a revolution, or that the establishment held? Does Dr. Cirtautas consider the self-governing, self-disciplined Muslim Brotherhood—now sharing power uneasily with the Egyptian military—a civil society? She is concerned about “credit” for 1989, but I am concerned about understanding the simultaneous instability and stability of modern authoritarian regimes.

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Will “uncivil society” become an enduring meme? That remains to be seen. Whatever the fate of this coinage, the phenomenon behind it—a *society*—is real and not captured by terms such as partocracy. As for “civil society,” outside a liberal polity it amounts to a strategy of resistance, which, unfortunately, usually fails, because authoritarian establishments often have ample muscle and determination to contain or crush it. That said, when rot and demoralization do induce elites to capitulate, the societal resistance, including dissidents, often contributes significantly to the aftermath, as they did in Eastern Europe after 1989, an argument I share with Prof. Tismăneanu, who is a living example. There should be no surprise, however, that the inherited uncivil *society* very significantly shaped those

aftermaths as well. And that Western Europe—in the form of the European Union and its requirements for admission—remained key. But it is early.

History permeates the present, visibly and invisibly, through institutions, landscapes, living individuals (descendants), memories, even ghosts or absences. Prof. Vujačić rightly asks where in my book is Andrew Janos' *East Central Europe in the Modern World* (2000), which sketched a grimly brilliant portrait of the power of long-standing international hierarchies, showing this region's stubbornly persistent economic lag of Western Europe, and how the acute pressure from and envy of West European prosperity, especially among elites, far predated Communism. There is a politics of backwardness. And yet, political institutions are not derived from economics. Certainly the revolutions of 1989 and their aftermaths reconfirmed the endurance of history, but they also revived a sense of possibility. How this will play out and look over time cannot be predicted. But if someone with a crystal ball could foretell the future makeup and behavior of German power and of Russian power—historically perhaps the two most important modern structural factors shaping the strip of land in between—I would feel more confident rendering a guess.

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